



19. strengths and weaknesses of gandhi's concept of nonviolence

[Click here to open as pdf](#) [1]

At a meeting on Friday 12 February 1999 at the Department of Peace Studies, Bradford University, Bhikhu Parekh, Professor of Politics at Hull University, gave a presentation on the strengths and weaknesses of Gandhi's concept of nonviolence. Present at the meeting were: Christina Arber, Roberta Bacic, Pat Bracken, April Carter, Philip Lewis, Alan Marks, Bob Overy, Michael Randle, Carol Rank, Andrew Rigby.

Presentation - [Bhikhu Parekh](#) [2]

Introducing his theme, Bhikhu, said that in the West people tended to focus on Gandhi's nonviolence, seeing it as an alternative to violence. But to some extent this was misleading. For Gandhi himself, it was Truth, rather than nonviolence as such, which was central - and he equated Truth with God. He allowed violence in certain cases if it was the only way to secure justice. Gandhi had a wide circle of Christian friends, and of the dozen biographies written about him most were by Christians. This led to the highlighting of certain themes, especially that of nonviolence which seemed to provide answers to questions posed by Christianity. As Martin Luther King expressed it, 'Jesus gave us the message. Gandhi gave us the method'. The interest of Christians in Gandhi, did much to spread his influence. He had a big presence in the West, in contrast to Islamic countries. But it was an influence mediated by a Christian perspective. It was important also to view Gandhi's ideas from his own perspective.

What then did nonviolence mean to him? It was a way of being in the world, a way of living. He believed there was a nonviolent way of thinking, feeling, judging. Ideas dating back to Plato, but reinforced by modernity, gave rise to the individual at war with his or her inner self. The goal should be to achieve an inner harmony. Nonviolent thinking would be open, not regimented and dogmatic. Gandhi's view of thinking as a process was similar, in fact, to that of Heidegger and Hannah Arendt. A nonviolent way of feeling meant love without possessiveness or the desire to mould the other person. It was love coupled with detachment. A nonviolent way of judging, implied being open to the differences between people. Living nonviolently meant not exploiting or killing others, and not taking more than one's fair share of resources.

How could nonviolence be applied to the realm of politics? There was a view that politics was a dirty business which should be eschewed. But Gandhi saw that nonparticipation would not do. His experience in South Africa, and later in India, convinced him that not to intervene was to share in the responsibility for the injustices perpetrated by the system - and injustice was a form of violence. So the question was how to intervene in politics without introducing further violence. Gandhi was a liberal in politics - almost a moral anarchist. He believed in the power of reasoned argument, drawing a distinction between aggressive disputation and persuasion. The latter involved coaxing and wooing assent rather than battering the opponent into agreement and was the only nonviolent way.

However, after three years in South Africa he realised that he could make no dent on the thinking of the White population and admitted failure. In that situation the constitutional democratic process did not work either. Gandhi concluded that reason had its limits and that it was important to recognize this. Rationalists, in his view, erred as seriously as religious fundamentalists if they believed that reason on its own was sufficient. This was the conviction that led him to develop the notion of satyagraha - literally 'holding fast to Truth'. It was underpinned by a religious tradition, and this raised the question of whether there was something else that could underpin nonviolence for the non-believer.

The reason that rational argument on its own often proved insufficient was clear enough. If the opponent was deeply prejudiced, or had hardened his heart against you, he would be impervious to reason. You were simply not part of his moral universe. How then could one deal with this situation? Gandhi concluded that the liberal fallacy was to rely on the head alone. If change was to occur, the heart as well as the head needed to be engaged. You needed to appeal to the humanity in the other person, to say to them in effect, 'I recognize your claims as well as my own'.



Gandhi's assumption was that prejudice and hatred were contingent elements in the human personality and that the soul of every individual was pure, created in the image of God. Through satyagraha, and the power of self-sacrifice, it was possible, he believed, to pierce the veil of prejudice and speak directly to the soul of the other. You were saying to the other person that whatever they did to you they could be assured that you would not harm them - but that, on the other hand, you would not accept injustice. Suffering love, Gandhi argued, was profoundly redemptive. It redeemed you, and it redeemed the other person. Gandhi was fond of saying - 'How come that this shepherd whom we call Jesus of Nazareth continues to haunt you 2,000 years after his death? Why does that figure on the cross move you so deeply?' Gandhi was a man who never entered a temple in his life, even when he was in south India where there are so many magnificent Hindu temples, and never bowed his head before a Hindu deity. The only icon he allowed in his Ashram was Jesus on the cross. He saw himself as living out the life of suffering love, trying to redeem others, and was deeply inspired by Jesus. So the theory was that it was through suffering that you touched the other person. It was not instant transformation, but you started something in him which would destabilise him and create a conflict within him. He would go away and say to himself, 'you know I really think this man is asking for the impossible.' But then something within him would add, 'After all he is a human being. Maybe I am being unjust to him.' Gandhi thought this was the way things worked.

But he realised things were not so simple, and therefore increasingly he added other weapons, as he called them, other nonviolent weapons. One was the boycott, the boycott of foreign cloth, to put pressure on the British government. That was not exactly nonviolence, and was an admission of the limitations of nonviolence. If you boycotted something you were not transforming the opponent's heart, you were appealing to his pocket.

Gandhi also introduced a method, namely non-cooperation. He had a theory that no system of injustice lasted unless the victim cooperated. The capitalist system would not last unless the workers could be sucked into it. British rule would not have lasted as long as it did in India if the Indians had not been tempted by it and been coopted into the British system. All systems of domination involved the collaboration of the victims, and therefore in a system of domination no-one was entirely innocent. If the victims believed they were innocent, they were talking nonsense. If the perpetrators believed they were innocent they were talking complete nonsense. There was complicity on both sides. Greater complicity on one side, lesser on the other, but complicity nonetheless. So Gandhi said, 'Look, the British are here because we collaborate with them. We supply them with the police, we go to their courts, we hire their lawyers, and every time we quarrel we make use of their law. In future, we do not cooperate, we become autonomous. Once we become autonomous, we go to our own courts, or we don't fight at all. And the Brits, like the skin of a snake, will simply fall off. The colonial ruler will have nothing to feed on.'

Another method he used was fasting. It had been much criticised, but it should be remembered that he used it not against the British but against his own side. He used it against the British only once in a slightly different context, not in order to get something from them but because he felt they had been spreading malicious rumours about him. He thought fasting was justified because it was part of dying. Just as violence specialised in the art of killing, so nonviolence specialised in the art of dying. And through death and suffering love you could trigger off certain processes in others and develop the technology of nonviolence. His fast unto death was basically the crucifixion of Christ worked out in a certain context. When he embarked on a fast unto death, the British said this was blackmail, but Gandhi responded, 'It is not blackmail, it is voluntary crucifixion of the flesh.' In other words, I torture myself, crucify myself, because I love my fellow-Indians and cannot bear the thought that they would stoop so low as to use violence and kill each other. I want to bring them back to sanity. I know they love me, and because I know they love me, I want to evoke their love and mobilise it by saying to them that if they continue to behave in this way they will not have me any more.' That was the meaning of fasting unto death, and it could only be used in relation to those you loved, and who loved you - people to whom you were closely bonded, and solely for the purpose of evoking the best in them. It should not be a kind of moral blackmail in which you said, 'Unless you do this for me - give me this house free or whatever - I will fast unto death.'

When did nonviolent action succeed, and what were its limitations? Gandhi made all sorts of claims for it, though the old boy really knew its limitations, and that for it to work certain conditions had to be met. In 1944 Louis Fischer asked him in one of his famous series of interviews whether nonviolence would still be necessary after India was independent. Gandhi replied that it would be even more necessary then, and the struggle would be even more bitter. To get rid of the British was relatively easy, but to get rid of the indigenous British, our own Brown Sahibs, was another matter. These were Indians who would want to perpetuate a system of exploitation - economic exploitation. Asked by Fisher if he thought nonviolence could succeed in this situation he replied that they would try. However, if that didn't work, they would put pressure on the state to use a bit of violence against those involved in exploitation. So while he was a pacifist in the sense of believing that peace was one of the highest values and of attaching so much importance to nonviolence, he was not a pacifist in the sense of believing that if nonviolence



didn't achieve a just and necessary goal it would be better to stay quiet and not fight for it. Truth, meaning Justice, was infinitely more important. He thought it could be achieved by nonviolence, but if this proved not to be the case, he was prepared to concede the necessity to use violence in certain instances. The Indian experience indicated that several conditions needed to be met for nonviolence to succeed.

First there must be a shared basis of understanding. Without that, no kind of persuasion, or satyagraha, is possible. Gandhi realised this. Although his satyagraha in South Africa was reasonably successful, he knew that it didn't really achieve very much, and that the system of White domination continued. Where people were dogmatically convinced that something was right, nothing would shift them - even if you gave up your life in the effort to persuade them. It would have made no difference to Hitler, and did not move the dogmatic Hindus in India. Out of five attempts on his life, four were by orthodox Hindus. To them, Gandhi was corrupting Hinduism. Firstly, he was saying that Untouchability was evil. Secondly, he was saying that Hindus must learn from other religions - and the religion which he admired most, next to his own, was Christianity. The orthodox Brahmins had always accused him of Christianising Hinduism. The present day attacks on Christian missionaries in India were the unfinished business of Gandhi's assassination. To the Hindu extremists he was far worse than the missionaries because whereas they were working from the outside, Gandhi was introducing Christian notions at the very heart of the Hindu religion and saying this was how Hinduism was to be interpreted.

Second, the opponent must be capable of self-reflection. They must be prepared to recognize that they could possibly be wrong.

Third, you needed an open society. Nonviolence worked in India because the Brits, for all their brutality from time to time, maintained a relatively open society. The worst atrocity they committed was the massacre at Amritsar in 1919 where about 379 people died. Apart from that, and events at the time of the 'Indian Mutiny' in 1857, there were no other such incidents. There was slow brutality, and diffuse brutality, examples of racism - but not systematic repression. If India had been occupied not by the British but by the Nazis, things would have been quite different. You needed the pressure of an open society for nonviolent resistance to work. If Gandhi had appeared in Hitler's Germany, even before he had built up his leadership, he would have been killed. The moment a leader appeared in such a regime, he was destroyed. The British didn't do that. Some would say they didn't do so because Gandhi was much more manageable and they could do all sorts of deals with him. There were some stories now suggesting he was the greatest spy MI5 could ever have had in India. The suggestion was that they did a deal with him saying, 'You keep quiet for 30 years, and when we leave you must make sure that your country is Anglophile. In return we'll allow you to be a madman!

Of particular interest here was the exchange of letters between Gandhi and Martin Buber, the great Jewish theologian and admirer of Gandhi. (It was worth recalling that the Jews were the second religious group after the Christians who had been tremendously attracted to Gandhi. All his close associates in South Africa, including the man who gave him Tolstoy Farm, were Jewish. In India the Jewish presence was small, but in Israel today Gandhi was a big figure.) Buber wrote to Gandhi in the late 1930s telling him of the stories that were coming out about what was happening to Jews in Germany, and asking him what he would advise them to do. Buber ended by making one telling remark. He said: 'Where there is no witness, there can be no martyrdom.' Martyrdom could be a mindless death unless there was a witness to record it. In Hitler's Germany, how could his people be martyrs?

These then were some of the conditions under which satyagraha wouldn't work. The whole theory of nonviolence was embedded in a certain religious metaphysics; it assumed there was a soul which could be touched. Those of us who did not entertain those beliefs needed either a secular alternative or a different kind of belief. There were also dangers in Gandhi's concept. Nehru pointed out the danger that India might become a land of masochists who made a fetish of suffering. 'Beat me until you get tired, brother; kill me if you want to, but I will not give in.' This kind of masochistic nonviolence could brutalise you, just as violence could brutalise you. There was, too, an element of moral and spiritual elitism in this approach. If someone was acting unjustly you went and told them so and said that you would redeem them. You asserted your moral superiority. The other person could beat the hell out of you, but you would continue to love them. There was a certain arrogance in trying to be someone else's redeemer.

Bhikhu concluded by raising two questions. First, how could one translate nonviolence into action today? Gandhi did so in the form of satyagraha, but were there other forms that nonviolence could take? Second, was it possible in today's world to translate nonviolence so that it was relevant internationally. At the level of internal politics it clearly was relevant, but how could it become a method of action at the international level? He had written a long article in the Times Literary Supplement on humanitarian intervention in which he had pointed out that when crises occurred in Bosnia or Sri Lanka or wherever, there was always a demand for the big powers to intervene. They did



not want to do so because it cost them a lot of money - about £200 million a day. Moreover if we were always asking them to intervene, we should not complain when they behaved like superpowers or if they started throwing their weight around. And finally military intervention involved killing.

Was there then no other way? Were only the Americans capable of solving European problems and world problems? Couldn't ordinary people in civil society do something about them? So he raised a suggestion - tentatively and with great hesitation - about what might have been done in the case of Serbia when it was acting with great brutality in Bosnia and other parts of Yugoslavia. Supposing 500 to 1,000 leaders of impeccable credentials - the Holy Father in Rome, cardinals, the Archbishop of Canterbury, various other leaders - announced publicly that they were entering the territory of Serbia and would stay there until the brutality stopped, daring the Serbian leaders to do their worst. What would have happened? Would the Serbs have had the guts to mow them all down? One should remember that they did not dare kill any of the UN observers. They might resent them and harass them, but would not kill them for fear of an international backlash. We could think in terms of having an international army of nonviolent workers - just as we have a national and international army of people trained to kill. If you had training schools with people who had built up enormous moral authority through good work, through social work - people of the calibre of Nelson Mandela or Bishop Desmond Tutu - and second cadres and third cadres in different countries who were daily engaged in social work and fighting for justice - you might establish a nonviolent police force at the disposal of the United Nations in crises like Bosnia. Was that idea totally crazy? If Gandhi was going to be made relevant, and if we were not going to allow such situations to fester, a way must be found for ordinary human being to do things. That was the Gandhian method.

NARP Discussion

Whether tyrant to himself

Bob said that one of the criticisms made of Gandhi was that, in the words of Eric Erikson, he was a nonviolent man who tyrannised over himself, and was very violent with himself through his fasting and so forth. Bhikhu seemed to be implying that this was not the case. Bhikhu said this was a good point. He had two responses. First, although Gandhi's ideal was to be completely nonviolent towards himself and others, he didn't always succeed in living up to it. There were lapses from time to time. He was hard on himself and there was this kind of austerity and harshness about him, particularly in relation to his sexuality. Like all of us, he aimed at a certain ideal but did not altogether realise it. Second, in order to become a particular kind of person you needed to engage in certain austerities. However, once having got there it became part of your nature and this enabled you to live out your life without repression.

An authoritarian leader?

Bob also commented that Bhikhu had treated Gandhi very much as an individual with a philosophy and discussed how he applied that philosophy towards himself. But he was also an organiser who mobilised others, and one of the means he used was to set up Ashrams to train workers. They were a moral elite, and effective agents for spreading a Gandhian approach across India. But they were subject to tight discipline and a strict regimen. How did that fit in with the notion of Gandhi being nonviolent to himself and people around him? He was in many ways a strict, authoritarian figure.

Bhikhu said he would not regard the discipline of the Ashram as violence because the people involved had volunteered to be there and to live by a certain regime. Discipline by itself was not violence. The point could be illustrated by contrasting the behaviour of Pandit Nehru, who had accepted the Gandhian discipline, and Maulana Azad, the Muslim President of Congress, who had not. Both were meat eaters and smokers, and whenever they went together to Gandhi's Ashram, Gandhi asked his wife, Kasturba, to cook lamb chops because Maulana was very fond of them. She hated doing so because she was a strict vegetarian, but Gandhi told her, 'If you do not cook lamb chops for Maulana you will be doing him violence because he likes it.' But Nehru was expected to eat only vegetarian food. So you had Maulana and Nehru sitting next to each other, with Maulana eating his lamb chops and Nehru salivating at the thought but not getting any himself. Similarly Nehru would never smoke in Gandhi's presence, whereas Maulana would light up a cigar, apparently unaware of the fact that this irritated the old man's throat. Never once did Gandhi protest or ask Maulana to desist as he felt that to do so would be an act of violence.



There was a great deal of nonviolence in the manner in which Gandhi held his beliefs. On issue after issue, he was not dogmatic - even over the partition of India. He said at one point that if there was to be partition it would be over his dead body. But when he knew that the Congress Working Committee was moving in that direction he did not threaten to fast unto death. And when people said, 'Fast unto death and you can prevent partition', he replied that that would be violence. It was his conviction that India should not be partitioned, but he was not prepared to impose this view on others. So in that sense he demonstrated infinite openness to a variety of views. However, Bhikhu agreed that there were aspects of Gandhi's life where there was a sternness and harshness, although there were other aspects in which he exhibited the nonviolence he was talking about.

Fundamental weaknesses

April asked if Bhikhu could expand his asides about fundamental weaknesses in Gandhi's approach - for instance his notion of heart speaking to heart, and his religious metaphysics. Bhikhu replied that he did not regard the concept of heart speaking to heart as a fundamental weakness. The fundamental weakness was his belief that there was something called the soul and that it was the hatred and prejudices that surrounded it which prevented us from getting to it; once we did so there was the pure soul which we could touch. Bhikhu did not believe in that kind of relationship between the soul and external prejudices because prejudices penetrated your core and there was not that pure soul lying there which one could activate.

However, the notion of suffering love did sometimes work: for example on one occasion during the Salt Satyagraha in 1930 mounted soldiers went about beating the satyagrahis, all dressed in white for purity and reassurance. Heads were broken - including Nehru's. But one satyagrahi who was being beaten repeatedly by a Sikh soldier kept responding by asking, 'Are you all right? Are you all right?' until finally the Sikh threw down his baton and exclaimed, 'You can't go on hitting a bastard like that who keeps on blessing you!'

Gandhi explained that what was happening here was 'surgery of the soul'. The nonviolent individual had to carry out this delicate surgery to get into that soul, and Gandhi kept experimenting all his life to find ways of doing this. It involved looking into the individual's background and history and finding out what was his or her tender spot where humanity shone through. This concept was central to Gandhi's thinking, but Bhikhu found it problematic. He found it difficult to believe in the soul, and even if he did, he would think that it had been tainted - as Christians recognized better than Hindus - by original sin. On Gandhi's view, it was difficult to explain his failure to elicit a response from Hitler, or Jinnah or Lord Wavell, or from the many other people who were not at all influenced by Gandhi.

Attitude to family, women, close followers.

Christina said she had been looking recently at Gandhi's relationship with women, in particular his relationship with his wife, Kasturba. In the early part of his life especially, his relationship with Kasturba was coercive. He put pressure on her to do things which went against her internalised system of values. He was coercive, too, at times in relation to his children. Another point that some feminists had argued was that Gandhi's notion of nonviolence had to be taken on board differentially depending on whether you were a man or a woman. It might be positive for men to be prepared to take on a more nurturing role, and to embrace self-sacrifice, but women had long been socialised to act in this way so for them it would be harmful to accept this philosophy. Finally, she did not think Gandhi was particularly nonviolent in relation to himself or his friends. He sometimes laid down pretty much what they should do and because they loved him they went along with it.

Bhikhu responded that he thought Christina was absolutely right regarding Gandhi's relationship with women. He was harsh on Kasturba and his relationship with his eldest child, Harilal, was particularly complex and difficult. A play called Gandhi versus Mahatma - which had recently been made into a film - took the form of a dialogue between Gandhi and Harilal. In it, Harilal lectured Gandhi and said, 'What have you done to me? You ignored me. I wanted to go to England and you wouldn't let me. I wanted to marry a certain person and you wouldn't let me. And what did you do to my mother?'

There was a real incident which was not in the play but which supported its central theme. It took place around 1943 after Gandhi had been released from prison and was travelling by train with Kasturba from Bombay to Delhi.



Harilal got a message through to his mother that she should look out for him amongst the crowd when the train stopped at Surat station. By that time Harilal had rebelled against his father, converted to Islam and done everything that his father hated. He was a meat eater, a smoker, a vagabond who frequented prostitutes. When the train stopped, Gandhi and Kasturbai got out of the train and Harilal ran over and fell to the feet of his mother, and embraced her and started weeping. Then he took an apple out of his pocket and said, 'Ba, this is for you'. Gandhi turned to him and said 'What about me?' Harilal shouted back, 'Nothing for you! What have you done? You are nothing!' Then he added, 'Remember, if you are great it is because of Ba. She made the sacrifices. Don't you ever forget it.' When the train drew away from the station, Gandhi, who was an immensely self-possessed man, returned to his seat and for twenty minutes didn't speak a word but just looked out of the window. And whenever the old man suffered intensely he dug deep into himself, used the last ounce of energy that was available to him, and eventually returned to normal.

Increasingly in his old age he felt he could have done things differently. Although he didn't write an autobiography after 1929, he remarked in private that he felt he could have handled his children differently. With Kasturbai, he forced her in South Africa to empty bedchambers, much against her wishes, and then imposed celibacy on her. She was not very articulate in such matters and went along with him. He liked to think that she had gone along with him voluntarily, but of course she didn't. So yes there was an element of repression and authoritarianism. When Gandhi learned that Mirabehn - Madeleine Slade - had fallen in love with his handsome, articulate secretary, Mahadev Desai, he forced her to shave off her hair and punished Mahadev by going on a fast for three days. But why shouldn't two people be normally sexually attracted to each other? So the old man had his own hang-ups and elements of violence.

Struggle to be more nonviolent

However, Bhikhu liked to think that in his own way Gandhi was struggling to be more nonviolent, more loving, in his attitude to people, though failing from time to time. In the '20s and '30s, long after South Africa, he began to say to himself, 'I am practising nonviolence. But is it not the case that in order to practise it I have to do violence to myself?'

The climax of the process was in 1946 and 1947. It was in Noakali that he really began to discover himself. Here was a place in which Hindus and Muslims were butchering one another, and Gandhi said that this was not the India he had fought for. So when Pandit Nehru invited him to unfurl the flag of independent India he said, 'What is there to celebrate? This is not the India I wanted, I am ashamed of it.' The real India was the India where people were dying. So, shunning police protection, he went with 12 women who dispersed themselves in the villages, staying with whoever was prepared to put them up - today in a Muslim house, tomorrow in a Hindu house. And because he was there to bring about peace and it was his last spiritual mission, he wore no shoes. So barefoot, his feet bleeding from the thorns which angry Hindus threw in his path, he quietly went from village to village. And he brought peace.

Influence on the Hindu tradition

Phillip wondered, given the Christian influences on himself, what impact Gandhi had had on the Hindu tradition. Bhikhu said Gandhi's impact on Hindu society was enormous. He brought in the Christian element, but also dug out elements from within his own tradition. Thus, the Christian elements he brought in were in turn Hinduised. He took the figure of the crucified Christ and asked how you could have a God who suffered. It didn't make sense, and was a form of moral blackmail. So he took it over and reconverted it into the Hindu notion of anasape or detachment. He introduced the notion of love, which the Hindu tradition lacked. However, for him the Christian concept of love was too anthropomorphic and passionate, so he brought in the Hindu concept of detachment. Was there, he asked, a detached love which moved you to action but did not cause any kind of movement within your own soul? Hindus were deeply influenced by him, though some also felt that he had taken liberties with their heritage. In his debate with Alinda Ghosh, the latter pointed out that the two great Hindu epics, the Mahabharata. and the Bhagavad Gita, were epics of violence. Gandhi replied that these were allegories. Like any other reformer, he was trying to reform his tradition, and to do so he had to play hide-and-seek. He felt that both Hinduism and Christianity had many admirable virtues, so why not blend them? The next question was how to sell the concept. And like any other Asian salesman he believed the way to achieve this was do deals with people.



Gandhi and Islam

Philip also commented that he had been struck by something Theodor Zeldon said about Gandhi in his book *An Intimate History of Humanity*. In it he argued there was no space for an uncompromising Muslim in Gandhi's imaginative world, and that his imaginative failure to understand Islam was a fatal flaw. Bhikhu said Gandhi certainly had difficulties with Muslims in India. But he had no difficulty with traditional Muslims, many of whom followed him and stayed on in India after independence. The Muslims with whom he had difficulty were those of the Jinnah type - the Westernised Muslims, and certain Muslim groups in North India who had not been fully assimilated into Indian society. In the 1946 elections, the Indian Muslims voted for Gandhi's party. In 1937 and again in 1946, Jinnah's Muslim League Party didn't form a government in the Punjab.

Nonviolence in closed societies

Carol said that one of the conditions Bhikhu had suggested was necessary for nonviolence to be effective was an open society. In that case almost by definition it could not be effective in a dictatorship or repressive society, and she wondered about the process of organising in such a society. Bhikhu in response said that dictatorship of itself did not rule out the possibility of nonviolent resistance. The British rule in India, after all, was not exactly democratic. But there was a difference between dictatorship and totalitarian tyranny where there was absolutely no free space of any kind, and civil society was stifled - where there were no independent newspapers, radio or television, and people could not talk. In a dictatorial society you could have self-critical opponents, and nonviolence could still be workable. But in his view it would not be workable in a society which was totally closed, and where the system was run by people - like Nazis and racists - who did not have doubts of any kind. That kind of extreme system, Gandhi's method could not touch. But short of that, it could have an influence. Michael commented that although nonviolent resistance might not have been possible under Stalin, the changes in the system over time made it possible to have a nonviolent resistance in Eastern Europe in 1989 which overturned the regimes there. Bhikhu agreed that there it was effective. He was talking about regimes which were so totally closed and totalitarian that as soon as a Gandhi appeared anywhere, he would be killed.

Heidegger

Pat noted that Bhikhu had mentioned Heidegger, and he suggested there was a similarity between Heidegger's notion of *gelassenheit* or releasement and Gandhi's thinking in his late period. He wondered if there was any contact or communication between the two men. Bhikhu said no, and followed this up with a story. In 1931 Einstein wrote a moving letter to Gandhi after reading reports of his Salt March, saying he was the greatest figure in history and that he would like to meet him. If he was ever in America he should let Einstein know. Gandhi wrote a three-line letter in response saying - 'My dear Einstein, My entire life is mortgaged to the service of my country, so I have decided not to leave. But should you ever be in India, you would be very welcome to stay with us, provided you are prepared to sleep on the floor, and eat the austere diet that I eat'. And after writing it, he turned to Pandit Nehru and said: 'Who is Einstein?' So if someone had mentioned Heidegger he would have said 'Who is Heidegger?'

Explaining the concept of *gelassenheit*, Pat said that Heidegger thought there was a great problem about modernity because of the way we rendered the world in our thinking as something for us to use as we wished. Heidegger referred to this as technology, and he found it in a whole range of things, not just in what we would normally consider technology. It pervaded our way of looking at the world and ourselves - and increasingly our way of thinking about human problems, where we regarded them as things to be analysed, diagnosed and treated. In contrast to that he expounded the notion of meditative thinking which he found in poetry and in Eastern philosophy. It was a notion of allowing the world to be. He said at one point that we had lost that wonder at our 'be-ing'.

[Click here to open as pdf](#) [1]



19. strengths and weaknesses of gandhi's concept of nonviolence

Published on CivilResistance.info (<https://civilresistance.info>)

[Return to 'challenge to nonviolence' table of contents](#) [3]

Attachment:  [19-bhikhu.pdf](#) [1]

Source URL (modified on 13/08/2014 - 11:05): <https://civilresistance.info/challenge/bhikhu>

Links

[1] <https://civilresistance.info/sites/default/files/19-bhikhu.pdf>

[2] <https://civilresistance.info/challenge/preface#Bhikhu>

[3] <https://civilresistance.info/challenge>