



COMMENT

Responding to global climate change: the Gandhian way

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INTRODUCTION

Lemons & Brown (2011, this issue) contend that convincing scientific evidence about the threats posed by global climate change (GCC) and their anthropogenic nature have been available over the past few decades through the 4 IPCC reports and a host of other studies. It is also amply clear that any procrastinating attitude in tackling this challenge will mean far-reaching adverse consequences for which the present generation, as the trustee of the global environment and its resources, cannot avoid responsibility. Besides, Lemons & Brown (2011) are also right to point out that GCC also gives rise to several ethical questions, firstly because the nations likely to be worst-affected are among the least contributors to greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions; secondly GCC affects people who are among the poorest; and thirdly because the global scope of the impacts of GCC can only be mitigated through co-operative action from multiple governments.

Despite these unequivocal indicators, the developed nations in general and the United States of America in particular, have failed to take sufficient concrete steps to reduce emissions and mitigate the adverse impacts of GCC, although they have ratified the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). Consequently, Lemons & Brown (2011) argue that continuing to gather and disseminate more scientific information on GCC among the US public policy makers, and also trying to drive home the ethical dimensions of the problem among them, are not likely to yield any discernible results. They, therefore, suggest non-violent civil disobedience (NVCD) as a third alternative, drawing philosophical support and justifying its adoption on moral-ethical grounds from a number of earlier instances starting with Socrates through Thoreau, Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., and others, to more recent applications of NVCD all over the world on

a number of issues that include environmental problems such as large dams, deforestation, carbon emissions and the like. However, Lemons & Brown (2011) also admit that participation of scientists and other environmental professionals in such a movement would inevitably be fraught with controversy and debate.

GANDHI AND NON-VIOLENT CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

Embarking upon civil disobedience under compelling circumstances and in opposition to unjust policies such as those created by GCC finds support from a number of philosophers and social-political thinkers such as Thoreau and Gandhi. In this commentary, I would like to draw from the experiences of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, firstly because he is considered one of the foremost proponents of NVCD, and secondly because being an Indian, I am more familiar with and perhaps able to better understand the perspectives and circumstances of Indian examples of NVCD. Gandhi faced many challenges during his use of NVCD, first in Transvaal, South Africa, in 1906, and then in India, in several different movements such as the non-cooperation movement of 1920–1922 and in the Dandi Salt March in 1930, against the policies of the British colonial government (Golson 2008). Here it needs to be pointed out that while every citizen has a right to stand up and defy the government against any unjust action or inaction for just causes, he or she also automatically inherits the responsibility of ensuring that the NVCD remains non-violent, does not cause loss or damage to life and property, and is not 'hijacked' by other, less noble, or even subversive causes. Gandhi faced similar challenges time and again, and even had to take the very difficult decision of withdrawing the non-cooperation movement when

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it had reached its peak in 1922, because of incidences of mob violence at a place called Chauri Chaura in the province of Uttar Pradesh. He was criticized by many who believed that the movement should not have been called off for a small and isolated incident. However, Gandhi justified the stand in his trial in 1922 by referring to the incident as 'the diabolical crimes of Chauri Chaura', and accepted full responsibility for this and the other acts of violence committed during the movement, and asked the judge to either resign his post or inflict on him (Gandhi) the severest penalty.

Nevertheless, he also unequivocally stated, 'I knew that I was playing with fire. I ran the risk and if I was set free I would still do the same [...] Non-violence is the first article of my faith. It is also the last article of my creed. But I had to make my choice. I had either to submit to a system which I considered had done an irreparable harm to my country, or incur the risk of the mad fury of my people bursting forth' (www.mkgandhi.org/speeches/gto1922.htm). Global climate change can be said to raise a similar moral-ethical dilemma of whether to accept the inactions or to put it more mildly, insufficient actions for the mitigation of the harmful effects of climate change by the parties concerned, and wait and hope for gradual improvements, or to try to accelerate the process by undertaking actions such as NVCD with their attendant hazards of losing control or direction or both. A question that also arises pertains to the methodologies to be adopted for ensuring the non-violent character of NVCD, especially in the wake of measures adopted by the state in its response. It also raises a moral question as to how any damage resulting from a wayward NVCD could be compensated and by whom?

Gandhi had undertaken a 5-day fast immediately after the Chauri Chaura incident as a penance for the violence. Whether this could be considered as an adequate compensation remains a question. Despite these challenges and limitations, one must also remember that 8 yr after Chauri Chaura, Gandhi in 1930 conducted a successful NVCD in the form of the Salt March, a movement which retained its non-violent character despite over 100 000 persons having been imprisoned during its course. The issue of non-violence assumes a central position, although there is a debate on whether non-violence is an essential part of a civil disobedience movement. However, in the same line of thinking as that of Gandhi and King, Rawls considers civil disobedience by definition non-violent, as any violent act is in contradiction of civility that underlies the concept of civil disobedience (quoted in Subudhi 2005). Cohen (1966) also feels that a civil disobedience movement would cease to enjoy moral-ethical support if it does not remain non-violent. Thus, while pondering over civil disobedience, the underlying phi-

losophy of non-violence and the problems of its strict observance need deep introspection. According to Gandhi, a 'satyagrahi', that is an adherent of truth (a volunteer in NVCD) must remember that the battle essentially is against wrong, and not against the wrong-doer, against whom no ill-will should be harbored. The movement ought to be rooted in love and not in hatred. Thus it is not enough to simply abstain from outward signs of violence, but to try to realize it inside as well. In Gandhi's own words, 'In the application of Satyagraha, I discovered in the earliest stages that pursuit of truth did not admit of violence being inflicted on one's opponent but that he must be weaned from error by patience and sympathy', (Kripalani 1960).

This of course can be dismissed by many as a utopia that might be well-nigh impossible to achieve and hence futile to pursue. Nevertheless, delving into the methods adopted by Gandhi during the Salt March of 1930, which remained non-violent throughout, we can find that he formed a core group of volunteer-marchers from his own 'ashram' (Golson 2008). Consequently, this group was deeply motivated to observe non-violence in the face of the direst provocation and they helped to retain the non-violent nature of the movement and spread and reinforce this belief among the participants. The unwavering faith of Gandhi in non-violence could perhaps be discerned from his statement that 'Non-violence is a universal principle and its operation is not limited by a hostile environment. Indeed, its efficacy can be tested only when it acts in the midst of and in spite of opposition. Our non-violence would be a hollow thing and nothing worth, if it depended for its success on the goodwill of the authorities' (Kripalani 1960).

PRINCIPLE OF SELF-SACRIFICE

It would perhaps require both time and effort to instill even the barest rudiment of these ideas in the minds of every NVCD volunteer. The 'Chipko' movement in the Indian Himalayas in the 1970s, which remained non-violent while choosing the novel method of hugging (chipko means to embrace) a tree to save it from tree fellers, successfully adopted the strategy of non-violent resistance and was in fact 'historically, philosophically, and organizationally, an extension of Gandhian Satyagraha' (Shiva & Bandyopadhyay 1986, p. 5). Tehri Garhwal, the area where the Chipko movement took place, had the tradition of 'forest satyagraha' in the pre-independence period, and on '30 May 1930, dozens of unarmed villagers were killed and hundreds injured in Tilari village, Tehri Garhwal, when they gathered to protest the For-

est Laws of the rulers' (Shiva & Bandyopadhyay 1986, p. 4). The example of Chipko perhaps refurbishes the belief that strict adherence to non-violence could yield tangible results that are more enduring than the other forms of protest and that non-violence as a tradition imbibed into the social consciousness in a given area could stand the test of time spanning 4 decades from 1930 to 1970. This 'philosophical continuity' of the tradition of using NVCD on environmental issues in India could be traced back to the 18th century, when in 1730, 363 women and men belonging to the Bishnoi community of Rajasthan sacrificed their lives when the axemen of the prince of Jodhpur tried to forcibly cut the sacred 'khejadi' trees (*Prosopis cineraria*) to provide fuel for lime kilns. It is said that a woman was the first to give up her life by embracing a tree, followed by the others. Moved by this massacre, the prince called off his men and granted the ecocentric religion of Bishnois state patronage (Gadgil 1990, Gadgil & Chandran 1992, Srivastava 2001).

CONCLUSIONS

NVCD or any other form of non-violent protest does have the potential to become an effective tool for voicing the concerns of the people on vital issues like GCC, provided its non-violent core is ensured through stringent self-discipline of the participants. It is also to be realized that the 'climate deniers' exist at all levels, in all professions, and in all countries, not simply confined to the USA or the other developed nations. The success of a non-violent mass movement would there-

fore depend to a large extent on its wide percolation and general acceptance by the people.

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Editorial responsibility: Darryl Macer, Bangkok, Thailand

*Submitted: 10 December 2010; Accepted: February 15, 2011
Proofs received from author(s): March 15, 2011*