CHAPTER 4

Perspectives on the Gandhian praxis: Select Narratives

This chapter is based on certain narratives, recounted in the course of conversations that took place on different occasions between this researcher and certain personalities from the civil society, who have been directly associated with the philosophy and practice of Gandhian non-violence in their lifetime. Based on the personal reflections of the speakers, the narratives are in the nature of vital insights that would help us delve deeper into the realms of peace, non-violence and human security and enrich our understanding regarding the same. Simultaneously, the purpose is also to record and document the narratives for posterity.

The method adopted to elicit information was that of Narrative Interview based on a two-way interactive dialogue process between the researcher and the “informant” (narrator). Accordingly, with the philosophy and practice of Gandhian non-violence constituting the central theme, the “informant” was encouraged to narrate in his or her own “spontaneous language” significant events and experiences based on his or own life as well as to express his or her own views and opinions. The conversations took place at different locations. The means adopted was that of the open-ended question-response mode of interviewing, aimed at sharing and transfer of knowledge. While the various interviews conducted have been reproduced directly, the narrative secured on each occasion has been supplemented by an
overall thematic analysis of the same, made as directly as possible from the perspective of the “informants”.

• The narrators or informants include the following personalities:

(a) Ravindra Upadhyaya, veteran Gandhian activist and founder of Tamulpur Anchalik Gramdan Sangh (TAGS), Kumarikata. Driven by an unstinting commitment to Gandhian principles, Ravindra Upadhyaya, who originally came to Assam to organize Shanti Sena (Peace Corps) activities, subsequently founded TAGS - the centre for Gandhian constructive work. Under his leadership, the organization been making determined efforts in the realm of addressing core human security concerns at a local level, spreading over a span of over four decades now since its inception in 1962.

(b) Hembhai, veteran Gandhian activist and the founder of Shanti Sadhana Ashram. Inspired by the Gandhian philosophy of peace and non-violence, Hembhai has led his organization towards making multidimensional interventions in the realm of human security, be it economic security, health security or otherwise. Significantly, he played an active role in organizing Shanti Sena activities in Assam in the 1960s.

(c) Hema Kakoti, former Pratinidhi of the Kasturba Gandhi National Memorial Trust (Assam Branch) or the Sarania Ashram. As a veteran Gandhian activist and
constructive worker from the Sarania Ashram, Hema Kakoti has been engaged in a host of socio-economic activities with an emphasis on the welfare of women and children. She was also associated with the Sarvodaya Trust.

(d) **Hiran Chandra**, who was one of the first few *sevikas* (volunteers) from the Sarania Ashram to have served at the Hong Kasturba Centre in what is present-day Arunachal Pradesh, way back in the early 1960s. As a matter of fact, she was one of those who pioneered setting up the centre itself.

(e) **Hema Bharali**, the octogenarian Gandhian Sarvodaya activist from Assam. She participated in the Indian Freedom Movement and was a front-ranking leader of Vinoba Bhave’s Bhoodan Movement. She has been engaged in an array of activities including welfare of women and children, empowerment of women, rural development, spread of basic education, strengthening of national integration, removal of social discrimination and securing social justice and promotion of peace and non-violence.

(f) **Natwar Thakkar**, Gandhian peace activist and founder of the Nagaland Gandhi Ashram. Originally hailing from Gujarat, Natwar Thakkar started his mission at Chuchuyimlang in Nagaland where he arrived way back in early 1955 at the age of 23 to work in the realm of Gandhian peace and non-violence. Under his leadership,
the Nagaland Gandhi Ashram, over the years, is credited to have undertaken a host of programmes along Gandhian lines aimed at socio-economic empowerment.

- The full text of each narrative, supplemented by a thematic analysis, is presented below:

1. **Narrator: Ravindra Upadhyaya**

   **Place:** TAGS Guest House at Kharguli, Guwahati

   **Date and Time:** May 14, 2005 at 9:15 am.

**Ravindra Upadhyaya:** "Throughout time, wars have been waged with a view to bringing peace. From the age of the Ramayana and Mahabharata to the writings of Karl Marx in the modern times it is seen that peace has been sought to be realized through war whereby it has been argued that where the end is just, the means can be of any kind. In other words it is a case of ends justifying means. However in contrast to such a line of contention, Gandhiji argued that if the end is just the means to achieve it cannot be unjust. Accordingly, we cannot have real peace through violence. The means must justify the ends.

   It is necessary to understand the meaning of peace. Peace does not merely imply absence of war and unrest. In that case there is peace even in the graveyard. But the question is, is that real peace? Peace is not only negative but also positive in connotation. Positively, peace means enjoyment of social justice and basic freedoms on the part of
every individual and the community at large. It implies the prevalence of a situation where
every individual as a member of the society can have access to his basic needs of food,
clothing, shelter, education, employment, medicine, health and sanitation. So peace in this
context means not just absence of violence but also prevalence of non-violence. Violence
only leads to counter-violence. Through violence one can only expect to achieve a façade
of peace at best, involving an absence of violence caused by striking fear in the hearts of
those who dare rebel, but that would not mean there is non-violence in the society, as
under a different set of circumstances it is most likely that violence would erupt. In the
absence of non-violence there cannot be real peace either. The strategy for establishing
peace in the true sense of the term lies in the Gandhian vision of social and economic
reconstruction. The present social, economic, political set up breeds an atmosphere of
violence as it is exploitative in nature. In fact violence is the result of exploitation in the
society. Factors like patriarchal norms and customs facilitating perpetuation of violence
against women in both domestic and public life, caste based discrimination, religious
intolerance, etc., have a paralyzing impact upon the healthy operation of the social system.
Similarly, the profit driven production process amounts to violence on the economic front.
Profit is nothing but the appropriation of the amount which is due to the workers for their
labour which has gone into the production process. As a result concentration of wealth
takes place. This industrial and economic exploitation is nothing but violence which results
in unrest. Likewise on the political front what we have is a representative and not a
participatory political system as a result of which the people have, for all practical
purposes, no scope to take part in the decision making process. Against the above
background, Gandhiji envisaged an inbuilt system devoid of any exploitation where individual autonomy would be ensured. Accordingly, production and distribution will be decentralized without any consideration of profit or loss. The key consideration was self-sufficiency. For instance Gandhiji insisted on the use of *khadi* for achieving self-reliance in clothing, the production of which would be entirely decentralized. Again, Gandhiji stressed on gender equality and advocated equal status for both men and women. Such a system would accommodate the voice of the womenfolk and make them active participants at all levels of the decision making process whether in the private or public sphere thereby helping them become active agents of social change. On the political front Gandhiji advocated *Gramswaraj* based on decentralization of power achieved through a federation of self-sufficient village communities heralding a truly participatory political system. In such a system every village will have its own parliament or *panchayat* where all the residents of the village would assemble and take collective decisions on village matters. Priorities would be set as per the needs of the village and then decisions taken on the basis of a consensus. Power shall flow from the village right up to the national level. It is entirely a bottom-up approach.

It may be noted here that in pursuance of the spirit of *Gramswaraj* of Gandhiji, Vinoba Bhave gave the concept of *Gramdan*-the villagisation of land. It centres on the concept pooling of resources of the village be it natural or manpower resources. Since all resources in a *gramdani* village is subject to common ownership, there is no scope of any exploitation and the basic needs of every villager are served. *Gramdan* is of special
relevance to the state of Assam where illegal infiltration from Bangladesh continues to remain a severe problem. In this context, by implementing the concept of *Gramdani* villages throughout the state whereby land management is carried out by the villagers themselves and does not rest in the hands of any government official, the problem of illegal infiltration and encroachment of land by such settlers can be curbed to a great extent.

To apply the Gandhian strategy to peace, it is important that people are properly educated so that they become conscious of their rights and duties. They must be convinced about the Gandhian way and spontaneously participate in social and economic reconstruction. In fact, lots of generations will be needed in order that the society evolves into a truly peaceful one. In order that there is peace all over the world, one should follow the dictum, ‘Think globally, act locally’ so that we consider the fallout of our actions on the world at large. In the ultimate analysis, it must be said that in totality the world is moving towards non-violence as societies are learning from their past experiences. It is an evolutionary and not a revolutionary process. Every individual has the capacity to tread the path of nonviolence and truth. It only needs ignition.”

*An Analysis of the above narrative-*

Ravindra Upadhyaya starts with the concept of peace itself involving the concepts of broad and narrow peace. His reference to peace in graveyard is an indication of negative peace—that of peace imposed from above intended to curb the overt manifestations of direct
violence. Accordingly, the mere absence of direct and manifest violence is but an indication of "narrow peace" marked by the existence of an imposed superficial calm. Such a connotation of peace in the negative sense fails to address the root causes and core issues of physical manifestations of violence in turn. This leads us to the concept of "broad peace" implying the absence of not only direct violence but also more significantly, "structural violence" meaning the perpetuation of exploitation and discrimination through societal structures which are often covert in nature. To quote Upadhyaya, "the present social, economic, political and set up breeds an atmosphere of violence as it is exploitative in nature. In fact violence is the result of exploitation in the society." In this context, Mahatma Gandhi articulated a vision of peace in which justice is an inherent and necessary aspect; that peace requires not only the absence of overt violence but also the presence of justice. Accordingly, peace in this sense is more of a positive concept that requires the existence of conditions facilitating human security while countering the threats to the same within a broad framework of survival, livelihood, dignity and sustainability. In the process, the very factors breeding the conditions of direct violence in the society are sought to be done away with. Ravindra Upadhyaya is seen to echo similar sentiments when he suggests that the strategy for establishing peace in the true sense of the term lies in the Gandhian vision of social and economic reconstruction. "The strategy for establishing peace in the true sense of the term lies in the Gandhian vision of social and economic reconstruction. Gandhiji envisaged an inbuilt system devoid of any exploitation where individual autonomy would be ensured." Ravindra Upadhyaya in the course of his interview touches upon the various dimensions of such a paradigm of socio-economic and political
reconstruction. Accordingly, he points out that on the economic front, production and
distribution would be decentralized with an eye on self-sufficiency. Again, on the social
front, it would ensure equal participation of men and women at all levels of the decision
making process and become active agents of social change. On the political front, it would
mean Gramswaraj based on decentralization of power and village self-sufficiency.
Significantly, Ravindra Upadhyaya also touches upon the issue of gramdan (village-gift).
According to Upadhyaya, “Since all resources in a gramdani village is subject to common
ownership, there is no scope of any exploitation and the basic needs of every villager are
served. Gramdan is of special relevance to the state of Assam where illegal infiltration
from Bangladesh continues to remain a severe problem.”

Analysing the concept of gramdan in the context of Assam, it could be argued that such an
elaborate programme of land-gifts and village-gifts is potentially equipped to address the
problem of unabated infiltration from across the Indo-Bangla border even as gramdan
aims at a conducive land management system, collectively involving the people of the
village themselves.

In the ultimate analysis, it could be gathered from the interview that, at one level, Ravindra
Upadayaya would seem to hint at the “freedom from want” approach of human security,
aimed at strengthening peoples’ abilities to act on their own behalf and on behalf of their
communities, with each individual becoming a stakeholder and active participant in the
process of his or her own development vis-à-vis the overall welfare and development of the larger society.

2. **Narrator: Hembhai**

*Place:* Shanti Sadhana Ashram premises at Basistha, Guwahati

*Date and Time:* July 23, 2008 at 3:15 pm.

**Hembhai:** “Becoming a good man is a must; good in the sense that he does not become an agent for any disturbance or ‘unpeace’, to himself and the society. This requires a lifelong, tenacious, perseverance stemming from introspection and far-sightedness. But, becoming merely good in one’s own self is not enough. He should be sensitive to the sorrows and miseries, the pangs and sufferings of the world at large. In other words, one’s goodness should be ‘infectious’ in that such goodness should spread to the suffering humanity in an encircling way. If you throw a stone or a pebble to the pond, first there would be a disturbance in the water or a ripple in the water, then it will take a circular form and it will spread outward. Same is the case with our individual goodness, preparing to touch everybody, trying to solve each and every problem faced. Non-violence is a measure to give good health for society. We remember the Alma-Atta Declaration on health—Health is physical, mental and social well-being, not merely the absence of disease and deprivation.”
The question of non-violence is completely entwined with the individual and social well-being.

When we today mention about non-violence, we remember immediately Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela and Suu Kyi, more than we remember the old sadhus and saints, prophets and angels, because these modern great men brought down truth and non-violence form the pinnacles of individual attainment to the solution of the problems of common men. We respect the sadhus and saints who attain such height but leave them as extra-ordinary incarnations. But individuals like Mahatma Gandhi show us the way to solve the socio-political, economic and moral problems of the society by engaging the common people. Here the goodness has to face the acid test of feeling for the people, organizing the people and preparing them to fight and suffer for a cause."

An Analysis of the above narrative -

Hembhai starts off with a belief in the innate goodness of every individual and his or her capacity for non-violence. To build up one’s capacity for non-violence, one has to relentlessly strive for perfection knowing full well that one could, by harnessing the power of non-violence, become an effective and powerful agent for social change oneself. According to Gandhi, man will ever remain imperfect but “it will always be his part to try to be perfect.” Non-violence is equated with positive peace in terms of its potential to further “physical, mental and social well-being” for founding a truly “healthy” society even as he could be seen to identify economic marginalisation and threats to health security.
as major symptoms of direct violence in the society. Hembhai points out the fact that non-violence inherently links up the individual with the society. As such, non-violence is not merely a matter of introspection, confined to listening to the inner voice of one's own conscience but it runs much deeper to explore the realm of social action in a way that the individual's own conviction that "non-violence is the way" equips him or her to apply the same to addressing social issues in way that mobilizes the people as active participants and stakeholders in determining their own destinies. Given one's unstinting commitment to non-violence, such a course of action on the part of a single individual is bound to have a cascading or ripple effect upon the society at large influencing more and more people to take to the path of non-violence in managing their lives as members of the society. As a matter of fact, Gandhi's novel contribution in reshaping non-violence as a doctrine per se into something of a strategy for social and political action to be used by groups and communities to solve "socio-political, economic and moral problems" is what distinguishes him from the exponents of non-violence of yore.

3. **Narrator: Hema Kakoti**

**Place:** Sarania Ashram premises, Sarania Hillside, Guwahati

**Date and Time:** September 5, 2009 at 11.00 am

**Hema Kakoti:** "I grew up in a family where most of its members, including both my parents and grandmother, were actively associated with activities for socio-economic reforms launched by the Indian National Congress under the initiative of Mahatma Gandhi during the Freedom Movement. I was born in Charing in Sibsagar District. During the rule
of the Ahoms, it was in this area that the Ahom princes used to receive their military training. Through his emphasis on village and cottage industries, Gandhiji wanted to make the village the nerve-centre of socio-economic reconstruction where all sections of the society including women can directly and indirectly contribute to the goal of nation building. As I was growing up, I, through my family, started working for the welfare of the women folk in the villages of our area in terms of constructive activities like spinning and weaving of khadi.

Over the years, it has been observed that increasingly, people have begun to depend more and more on others to fulfil their needs and hence look to others to offer them food to eat, clothes to wear and the like. However, what we have lost sight of is the fact that in reality, it is the spirit of self-reliance that needs to be cultivated and not a culture of dependency, if we sincerely desire progress that is sustainable in the long run. Accordingly, avenues of self-employment like small-scale village and cottage industries must be encouraged. Together with it, there is a need to impart appropriate vocational skills and to build up capacities for self-help.

Speaking of khadi (garments), it is observed that these days, it is mostly worn by only those who are directly associated with Gandhian social action. This in contrast to most other parts of India where khadi wear is becoming popular among the general population. For instance, in places like Delhi, the dying and colouring of khadi clothes is taking place. Consequently khadi garments have been able to attract a larger segment of
the population. Now coming to the State of Assam, an important issue here is that of the expensive nature of coloured thread, as the same has to be brought from outside of the State. This factor has proved to be a major hurdle in the way of producing attractive khadi wear in the State. The government must therefore look into the matter in all earnest.”

Commenting on the role of women, she says “Women invariably plays a special role in the household. As a mother and nurturer, she is actually the leader of the family. As a matter of fact, every mother must take up the responsibility of generating consciousness in her family regarding non-violence. The way and the extent to which a mother can teach about non-violence, none else possibly can in the family.”

Regarding manifestations of more direct violence in the society, Hema Kakoti says, “The roots of inter-community violence are steeped in deep levels of misunderstanding. Weapons cannot be a solution to end conflict. ‘An eye for an eye’ approach will only make us all blind, triggering off an endless cycle of violence and counter-violence. It is necessary to find a more constructive approach and create a proper value culture fostering non-violence. I strongly feel that elements of non-violence should be included in the school curriculum in this regard. Gandhian way is the only way adherence to which can help us all live in peace.”

An Analysis of the above narrative -

Analysing the above narrative, the single most important point that emerges from the same is the fact that a culture of dependency has surely crept into our society as pointed out by
Hema Kakoti even as the post-independent period has been one where the very idea of self-reliance increasingly came to be sidelined. As a matter of fact, the state too could be said to be guilty of promoting such a culture of dependency to a large extent. For instance, while acknowledging that self-employment through rural industrialisation is of paramount importance for a country like India, the state seemed to remain self-content by just putting in place governmental bodies like the Khadi and Village Industries Commission to work in this sphere, while missing the reality that in order to be truly successful in this regard, what is actually called for is a bottom up approach wherein local communities are themselves encouraged and facilitated to undertake such initiatives with the state pro-actively fostering a broad culture of peace and non-violence in the background.

Hema Kakoti has also spoken of the hardships that are there in terms of popularising *khadi* wear among the consumers as is evident from the high cost of dyed or coloured thread, pointed out by Hema Kakoti herself. This is something which the relevant authorities must immediately look into. Furthermore, Hema Kakoti has touched upon the issue of socialisation among the children in their formative years when she says that “elements of non-violence should be included in the school curriculum” so as to “create a proper value system fostering non-violence.” In this context she also speaks of the special role that women could play in the family for she believes that women are naturally capable of spreading the message of peace and non-violence by virtue of their mothering and nurturing qualities. As a matter of fact, in recent times, there has been a growing realization regarding the potential of women to become powerful actors for sustainable and
just peace, as women are in the forefront of managing survival. In this context, one might refer to the opinion expressed by former UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan. According to him, “Women, who know the price of conflict so well, are also better equipped than men to prevent or resolve it. For generations, women have served as peace educators, both in their families and in their societies. They have proved instrumental in building bridges rather than walls.”

4. **Narrator: Hiran Chandra**

*Place:* Residence at Borbhogia village (Jamugurihat), Sonitpur District

*Date and Time:* March 20, 2008 at 5:30 pm

**Hiran Chandra:** “To begin with, my first acquaintance with the Gandhian philosophy of non-violence was when Shrimati Pushpa Lata Das, veteran freedom fighter and wife of noted Gandhian social worker and freedom fighter, Shri Omeo Kumar Das, paid a visit to the school I was studying in, namely, Girls M.V.School, Tezpur. I was really inspired by the words spoken by the visitor whose speech left me craving to work along Gandhian lines and to really do something for the society. Subsequently, our headmistress, told me that I could fulfil my dream by way of rendering my services on behalf of the Kasturba Gandhi National Memorial Trust. I was very delighted to hear that and soon found myself receiving training at the Sarania Ashram at Guwahati. It was the year 1949.

A significant turning point in my life came about in the year 1963 when Shri J.P.Narayan accompanied by his wife Prabhavati came on a visit to Assam. During that
visit, I found myself accompanying them along with Amal Prova Das Baideo, the then Pratinidhi of the Kasturba Trust in Assam, on a visit to Arunachal Pradesh, then known as North East Frontier Agency (NEFA). We arrived at a place called Talo Basti which was a village inhabited by members of the Nishi tribe. On interacting with the people there we found that they, particularly the women folk, were keen that we teach them how to read and write. At this, Shri J.P. Narayan and wife Prabhavati recommended Amal Prava Das Baideo to start work in the region who in turn entrusted me, together with two other ladies, one of whom we addressed as Jethai (aunt) and another by the name of Ms. Seuti Rabha, with the mission to work for the welfare of the deprived sections in the remote areas of NEFA. Accordingly, in the year 1963, we first set up camp at a particular place called Hong, which happened to be the largest village in the Apatani plateau. All together there were seven villages in the plateau, including Hong. At present, it is situated in the Lower Subansiri District of Arunachal Pradesh. Back in those days, there were no roads connecting the village with the district headquarter and we had to travel 5 miles on foot to get there. We were called hailang meaning “outsiders”, an expression used by the locals for non-tribal people coming from the plains. The first task we undertook was to set up a school with the available resources, which saw an initial enrolment of only three boys. Later more and more learners joined in. Incidentally, it was an Assamese medium school. We also built houses for the needy with the help of the local people. We tried to generate awareness among the villagers about basic aspects concerning personal health, hygiene and cleanliness as well as first-aid. In due course of time, we started imparting training to the women folk on weaving and spinning activities. It may be mentioned here that the people
were ever willing to help us in our mission even as they appreciated women workers working in their midst. In fact, we could build such a good rapport with people there that they eventually started addressing us as We meaning "God" in the Apatani tongue. With the active support and cooperation of the village folk and the district administration, our efforts bore fruit and soon we had our own residential campus to carry out work in a more organized way. Mention must be made of Mr.P.N.Luthra, the then advisor to the Governor of Assam for Arunachal Pradesh, who helped us greatly in this regard. The school that we started turned into a full fledged L.P. school with an emphasis on the Gandhian concept of Basic Education or Nai Talim. Interestingly, a number of pass outs from that school have gone on to hold important positions in the bureaucracy. Now at the Hong Centre, besides the school, there is a well equipped weaving and spinning centre with hostel facilities. Every year a batch of ten women is imparted training to, in a way that they are able to avail themselves of self-employment opportunities when they pass out. During the training period, a stipend is paid to the trainees. It is borne by the Government of Arunachal Pradesh. Agriculture related activities are also taken up within the campus. Furthermore, the volunteers of the centre are constantly engaged in generating awareness regarding health and hygiene and also impart training on the use and administration of first-aid. I served at the Hong centre for a period of twenty two years until I came back in 1985."

An Analysis of the above narrative -
Analysing the above narrative, one finds the sincere commitment of a person motivated by the Gandhian philosophy at different levels of her life even as she overcame all odds to
take Gandhi’s message to a group of people rendering meaningful human security intervention in a hitherto "uncharted" territory. Recounting her experiences as a school-going girl, Hiran Chandra mentions as to how she was inspired by Pushpa Lata Das’ speech. Significantly, she also accompanied Amal Prava Das to NEFA. Such an exposure to the Gandhian philosophy at different stages of her early life vis-à-vis her coming into contact with Gandhian stalwarts themselves, instilled in her a strong sense of commitment to the Gandhian strategy for social action. It goes to the credit of Hiran Chandra that she along with two other woman volunteers, over forty years back, braved the rough hilly terrains of Arunachal Pradesh to work for a group of people in a completely different surrounding cut off from the mainland. Driven by a sense of sincere commitment to serve, the volunteers made direct contributions in the realm of human security basically encompassing the areas of education, skill-development for self employment and health and personal hygiene. Significantly, the school started by the volunteers was modeled along the Gandhian concept of Basic Education or \textit{Nai Talim} which aimed at bringing about a harmony between intellectual and manual training. According to Gandhi, "The scope of basic education included the education of the entire society, beginning with the children and going up to adults and old men and women. It had to be imparted through the practice of handicrafts, village sanitation and medical relief, preventive and curative, especially with regard to deficiency diseases." \textsuperscript{iv}

If from its humble beginnings, the Hong Kasturba Centre has come of age today, it is largely because of the unstinting efforts of the initial volunteers like Hiran Chandra who
laid the basic foundation of the centre in the early sixties in a way that fostered a spirit of mutual trust and goodwill among a group of people who were able to develop a new sense of self-confidence in leading their lives. As a matter of fact, the level of commitment on the part of the *sevikas* becomes evident from the fact that from being once looked upon as *hailing* or "outsiders," they soon came to be addressed as *We* or "God" by the same set of people in acknowledgment of their spirit of service and self-sacrifice.

Besides the above-mentioned personalities who happen to be directly associated with my research work, I have also interviewed two other noted Gandhian activists from the region, namely, Hema Bharali and Natwar Thakkar.

5. **Narrator**: Hema Bharali  

**Place**: Residence at Sarania Hillside, Guwahati  

**Date and Time**: November 2, 2009 at 4:00 pm

Hema Bharali: “I do not believe in violence. Through violence, no country in the world can ever find solution to any problem. As a matter of fact, a section of scientists of the world are of the view that there is no other technique than Gandhian non-violence that solves the problems facing the planet today. Speaking from my long years of experience as a social worker, I have observed that most violent activities are motivated by personal factors like selfishness and resentment. Often, certain issues are sought to be politicised by certain sections for personal gain, who resort to specific propaganda to mobilise the people.
along emotional lines. These vested interests aggravate the situation by sharpening the faultlines across groups and communities, thereby creating a vicious atmosphere of all round violence leading to loss of lives and destruction of property, which has a spiralling impact upon the society. We as social workers have been witness to such situations from close quarters. However, more often than not, an in-depth assessment of many violent conflict situations, reveal that the common folk living in the conflict-ridden areas are least appreciative of all the violence and bloodshed that takes place even as they express their desire to live in peace and harmony.

Besides such specific instances of manifest violence, another very potent source of violence, though not always overtly visible, is the ‘bandh culture’ which has precariously gripped our region of late, with the number and frequency of bandhs called form time to time by different organisations increasing by the day. This has severe economic implications for the region, given the huge loss that it has to incur as a result of such frequent bandhs. Invariably, the brunt of these bandhs is mostly borne by small-scale production units and daily wage earners. For instance, a small factory may be employing 10-15 workers. However, on the day of the bandh, the whole production process is stopped which hampers the owner and workers alike. Most often, the loss incurred in the process is sought to be compensated through an increase in prices, which in turn puts the consumers at the receiving end. The situation is still worse for the daily wage earner. Barely making something like Rs.150-200 a day, he has to go to bed hungry on the day of the bandh as he would not be able to go out for work on that day.
It is imperative to bear in mind that for conflict resolution, what is needed is a proper dialogue process. People should desist from politicising issues. In this regard, our leaders are expected to be statesman like in their approach. In the wake of India’s independence, Mahatma Gandhi said that the task that lay ahead of all our countrymen was that of economic, political and social reconstruction of the society. At that time, noted industrialist of the day, Jamna Lal Bajaj asked Gandhi ‘Bapuji, after the independence of the country, with whom do intend to fight a second war?’ To this Mahatma Gandhi said, ‘Charity begins at home. I will start form you. You are an industrialist. As an industrialist, you will get what is only due to you. There should not be any distance between the owner and the worker.’ Bajaj heeded Gandhiji’s advice. He kept only a section of his wealth to himself while dedicating the rest of his wealth to the society considering it as a sacred trust to be used for the benefit of the people in line with the trusteeship concept proposed by Gandhiji.

Gandhiji himself drew up an eighteen-point agenda for socio-economic regeneration of the nation. These included among others, khadi and other village and cottage industries. He felt that that it was only through these industries that meaningful employment opportunities could be generated for thousands of unemployed youths across the country, thereby building up the spirit of self-reliance at the level of the individual and the society at large. It must be mentioned in this context that Gandhiji was not opposed to the mill. But the kind of production process that takes away food and clothing from 90 workers out of 100 was what Gandhiji strongly advocated against. He strongly suggested that each mill
worker must be able to fulfil his needs. However, it is, but unfortunate that this line of thinking took a backseat after independence. While it is true that among those responsible for governing the country, there were still people who believed in Gandhiji’s views, there were many others who were not inclined towards Gandhiji’s strategy for socio-economic progress and hence declined to follow the same. They would much rather stick to the old colonial mindset. That is why, even after independence, we more or less carried on with the old colonial system of education and went in for the western model of production to take the nation forward. As a result, in the years ahead, the problem of unemployment became graver; exploitation increased, accelerating the conflict between the owner and the workers. The gulf between the educated and the uneducated widened. Corruption started making deep inroads into the health of the nation. On the whole, in the post-independent period, a feeling of mistrust and suspicion started to creep in among the different sections of people in the society. While these developments are a matter of great concern, I would describe the present situation as a transitional phase in our nation’s history since I am inclined to think that the younger generation today is much more conscious and disapprove of the decay in values and institutions that they witness around them. The youths of today think differently and are more constructive in their outlook. They are not mentally prepared to accept such degradation nor will they ever accept it. On the contrary, I am quite convinced that they will examine the problems confronting the nation in a scientific way and try to find solutions to the same by adopting a new and more rational approach.

I would like to say that some people say that Gandhiji’s thoughts are irrelevant today. But I have always maintained that Gandhiji’s thoughts are more relevant today than
ever before. It is heartening to note of late, that more and more people across the world are
doing some keen thinking on the issue of non-violence in an effort to create a truly non-
violent world. Gandhiji’s non-violence is just not confined to India alone but is universally
applicable across the whole world. That is why, I believe, that it is the duty of very citizen
to take Gandhiji’s thoughts to the international arena so as to cultivate a culture of peace
and non-violence in the true sense.’’

An Analysis of the above narrative -
Hema Bharali touches upon certain vital issues relating to societal tensions. In this context
she has very rightly pointed out that most often, manipulation and politicization of issues
and events by certain vested interests aimed at serving their own selfish interests, be it
grabbing of political power or otherwise triggers violent conflicts. As a matter of fact, it is
seen that propaganda machinery based on miscommunication and distortion of facts is
constantly at work to keep the conflict going. However, in the midst of all this, it is the
common people who end up being caught in the cross fire as, more often than not, they are
used as pawns in the attempts made by the actors orchestrating the conflict, at settling
scores and making points.

Hema Bharali has also commented on the policies adopted by the state over the
years, with such policies having their roots in the old colonial structures for the most part.
This is indeed true, as we have seen that in the post independent period, the educational
system that was opted for, has failed to be effective in terms of equipping the individual
with necessary skills for self-employment. As a matter of fact the scheme of basic education as advocated by Gandhi for ensuring the all-round development of the individual rapidly started fading away from the school curriculum in the post-independent period.

Commenting on the production process, Hema Bharali would argue that it should be aimed at fulfilling the basic needs of the masses without any semblance of exploitation. She has rightly pointed out that what Gandhi was opposed to was not the machine ("mill") per se but the kind of production process that renders vast sections unemployed, to be on the breadline. In this context, one may put forward Gandhi's own views. In response to a question asked by G. Ramachandran, a young student from Shantiniketan, in 1924, as to whether Gandhi was against all machinery, the latter replied, "How can I be when I know that even this body is a most delicate piece of machinery? The spinning-wheel itself is a machine; a little tooth-pick is a machine. What I object to, is the craze for machinery, not machinery as such. The craze is for what they call labour-saving machinery. Men go on 'saving labour' till thousands are without work and thrown on the open streets to die of starvation. I want to save time and labour, not for a fraction of mankind, but for all. I want the concentration of wealth, not in the hands of a few, but in the hands of all. Today machinery merely helps a few to ride on the backs of millions. The impetus behind it all is not the philanthropy to save labour, but greed. It is against this constitution of things that I am fighting with all my might." He further says, that "Scientific truths and discoveries should first of all cease to be the mere instruments of greed. Then labourers will not be over-worked and machinery instead of becoming a hindrance will be a help. I am aiming, not at eradication of all machinery, but limitations."
As a matter of fact, it has to be admitted that, more often than not, the policies adopted by the state over the years have only ended up driving a wedge between those who have access to resources and those who do not as would be reflected in various spheres of human relations.

Hema Bharali has also commented on the indiscriminate use of *bandh* as a protest measure. It is true that even during the Indian freedom movement, *hartal* or strike action involving a total shutdown of workplaces, offices, shops, closing of educational institutions, etc., was resorted to. But back then, *hartal* meant mass protest of a peaceful and voluntary nature, against injustice, with the people ready to make sacrifices. However, it is an altogether different picture today with the instrument of *bandh* fast losing its sanctity as a protest measure. At present, we have a situation where *bandh* calls are given indiscriminately, almost at the drop of a hat, marred by incidents of violence at times. While a day of *bandh* severely affects certain sections like the daily wage earner as pointed out by Hema Bharali, others observe it as a leisurely holiday to be spent at home. In a way, *bandhs* nowadays are increasingly becoming periods of “non-action” and “inactivity” even as they are found to fare poorly as a means of mass mobilization.

Hema Bharali finally ends with a note of optimism when she points out that the present generation is a much more informed one and are ready to make a change. However, it has to be borne in mind that when she makes that point, she is speaking in a larger context of the nation a whole. As a matter of fact, in our region, much still remains to be done in terms of involving more and more younger persons in the field of non-violent social action.
Narrator: Natwar Thakkar

Place: Camp Office of the Nagaland Gandhi Ashram at R.G. Baruah Road, Guwahati

Date and Time: November 15, 2006 at 5:30 pm

Natwar Thakkar: "At the very outset, I would like to say that Gandhiji himself has given us a key to understand his thoughts and teachings—it consists of one highly relevant sentence, 'My life is my message.' Let us therefore understand how Mohan Das Karamchand Gandhi evolved into Mahatma Gandhi. In other words, let us try to understand the course of his life.

From Gandhi to Mahatma:

When we look at his early life, we find that he was a very ordinary person as anyone else. He did not harbour big ambitions nor did he feel in those early days that he was made for any extraordinary mission. On reaching Africa, to earn his bread he came across highly unjust treatment meted out to him just because he was not a person born with white skin. Although he had the proper railway ticket to travel first class, he was physically pushed out of the compartment and all his baggage was thrown out just because he was not a white skinned human being. This incident happened on the railway station at Pietermaritzberg in South Africa. Gandhi was deeply hurt and remained restless throughout the night. The natural question that bothered him was as to how a man can act against another man in this
fashion? This incident can be termed as one that saw the birth of the Mahatma and this railway station as the birthplace of the Mahatma. Shri M.K.Gandhi suffered from similar humiliating incidents in course of his long stay in South Africa. He interacted with fellow citizens and studied the laws and rules governing the immigrant Indian population. He also interacted with them intensely and motivated them to fight against the prevailing injustice. He provided exemplary leadership and was finally successful in leading the Indian community in South Africa to freedom from injustice and unjust laws.

Wrongdoer as distinct from wrong deeds:

His mission in Africa over, Gandhiji returned to India. In accordance with the advice given by his political mentor, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, he went around the country for one full year, studied the conditions, interacted with common people as well as the people held in high esteem by the community. Initially, Gandhi did not work to free India from British domination. But, he came across many instances of British arrogance and also noticed the economic exploitation indulged in by the British rulers. It then became clear to him that complete independence for his countrymen was unavoidable. An interesting point to remember is that Gandhi firmly exhorted his countrymen not to treat the British as enemies. He has used very strong and harsh language in condemning the wrong deeds of the British. But simultaneously, he reminded the British and the countrymen that it is because of his spirit of friendship towards the British that he wants to save the latter from doing wrong. It is this spirit of friendship which prompts him to use strong language to drive the lesson home.
Truth and non-violence as means to achieve the end:

This is not the occasion to narrate the entire story of Mahatma Gandhi’s struggle for India’s freedom. But the way he conducted the struggle and the unique weapon of non-violence that he used in winning freedom is highly relevant in understanding Gandhi and his teachings.

As we have stated once, Gandhi started his life as any other ordinary citizen. He did not aim at building any system or developing an ideology or in promoting any new philosophy of life. He came upon the weapon of non-violence while fighting injustice perpetrated by the white rulers of South Africa against non-white immigrants. The more he thought about non-violence, the more he was convinced that the way of non-violence was the only right way for the civilized humanity. Similarly, the pursuit of truth or the adherence to truth was equally important. With this strong conviction in truth and non-violence, he wielded this weapon in his struggle for India’s freedom. By way of illustration of his faith in truth and non-violence which are essentially spiritual values, one is reminded of two important incidents in Gandhi’s life. The first relates to an incident at the police station at Chauri Chaura in Uttar Pradesh. This incident happened in course of the countrywide mass-movement launched by Mahatma Gandhi. The movement had grown strong and it created powerful impact all over the country. On one hand, it generated great self-confidence in the minds of the people of India, while on the other, it caused a sense of insecurity in the minds of the rulers. But, when the Chauri Chaura incident took place, Mahatma Gandhi declared immediate suspension of the movement. What had happened in
Chauri Chaura was that a mob had become violent and it had set the police station on fire. There were nearly 20 policemen and officers at the police station and all of them got roasted alive. Gandhiji recognized that this was a serious breach of the principle of non-violence and he cannot allow such breaches to multiply. He therefore, immediately halted the agitation although a large majority of Congress leaders were against such suspension. They argued that in a vast country like India, such incidents are not as serious as Gandhiji viewed it. But at the same time, their respect for and faith in Gandhiji was so strong that they followed his advice faithfully. This incident indicates another important ingredient of Gandhian way. The Congress leaders believed that the end of the agitation was great and noble and if the means get diluted to some extent, it should not be taken very seriously. But Gandhiji viewed it differently. To him, the means were as important and had to be as noble and pure as the end itself. He strongly rejected the belief that as long as the ends are noble and great, the nature of means did not matter. Another very important incident comes to my mind. This was the incident when Gandhiji formally resigned from his membership of Indian National Congress. This happened sometime in the thirties and since then Gandhiji ceased to be a formal member of the Congress. The difference which arose between him and the Congress leaders was that there was a resolution by the Congress which said that it will struggle to achieve complete independence by peaceful and legitimate means. Gandhiji wanted to replace the words “peaceful” and “legitimate” with “truth” and “non-violence.”
These two incidents show how the spiritual values of truth and non-violence were most vital to Gandhiji. As a matter of fact, the key ingredients of truth and non-violence are most vital when we talk of Gandhian approach in any situation.

*Rational analysis of the causes of conflict:*

Gandhiji of course could never support any method of coercion or adoption of a punitive measure. The rational approach will be to trace the root of conflict or the root of the prevalence of violence and disorder and to see if these undesirable roots can be removed. There are many situations that lead to conflict and disturbance of peace and even emergence of violence. Each situation is likely to be different than the other. These situations of disorder and violence are inevitably related to the time and space. In other words, these situations are time specific and location specific. As I understand Gandhiji, the first step in establishing peace will be to explore the causes that lead to violence and see if these causes can be dealt with by mutual consent of all parties involved in the situation of violence and disorder and arrive at an amicable settlement. At times, one party or the other refuses to accept a rational analysis to a situation and then difficulties arise. In such a situation, every effort needs to be made to convince the other party with a calm spirit about the true nature of the prevailing realities. This may prove at times to be a very strenuous exercise. But one must persist to arrive at a mutually acceptable understanding.
Violence inevitably causes adverse after-effects:

I have lived my entire adult life in a situation which was pervaded with ongoing violence. This experience of living with violence is five decades old in my case. One valuable lesson that I have learned was how true and relevant Gandhi was in emphasizing upon non-violence. My experience has also shown that violence may lead to temporary solution but it creates harmful after-effects of major proportions in the long run. It leads to the total breakdown of moral and ethical norms and it thrives on merely opportunism and materialistic values of life. I am also convinced that any individual or group that professes its mission as that of service to the people and aims at working for the well-being of the people fail to do so in reality if they resort to armed struggle. In fact, when the armed struggle continues over a long period, the main concern of the leadership is to see that its firepower does not get depleted even as their own security becomes the priority. These violent agitations are sustained through coercion only. They also have to inevitably resort to levying some form of imposed taxation on its followers. The taxation is paid not out of volition but out of fear of death at the hands of militancy. Having witnessed different kinds of militancies that came into being in the North-Eastern region, we can now say that these militancies cannot serve the true interests of the people.

Use of violence by a democratically constituted state as opposed to its use by militants:

While making the above statement, one cannot ignore the reality that the state machinery itself has provision to wield violence. But there is a difference when a democratically constituted state wields violence. State is restrained by the Directive Principles of the
Constitution. It is restrained also by the laws of the land. The state is permitted to wield violence in a prescribed legal framework. And last but not the least, there is a provision in every democratic state to permit a citizen to protest against state violence if he or she finds the use of violence against him or her as fully unjust. The citizen can also resort to judicial process and if judiciary finds state in the wrong, the state is bound to not only correct its course but also compensate the citizen for the unjust use of violence against him or her. In contrast to the above, what is the situation in a militancy-ridden area? The militants claim that they are servants of the people and they are working for the well-being of the people. In most cases, the militants also constitute themselves into some kind of parallel administration or government and they create paraphernalia similar to legally constituted governments. But there is one tremendous difference. The militancy-backed government sustains itself with the strength of weapons and firepower. It resorts to drastic action against any citizen who raises protests or disagreement against any of its acts. Secondly, the people have no voice at all in either the policy formation or the day-to-day functioning of the parallel state. In reality what happens is that there is only a coterie which controls all the affairs of their parallel state. In other words, it imposes its will on the masses. How can such a situation bring about well being of the people?

To return to Gandhian way, let us recall Gandhi’s strong conviction that only the good and fair means can lead to good and fair ends. The Gandhian approach to usher in peace is to strongly adhere to spiritual values of truth and non-violence and adhere to the adoption of right and fair means to serve our ends.
Society should withdraw sanction to violence:
The only remedy in this situation is for the truly committed voluntary social service organizations and peace activists to go from door to door, and tell the common people to cultivate a strong conviction to abdicate violence from all walks of life. In other words, the society must withdraw its sanction to violence for all time to come. Those concerned with the need to usher in peace have to convince the people about the Gandhian value system and Gandhian insistence on the right means to achieve right ends. People must cultivate courage to strongly resist tyranny and coercion even when our own people perpetrate it. To repeat again, it is only when the people will strongly assert their will against violence and militancy that peace can be promoted."

An Analysis of the above narrative —

Natwar Thakkar basically makes some observations involving the realm of peace and conflict. He begins by pointing out that each conflict situation is distinct from the other in terms of its spatial and temporal dimensions which in turn would determine its nature and complexion. Such an acknowledgement would constitute the basic pre-requisite of any attempt at diffusing a conflict situation. This would then have to be followed by a sincere effort to make a realistic assessment of the situation, exploring the specific causes that led to the outbreak of the conflict situation itself, in the first place. However, in most cases, such a rational analysis is more of an exception, with the parties involved in the conflict trying to get the better of the other thereby intensifying the conflict of goals between them. This is exactly where satyagraha comes into play. Satyagraha aims at conflict
transformation emphasizing the “opportunity perspective” of any conflict situation. In this latter sense, conflict is understood to be a natural and dynamic process, which only helps conflicting communities or groups to empathize and evolve at new levels of understanding, and accordingly to rework their relationships. This in turn, has the effect of moulding the process of social change in a way that fosters and promotes co-existence. In this context, while appreciating satyagraha in the light of conflict transformation, one has to bear in mind that the fundamental principle is to separate the person who has committed any wrong from the structures of oppression and injustice that cause that person to commit such a wrong. To quote Gandhi, “Satyagraha is not physical force. A satyagrahi does not inflict pain on the adversary; he does not seek his destruction. A satyagrahi never resorts to firearms. In the use of satyagraha, there is no ill-will whatever.”\textsuperscript{1} N. Thakkar is clear about it when he says, “An interesting point to remember is that Gandhi firmly exhorted his countrymen not to treat the British as enemies. He has used very strong and harsh language in condemning the wrong deeds of the British. But simultaneously, he reminded the British and the countrymen that it is because of his spirit of friendship towards the British that he wants to save the latter from doing wrong.”

Thus, we find that Natwar Thakkar is referring to the fact that non-violence encompasses the issue of “broad peace,” even as the latter seeks to address the structures and processes perpetuating violence, embedded as they are, in the social, cultural, economic and political milieus. Any attempt at achieving “peace” bereft of such an understanding can never ensure enduring peace for such a peace is invariably based on sheer force and not on the will of the people at large. In this context, he is critical of the
violent means adopted by the militant groups in the region, more particularly so in the context of the absence of any grievance-redressal mechanism as does exist in the case of the use of violence by the state as opposed to the militant outfits. “These violent agitations are sustained through coercion only. They also have to inevitably resort to levying some form of imposed taxation on its followers. The taxation is paid not out of volition but out of fear of death at the hands of militancy.” Thakkar reaffirms his faith in the synchronous relationship between ends and means when he says that the Gandhian approach to usher in peace demands a strict adherence to the adoption of right and fair means to serve our ends. In this context, Thakkar underscores the need to develop the inherent strength of the community to be able to resist coercion under all circumstances and to insist on the consistency of non-violence as a means to serve just causes. To quote Gandhi, “A truly non-violent person should brave the danger and prove his worth. The courage of a non-violent person is many times superior to the courage of a violent person.”

References:

1 http://www2.lse.ac.uk/methodologyInstitute/pdf/QualPapers/Bauer-NARRAT1SS.pdf accessed on 16-10-09.


Ibid., p. 266.
