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## UNIT 13 GANDHI ON STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE

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### 13.1 INTRODUCTION

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Mahatma Gandhi's life and work embodies a unique vision of peace and non-violent activism. He not only abhorred wars and killings under any guise but also addressed the insidious ramifications of indirect violence embedded in the societal structures and cultures. His absolute disavowal of violence amid gravest of provocation makes him the most inveterate proponent of non-violent methods to achieve peace. Peace, he insisted, can only be brought about by the peaceful means. Unsurprisingly, the Gandhian vision led to multiple streams of thinking and action research in contemporary peace and conflict studies. In this Unit, we would take a closer look at some of his ideas, which exemplify his notion of peacebuilding as well, provide range of pedagogical tools to detangle peace studies and conflict analysis. One of the most significant Gandhian insights that has given a new dimension to our understanding of conflict and violence analysis is the notion of Structural Violence which continues to inspire new thinking in the area.

Gandhi took a comprehensive view of violence and expanded its scope to include oppressive structures, which erode and damage human dignity and prevent human beings from achieving their full potentials. He included untouchability, racialism, communalism and gender-based discrimination as acts of violence against humanity. The deprivation and impoverishment for him were ready markers of an unjust and violent social order. Conceptualised as 'Structural Violence', this indirect type of violence has been conceptualised lately by the Norwegian scholar Johan Galtung - a pioneer of peace studies. However, it is in the Gandhian thoughts that one finds a quintessential elaboration of structural violence – a fact admitted readily by Galtung himself. The Unit deals at length with Galtung's interpretation.

#### Aims and Objectives

After reading this Unit, you would be able to understand

- The anatomy of violence- both direct and indirect
- The notion of structural violence
- The importance of these concepts to understand the central ethos of Gandhi's vision of peace and non-violent activism.

## 13.2 CONFLICT AND VIOLENCE

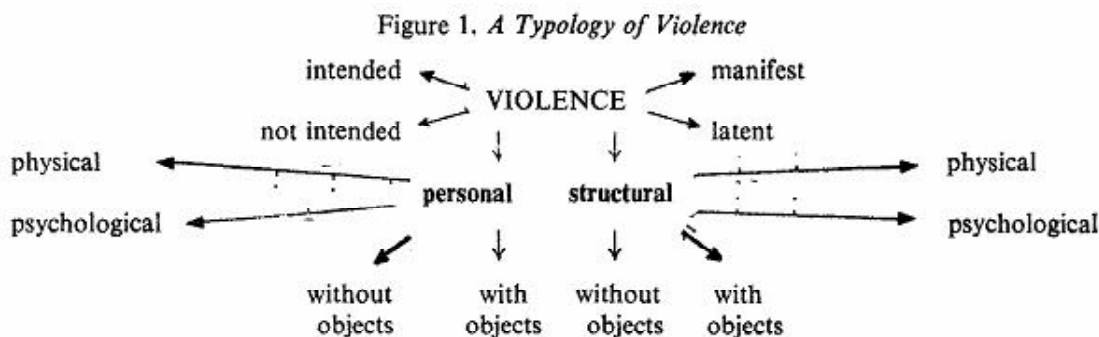
What is violence? Is it different from conflict? These queries preface any discussion on the subject. There is an obvious overlap between the two concepts as conflicts have a propensity to evoke violence. But as such these are two different phenomena. Conflict per se refers to competing social interests or differences or incompatibilities. They can be both functional and dysfunctional. Some conflicts can even spell a positive influence for social change and progress. In fact conflicts, in their different stages, offer ample opportunity to be managed peacefully through a negotiated settlement. Marx saw conflict not only as a matter to be resolved, but also as a driving force of change to new relationships. Gandhi also welcomed conflicts as an opportunity to know and negotiate with one's opponent. Gandhi was emphatic that the generic causes of conflict need to be addressed for its long-term solution.

On the other hand, violence in common parlance stands for war or collective killing, and bloodshed committed by a persona or collectively. Such direct violence is an instantly recognisable form of violence, which creates victims of conflict- through death, injury and psychological damage. Violence has been justified on various grounds including at times, for bringing peace and security. But Gandhi never approved of the use of violence under any circumstances. So he said: 'I object to violence because when it appears to do good, the good is only temporary; the evil it does is permanent.'

## 13.3 VIOLENCE DIRECT AND INDIRECT

Violence- both direct and indirect- is among the leading causes of death for people aged 15-44 years worldwide, accounting for about 14% of deaths among male and 7% of deaths among female in that age group. Since it is so pervasive, violence is often seen as an inevitable part of the human conditions. In popular imagination violence and human aggression seem to run in the human blood. However many scientific studies have discounted this biological linkage. The Seville Statement signed by 22 leading scientists in 1994 has demonstrated that peacefulness is as much intrinsic to human physiology as is the possibility of his acting otherwise.

The following typology of violence is an easy way to show the intend and contend of violence, and its ramifications. What is noteworthy is that both at personal and structural level one can see the same process, causation and expression. Violence undertaken by an actor (person) intentionally or unintentionally falls in the category of direct violence and when such physical or psychological violence is felt due to a structure in a manifest or latent manner, then it is called an indirect violence.



As compared to indirect violence, the direct violence is easy to describe. It involves wars, mass killings and other episodes of bloodshed. But if we consider the indirect forms of violence then the loss is unimaginable. By a World Health Organisation estimate, such violence results in more than 1.5 million people being killed each year, and many more suffer non-fatal injuries and chronic, noninjury health consequences, and interpersonal violence (domestic violence, child maltreatment, elder abuse and sexual violence. See URL: [www.who.int/violence\\_injury\\_prevention](http://www.who.int/violence_injury_prevention)).

While Gandhi always remained concerned with wars and organised killings and nuclear weapons, he also warned us of those hidden forms of violence, which are more insidious than any other form of direct violence. The Gandhian emphasis on everyday violence ingrained in the very structure of the society paved the way for new thinking in this area. Gandhi defined violence as anything which would impede the individual from self-realisation, whether by his progress, or by keeping him at a moral standstill. Therefore, the violence of the 'evil-doer' includes its effects in setting the 'evil-doer' back himself; violence can be self-inflicted, and not just inflicted upon others.

Following the Gandhi's lead, Johan Galtung created a violence typology based on a broader understanding of violence. Violence, according to Galtung, is "the avoidable impairment of fundamental human needs or, to put it in more general terms, the impairment of human life, which lowers the actual degree to which someone is able to meet their needs below that which would otherwise be possible." Thus in its expanded scope, violence includes not only the intentional use of physical damage but also its threat which might result in injury, death, psychological harm and also in various forms of maldevelopment, deprivation and disempowerment. Such comprehensive vision of violence corresponds closely to Gandhi's own understanding of violence.

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### 13.4 STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE

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While the content of structural violence was well amplified by Gandhi in his writings, Johan Galtung, a peace researcher, developed pedagogy around the concept of structural violence which is not inflicted physically on another but is hidden in structures.

Indirect violence, according to Galtung, includes both Structural and Cultural violence. He defined it as a violence that does not hurt or kill through fists or guns or nuclear bombs, but through social structures that produce poverty, death and enormous suffering. Structural violence may be politically repressive, and exploitative; it occurs when the social order directly or indirectly causes human suffering and death. When people starve, for example, even though there's enough food for everyone, the distribution system is creating structural violence. However, the direct violence is noticed quickly as it injures or kills people instantly and dramatically often resulting in early remedial response.

Galtung argues that violence is built into unequal, unjust and unrepresentative social structures, which produce social groups who have low incomes, low education, low health, and low life expectancy. The human and social costs of this kind of silent, indirect violence are often higher than those of direct physical harm. Such systemic violence denies the larger population from meeting their basic human needs.

Racialism and untouchability are two stark instances of such structural violence. In both cases the societal, political and economic structures are employed to oppress and exploit the victims of structural violence. Spread of poverty and underdevelopment also inflict the

humanity with worst kind of violence. Petra Kelly, the founder of the German Green Party, wrote in 1984:

A third of the 2,000 million people in the developing countries are starving or suffering from malnutrition. Twenty-five per cent of their children die before their fifth birthday [...] Less than 10 per cent of the 15 million children who died this year had been vaccinated against the six most common and dangerous children's diseases. Vaccinating every child costs £3 per child. But not doing so costs us five million lives a year. These are classic examples of structural violence.

The episodes of structural violence are less perceptible as they remain embedded in the exploitative, hunger and illness-producing structures. Disempowered and marginalised people suffer and die in silence due to structured inequities- local, regional or may be global. It is easy to correlate the inaccessibility of health care and life-saving systems to unequal and unfair distribution of society's resources.

There is of course a two-way relation between the structural violence and direct violence. The structured inequalities easily ignite organised armed conflict. Those who are chronically oppressed resort to direct violence, often to seek remedial measures. Most of the ethnic conflicts of recent past were either ignited or exacerbated by the continued disparities and deprivations. Be it Northern Ireland or Sri Lanka or Rwanda – one finds that unabated structural disparities provided justifications for the violent conflict.

The enormous resources consumed by armament and militarisation denies a large chunk of population from meeting their basic human needs for adequate food, health care, and education. The nexus between market forces, arms production and politicians ensure that precious resources in poor countries first go to the buying of arms rather than to alleviate the misery of teeming millions suffering from poverty, hunger and marginalisation.

The UNDP Report of 1998 estimated the annual cost to achieve universal access to a number of basic social services in all developing countries: \$9 billion would provide water and sanitation for all; \$12 billion would cover reproductive health for all women; \$13 billion would give every person on Earth basic health and nutrition; and \$6 billion would provide basic education for all. These social and health expenditures are just a fraction of the annual military budget for the United States alone.

Clearly, the unchecked growth of militarism in the world is the single most constraining factor in helping out people in the situation of human insecurity. This has led to a rising discontent in the impoverished and deprived youth in the developing and the less developed countries against the rich, powerful, and the imposing West making them an easy prey to the siren song of extremism.

The globalisation, with its differential character, is further promoting powerful multinational conglomerates that derive huge profits off under-paid labourers in developing countries. The result is horrific structural violence to workers who toil under brutal conditions. It also produces a monoculture, in which people throughout the world learn that the good life consists of convenience products, western dress, and western values of individuality and consumerism. The invisibility of injustice to labourers in the global market economy parallels the invisibility of injustice to indigenous people.

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### 13.5 CULTURAL VIOLENCE

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The structural violence enforces the powerlessness of its victims, entrenched in the psyche of the society. Galtung, in course, supplemented the notion of structural violence to include the concept of cultural violence. According to him, Cultural Violence describes the ideologies, convictions, traditions and systems of legitimation, through which direct or structural violence is made possible, justified and legitimised.

Violence can be cultural, which occurs when beliefs are used to justify either direct or structural violence. For example, when a person justifies the deaths of starving people by blaming them for their situation (called blaming the victim), that person is engaging in cultural violence. The earlier discussion on structural violence has shown the faultlines in the cultural traditions that permit and even rationalise the violence in its structural forms. In India the notion of *Karma* assumes that the victims of social inequity must, in some way, deserve their plight. But certainly it is easy to see that young children do not deserve to be victims of structural violence.

Infact the structural inequities, in course, become a part of a powerful cultural mechanism which then legitimises the continuation of such subtle violence. Discriminating cultural and religious beliefs, rituals, art, language and ideologies are constructed to carry on the structural inequities and oppression in a routine manner. Whether it is the theorem of a superior race (*Herrenvolk*) or the notion of untouchability – all are products of such cultural violence. The theory of cultural violence corresponds closely to the two basic points in Gandhism, the doctrines of unity of life and of unity of means and ends.

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### 13.6 GANDHI ON STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE

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Gandhi's comprehensive approach to non-violence has a close bearing on the contemporary discourse on peace and conflict. Many researchers find his ideas as important to understand the concept of structural violence. Johan Galtung, by his own admission, learned the basics of structural violence through an exploration of Gandhian philosophy during his time at the Gandhian Institute of Studies in Varanasi in 1969. He labelled Gandhi as a 'structuralist' for establishing the distinction between a person and a structure.

Through Gandhian lenses, Galtung saw how violence is built into social structures, and not into the persons. Gandhi intuitively understood the violence perpetrated by oppressive social structures and political institutions. He was unequivocal in saying that the evil was in the structure, not in the person who carried out his obligations. Elsewhere he said that 'the essence of nonviolence technique is that it seeks to liquidate antagonisms but not the antagonists themselves.'

Gandhi justifiably found the colonialism as a quintessential case of structural violence. Colonialism, according to Gandhi, was thus an oppressive structure and so was the caste system within which people acquired their consciousness and performed their assigned duties and roles. In Gandhi's schema, an evil is an offshoot of the social structure. For Gandhi, economics that is destructive of the moral well-being of any individual or nation is immoral, and a political structure bereft of religion and morality cannot bring about the dignity, inner freedom and justice of the citizens. Thus Gandhi highly disapproved of capitalism, not the capitalist; racialism, not the white men; and modern civilisation, not the Western people living in it.

Aware of the systemic imperatives of oppression, Gandhi stated emphatically that the sheer replacement of colonial white regime by brown rulers would not bring any succour to the suffering masses. He was apprehensive that the new rulers would still follow the same objectives, principles and commitment of the 'so called' modern (western) civilisation, which according to him, is founded on the premise of a ruthless competition and unbridled individualism. He said:

Unrestricted individualism is the law of the beast of the jungle. We have learnt to strike the mean between individual freedom and social restraint. Willing submission to social restraint for the sake of the well being of the whole society, enriches both the individual and the society of which one is a member (Harijan, May 27, 1939).

In his foundational oeuvre, 'Hind Swaraj', he severely condemned the 'modern civilisation' which corrodes the dignity and the soul of human beings. According to Gandhi, the unbridled quest of human consumption, wants, and addiction to technological solutions, would further divide the society and inflict psychological damage to the underprivileged sections of the society. Gandhi found the practices of modern civilisation ruthless and aggressive which puts a premium on ambitious, competitive, tough men whose only mission is to maximise their wealth and power. The blind pursuance of modernity tends to undermine the shared bonds of a true community and indulges in structural violence often in tandem with an oppressive state.

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### 13.7 PREVENTING STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE

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Gandhi wanted to demolish such norms and institutions that justify discrimination, exploitation and dehumanisation. No wonder that his notion of non-violent activism far exceeds the narrow understanding of violence confined to direct injuries and bloodshed. In fact Gandhi's Ahimsa focused as much on the system-generated structural violence as on actor-oriented direct violence.

The Gandhian vision on structural violence has found greater relevance in recent times. While the episodes of direct violence between the states have diminished, there is an unprecedented surge of civilian violence – people killing their fellow beings and violence perpetrated by the state against its own citizens. The violence against the weaker sections has also increased whether it is against the women or against other ethnic, caste or communities. In India the growth of naxalism is often attributed to the long drawn exploitation, oppression and dehumanisation of the tribals in a systemic manner.

Gandhi did not approve of the modern territorial state as a panacea to end the structural violence for the same reasons he discounted the modern civilisation. His ideal of social organisation was the family which could encompass the whole world (*vasudhaiva kutumbakam*). Gandhi's non-violent activism was based on a social order in which there is no dehumanisation and each one is treated with dignity in the spirit of shared humanity. In his ideal society, free from structural violence, he visualised that people would be content to fulfill their basic human needs and would not hanker for more. In a much-cited speech he said:

If I take anything that I do not need for my immediate use, and keep it, I thief it from somebody else. I venture to suggest that it is the fundamental law of nature, without exception, that Nature produces enough for our wants from day to day, and if only everybody took enough for himself and nothing more, there would be no pauperism in this

world, there would be no dying of starvation in this world. But so long as we have got this inequality, so long we are thieving.<sup>1</sup>

Clearly then Gandhi highlighted the norm of shared responsibility and accorded the community of ensuring the fulfillment of each one's basic human needs. He chided those who craved for the surplus at the cost of depriving others of meeting their basic human needs.

As mentioned earlier, Gandhi feared that colonialism not only engages in political and economic exploitation but also fabricates a cultural mindset conducive to subjugate its targets. He apprehended that the philosophical and moral worldview of the colonisers would persist despite India achieving its independence.

Gandhi's epic treatise 'Hind Swaraj' is in fact a critique of structures and cultures that persist in Structural Violence. He wanted new structures and norms to replace the colonial legacy in independent India and doubted how the elite steeped in the western culture can do so. He was opposed to the usurping and abusing of political power by a few authorities. He instead called for the capacity-building of the masses so that a truly representative democracy could emerge.

Unless there is a total shift in the way we look at the concept of progress and development, India will witness greater intensity of structural and cultural violence. To rid India from the structural and cultural violence, the Gandhian precepts of Swaraj and *Swadeshi* offered ways to liberate our people from systemic violence. Realising that structural violence is ingrained in the profit-seeking capitalist world, Gandhi's non-violent social order entailed limiting the consumption as well as such new technology, which promotes exploitation, inequity, centralisation of power and authority.

Gandhi had an innate sympathy for the poor and deprived. He believed that capitalism is an economic order and had roots of all exploitation. The relentless pursuit of profit led to discrimination, oppression and exploitation. There is always enough in this world to meet the basic human needs of its people. The misery of poverty and deprivation arise because of the possessive individual who thrives on the labour put in by others. Only if people could take from the system only as much as they need, then there will be an end to misery and violence that it entails. 'In this country of semi-starvation of millions and inefficient nutrition,' Gandhi said, "the wearing of jewelry is an offense to the eyes."

Gandhi therefore talked about self-sufficient village and indigenous mode of development. Gandhi visualised the philosophy of Sarvodaya to usher in economic equity reaching down to the last and the least without ruthless compulsion and violence. His answer to structural violence was thus Ahimsa and Sarvodaya. While Ahimsa would heal, Sarvodaya would spell the sense of unity, a 'oneness' among all without any distinction, high and low, rich and poor, strong and weak, even the good and the bad.

### 13.7.1 Untouchability as Violence

Gandhi found untouchability as the blatant case of structural violence and a worst crime against humanity. The question of eliminating untouchability to him was more critical than even the quest of political independence. So he wrote in 'Young India' as early as in 1921 that "Swaraj is a meaningless term if we desire to keep a fifth of India under perpetual subjection... Inhuman ourselves we may not plead before the Throne for the deliverance from the inhumanity of others." Again in 1928 Gandhi declared untouchability as an

“inhuman boycott of human beings” and thought that its removal was a prerequisite for the attainment of home-rule.

Gandhi not only reclaimed the dignity of untouchables by renaming them as Harijans - ‘God’s children’ but also integrated them in his personal life and work. He himself started cleaning the public toilets along with the Harijans to set an example.

Gandhi was highly grieved not only among Hindu untouchables, but also among Hindus, Muslims, Christians, and all other different religions about the caste system and found it to be a social evil, but untouchability to him was a sin.

Gandhi worked relentlessly to elevate the social status of the untouchables in India. He wanted penance for crimes of discrimination that have been perpetuated for thousands of years as he wanted society to work hard to relocate the untouchables on an equal footing with the other members of society.

Gandhi went on a fast until death after the proclamation of the elections based on communal identity in 1935. He could not tolerate the non-accommodation of the untouchables within the fold of the Hindu community. Gandhi was instrumental to a great degree to make the Indians conscious of the evils of untouchability. In an attempt to persuade the orthodox Hindus to wipe out the “blight of untouchability”, Gandhi undertook fast in the summer of 1933 for three weeks. To him his battle against untouchability related to the larger question of unity communities.

### **13.7.2 Modern Education**

Gandhi often referred to the hardheartedness of the educated and lamented that the modern education does not teach compassion or empathy for the poor and the disempowered. He reflected on the insensate pedagogy of western-inspired education which is wholly inadequate to understand the misery of those who are subjected to a systemic or structural violence. For instance he scoffs at model building and other economic analysis which has no feel of the real world of poor people and reduces poor people into a series of numbers and abstractions. In all this, the meaning of ‘poverty’ itself never gets interrogated.

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## **13.8 SUMMARY**

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The concept of Structural violence expands the scope of violence from inflicting direct physical damage to a range of situations which disallows humans to attain their full potentials in terms of actual somatic and mental realisation. By bringing out this indirect and subtle nature of violence, Gandhi brings on board the misery of teeming millions who suffer in silence inflicted by the oppressive structures. Gandhi was upfront in declaring that any division in society would lead to inequality and which in turn would lead to violence. He also emphasised that poverty and deprivation are the most widespread manifestations of structural violence. And unless these exploitative structures are dismantled, there would be no sustainable peace.

This conceptual expansion has endowed peace and conflict studies greater insights into the generic causes of violent conflicts. Many recent initiatives like human development and human security have highlighted the core issues of Structural Violence. Thus human security is defined as freedom from fear and freedom from want, which include safety from chronic threats such as hunger, disease and repressions, and protection from sudden and hurtful disruptions in the patterns of daily life.



The responsibility of eliminating structural violence eventually rests on the concerted efforts to promote political and economic institutions which consider the fulfillment of basic human needs as their primary goal. Many imperatives, which according to Gandhi, violated human dignity are now being attended within the ambit of human security and human development including increasing poverty reduction programmes, support for women's education, health, and family welfare; sustained efforts to use forests, water, and soils which support rural economies; and measures to ensure effective citizenship.

Gandhi also spells out the ways to mitigate structural violence. While his vision of *Ahimsa* heals, the human governance as conceived in *Swaraj* alleviates and eventually eliminates its effects. He calls for deep reforms in the way we define and organise development and governance. Gandhi was skeptic about the state's intention and capacity to deal with core issues of structural violence and exhorted the civil society to take the lead in understanding and eliminating the curse of oppressive structures. Gandhi was also emphatic that it is only by redressing the malefic effects of structural violence which impact the majority of people that India could grow as a healthy and happy nation.

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### 13.9 TERMINAL QUESTIONS

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1. What is Violence? How is it different from Conflict?
2. Differentiate between Direct and Indirect Violence.
3. Define Structural Violence. What are its main features?
4. How did Gandhi inspire the thinking on Structural Violence?
5. How, according to Gandhi, can Structural Violence impact poor and powerless?
5. Give some examples of Structural Violence.

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### SUGGESTED READINGS

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**(Endnotes)**

<sup>1</sup>Speech on "Ashram Vows" at Y.M.C.A., Madras', *Indian Review* (February 1916).