Between 2000 and 1000 B.C., when the Greeks were still nomads, the oldest religious writings in history appeared in India. They were the Vedas in which we find, what has described “the first outpourings of the human mind, the glow of poetry, the rapture of nature’s loveliness and mystery”. Following the Vedas came the ritualistic Brahmanas, the Laws of Manu, and the philosophical Upanishads. Then, appeared the two great popular epics, the Ramayana, and the Mahabharata and as a part of the later, the Bhagavad-Gita, called by Wilhem von Humboldt “the most beautiful, perhaps the only true philosophical song existing in any known language”.

From the beginning, amidst prayers, philosophical speculation, commandments, poetry and epics the idea of nonviolence was present. In the Bhagwad-Gita, ahimsa is a superior ethical virtue:

I foresee no good will come
From killing my own kindred in war.
Even though they slay me, I wish not to strike them.
How can we be happy, having slain our own kindred.
Though they, with hearts deadened with avarice,
See not the evil that will come.

The Laws of Manu prescribe that he who would teach others for their well-being must be guided by ahimsa and use sweet and gentle speech towards them. From the Mahabharata comes the maxim that nonviolence is the greatest religion or duty.

Not only is nonviolence one of Hinduism’s cardinal virtues and its cosmic outlook generally, there are also present in it those other qualities of the human spirit which are inseparable from nonviolence. So in the Mahabharata abstention from injury to all creatures in thought, word and deed is admonished and kindness and generosity are called the permanent duties of the good. Enjoin the laws of Manu: “Let him patiently hear hard words. Let him not insult anybody. Against an angry man let him not in return show anger. Let him bless when he is cursed.”

The great reforms came with Gautama Buddha, Mahavira hundreds of years
before Christ, who gave the world an early and extra-ordinarily great personal example of total commitment to the non-violent way of life.

The origin and support of the spirit of non-violence in a people or a person has no single explanation. It may be given, that is, born of the culture of one’s religious heritage, at the mother’s knee. Gandhi’s non-violence was in gestation for three thousand years, at the least, here in the land of Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism.

Again, non-violence is sometimes born of an extremity, of one’s own sufferings of others. King Ashoka could not bear the horror on the battle field of Kalinga and he was reborn. Gandhi could not bear the insults inflicted upon himself and upon his fellow dark skinned people in South Africa and he began the search for an answer. This search ended in of truth and non-violence.

Whatever the origin of non-violence it must be supported by reason. The Buddhists saw clearly that victory by force breeds hatred, for the conquered is always unhappy. Gandhi was inspired by the great tradition of ahimsa in India but he spent a lifetime elaborating a rational structure for his faith, in which he reasoned: self-sacrifice is superior to the sacrifice of other; if the cause is not right then only the resisters will suffer, non-violence is the aseptic way of permitting the poison to work itself out by letting all the natural forces have full play; non-violence arouses the best in others; apparent good from violence is temporary, while the evil is permanent; good brought through force destroys individuality, while non-violent non-cooperation preserves individuality.

There is no denying of the fact that the cardinal virtues of Indian civilization are purity, self-control, detachment, truth, and non-violence. Nonviolence is the law of love. The sacredness of life in all sentient creation is affirmed as a cardinal truth, offence to sentient creation in any form is violence, whether injuring them, killing them, hurting their feelings, insulting them or destroying, their rights, dignity or self-sense. The Jainism and Buddhism carried the doctrine to incredible lengths. They were against killing any form. They held that we should neither kill nor get the killing done through an agent. The mere thought of killing is as much a moral evil as the actual killing. Any word expressing the desire to kill is also deemed to be killing.
principle of ahimsa involves purity of thought, word and deed in the practice of universal love. It is described as a great vow (mahavrata).

With this perspective in mind, the present study aims to understand the traditions of non-violence in India, its impact on the psyche of the people; the process of transforming non-violence from an individual virtue as the basis of mass action and examining the feasibility of absolute ahimsa.

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