

Mohandas Gandhi speaks to Abdullah Öcalan

On violence, non-violence, and the state

1 AUGUST 2023, ASHISH KOTHARI



Kurdish women guerilla fighters in the Kandil Mountains @ ANF

As recorded by Ashish Kothari.

Abdullah: Mr. Gandhi, *jin jiyana azadi* - greetings from Kurdistan!

Mohandas: Havel Öcalan, *namaste* and *zindabad* from India!

Oh, thank you for using our term for respectfully addressing each other ... and I notice you say *zindabad* ... does this have to do with life and women's liberation, as in our term *jin-jiyana-azadi*?

Indeed, to be *zinda* is to be alive; it's a term used by many mass movements in India, which I picked up recently. And I can recognize that *jiyan* is like *jevan* for us – life - but is it *jin* that is to do with women? Remarkable – so your greeting starts with women?

Quite so, it is a recognition that without women, there is no life, there is no

freedom. Somewhere (I don't remember quite where - I've written or said so much in my long years in prison!) I've said: 'Without gender equality, no demand for freedom and equality can be meaningful. The most permanent and comprehensive component of democratization is woman's freedom'.

Wah! I think I was rather late in acknowledging the centrality of women in achieving *swaraj*, but you are absolutely right! But listen, what I wanted to talk to you about was violence and non-violence, this is why I asked to speak to you though I know you have such limited time for outside contact in your prison ². So my curiosity was about ...

(interrupting): Mr. Gandhi, sorry to interrupt, but could you pl. explain that term you just used – *swaraj*, I think you said?

Ah, my favourite term - I've explained it in my little book *Hind Swaraj* and elsewhere. It is a simultaneously political and moral state of individual and collective self-rule and freedom, resting on the expression of power in every person and not in the government. It rests on the capacity to resist authority when abused, it voluntarily accepted restraints in our own life to ensure that others can also live with fulfilment, and it balances duties and rights. In a way, you know, I have been an anarchist, since I think a centralized state is an organised form of violence; but I also think western liberalism is dangerously divisive.

Fascinating! In Kurdistan we are trying to follow very similar principles of autonomous decision-making by each commune, with a focus on responsible collective living, and linking across larger landscapes in what I term 'democratic confederalism'. Indeed, I think we can use this as a basis of self-governance by peoples of the world, from the very local to the global. The latter could be a World Democracy Confederal Union, replacing the United Nations, which is dominated by the superpower nation-states ...

Hmm ... somewhere I think I spoke of 'oceanic circles' – wider and wider areas of *swaraj*-based decision-making that are founded on self-governing individual settlements, without hierarchy. I suppose one could construct a global governance based on this. But I do recall also supporting the idea of a federation of free nations, thinking it to be relevant for global peace-keeping, perhaps not realizing well enough that it would get dominated by nation-state governments without adequate space for the peoples of the world.

Yes, the power of nation-states, we should discuss that, as I think it is one of the pillars of global colonialism ... by the way I like your formulation of 'oceanic circles', that's poetic! But you were said you wanted to talk to me about non-violence? I too wish to ask you about it, for I have read some of your thoughts on it in Stanley Wolpert's book 'Gandhi's Passion: The Life and Legacy of Mahatma', which my lawyers managed to get me a copy of in prison. I am very intrigued by your views on this.

Yes. Unlike you, here in our self-governing afterlife where us martyred folks have a special say - Martin Luther King and Christ are also here by the way! – I have access to all the world's books, and I've read some on your brave movement. Tell me, your

ideology of democratic nation and confederalism and of an ecological society, which has much in common with *swaraj*, should not have space for violence. Why then does your movement have armies, even a women's army? Is that not a contradiction?

Oh yes, it is! Not only democracy in the way I've promoted it, but *jineoloji* – the science of women's freedom – emphasizes peace and harmony, including with the earth. But I think self-defence is one of the most important imperatives of all creatures, including humans. I have even said that much more than an army, self-defence is about the preservation of one's identity, of one's own political awareness, and of democratization.

But Mr. Gandhi, we are surrounded by the violent, militarized forces of the nation-states we live within. This region has a long historical context of persecution, including genocide against Armenians, Assyrians and Rum Greeks, and numerous massacres in Kurdistan. A deliberate policy of cultural genocide has been followed by the Turkish state. We tried for years, and on many occasions, to negotiate with them using peaceful means. We even declared unilateral ceasefire on several occasions. But barring a brief period when they seemed to be responding openly, they have never been interested in such a resolution. They could not tolerate the idea of Kurdish autonomy even if we agreed to continue living within their boundaries and not demand our own country. And they are still bombing us, killing our comrades, waging war on us. In this situation, we have had the choice of defending with our own forces, or being wiped out!

But are you sure you have given non-violence a full chance to express itself? I believe that is a group of people are fully prepared for it, it can overcome the most violent of aggressors – but that state of preparation is essential.

I must confess that I have not read or understood enough of your concept of non-violence, and of the preparation needed for it. But whether it is the stage of intellectual and cultural evolution our society is at, or the kind of obdurately violent nation-state we have had to confront, it seemed that counter-force was the only thing that could save us. But we are also constantly working on building mindsets that do not legitimize violence per se, that advocate peace and reconciliation, through our regular processes of education that everyone participates in.

I can understand that. For a full society to be ready to use non-violence as a means of resistance and *satyagraha*, and overcoming those who are imposing their will on it, requires a lot of hard mental and spiritual training. I imagine that Kurdish society may not have had the time to make this preparation, or that in some cases, like the situation you've been in, no state of readiness may work at least in the short run.

But listen, I also want to clarify that I did not mean non-violence to be an absolutist practice, even though I did talk of it as being a strict principle. I recall saying (in many different ways) that if the capacity for non-violent self-defence is lacking, there need be no hesitation in using violent means, and that violence in self-defence is far superior to impotence, or cowardly giving in. I have also said that while a

population prepares for non-violence and peaceful non-cooperation, it may need to have a small armed force. In this sense I would salute your soldiers, especially the women who are putting their bodies in the line of fire, so that the rest of your community has the chance to live peaceful lives.

Thanks for understanding! You know I would have loved to have the Kurdish movement invite you to share your principles and your practices of non-violence, as also *swaraj* and other approaches you advocated – sorry I cannot remember all the names - and your deep insights into our ecological predicament. Whether it would have helped us to resist with non-violence more than with violence, I can't say. But alas, we are anyway a few decades too late in having the pleasure of learning from you in person.

I would have been delighted to walk through Kurdistan! From what I can gather, your people are also practicing many other approaches similar to the ones I advocated, such as some form of *satyagraha*, which is speaking truth to power, or convincing the aggressor with truth. I myself learnt these from others in history. (Pauses, brow furrowed, then breaks into a smile). Actually, you know, I think I would have undertaken a fast in support of your release from prison!

I am honoured! You know in 2019, I actually exhorted some of my colleagues like Leyla Güven, who were on a fast to demand my release from prison, that they should study your teachings regarding fasting. Especially how the spiritual, physical and psychological health of people undertaking such actions is crucial to a democratic political resistance culture, and how fasts should always be undertaken within the context of social and political struggle. Am I right?

Bahut khoob – well-said! Indeed, for me a fast was not an isolated tactic, it was part of such struggle, but it was also an act of self-cleansing. I repeatedly clarified that a fast is not a hunger strike; it is not about blackmail, but about raising the collective moral conscience, the most potent tool in the toolkit of *satyagraha*. It can never be for selfish ends, and it cannot be undertaken out of anger, it is for convincing rather than coercing. *And* it is ultimately an act of non-violence!

Mr. Gandhi, it has been an absolute honour, I think I get a sense of why they call you the Mahatma, yours is indeed a great soul ...

(interrupting): Havel Öcalan, pl. don't call me that, it's not a label I relish!

Oh sorry ... yes I too feel that way when people tell me my photos are all over Kurdistan and other places where our people are spread. But now the prison guards are calling, my time for outside contact is over. I wish dearly we can have another conversation soon, I so want to talk to you about your other notions and practices, including, what did you call it, *satyagraha*?

Yes, indeed; as you mentioned your people are trying *swaraj*-like democracy, based on your ideas of democratic confederalism, which I'd like to learn from. I will also try to connect more with some of your martyred comrades who I think are also over here, especially the women who were part of the Kurdish army – it will be fascinating to talk about violence and non-violence with them. I wish I could even

convey your principles and explorations for democracy, to the struggles for freedom that are once again having to be waged in India. Both your and my people face authoritarian regimes, they need to be in solidarity with and learn from each other!

I salute those last words. *Jin jiyan azadi, and zindabad!*

Notes

¹ Mohandas Gandhi (1969-1948) and Abdullah Öcalan (1949-) were not contemporaries; this conversation is imaginary, but it may well have taken place in one of the many worlds we inhabit. The quotes (in original or slightly paraphrased) from both of them, are from available texts that they have written. Useful inputs were received from Vinay Lal, Shrishtee Bajpai, and Kurdish comrades.

² Abdullah Öcalan has been in solitary confinement in a high-security Turkish prison on Imrali island, for 24 years. He has written or dictated his thoughts profusely, despite his conditions, including in the form of notes taken by his lawyers, and his defence before the European Court of Human Rights.

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An environmentalist based in India, Ashish has helped found several national and global organisations and networks. Views expressed in this column do not necessarily represent the views of any of these.

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2. Gandhian Baba Amte and anti-dam protesters in Delhi - many movements for justice continue to use non-violent methods @ Ashish Kothari
3. A mass demonstration in Bakur, Northern Kurdistan (occupied by Turkey) @ Firat News Agency
4. Kurdish women at a celebration of the anniversary of the revolution in Rojava @ Firat News Agency
5. Long live the prison resistance - mural in North Kurdistan with a stencil of Mazlum Dogan, who died in prison 1982 @ ANF
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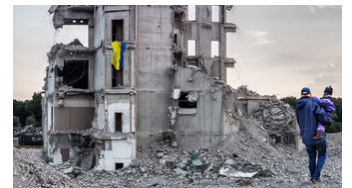
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