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## What exactly does 'Ahimsā' in the Indian tradition connote?

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### Abstract:

The history of *ahimsā* is as old as the history of humankind, and the pacifist idea of *ahimsā* has been an essential condition for the advancement of every human civilization. Although all philosophical traditions of the world have recognized *ahimsā* and its adjacent values as essential for human and social well-being; Nevertheless, the subtle thinking seen on this subject in the Indian tradition is not found anywhere else. In this context, this article attempts to know the real meaning of the idea of *ahimsā* in the Indian tradition. It focuses specifically on a critical appraisal of the connotation of *ahimsā* in both the Vedic and Śramaṇic traditions within the Indian tradition.

**Keyword:** *Ahimsā*, non-violence, Indian tradition, Vedic, śramaṇic, yoga sutras, jain, buddhist, yama rules, peace

### Introduction

Almost all the traditions of the world depend on the idea of *ahimsā*/Non-violence to instil values in human life, as it is a fundamental eternal moral value. The idea of *ahimsā* is the conclusion of the best thinking of human civilization. Along with the evolution of humankind, the culture of *ahimsā* has also been refined continuously. In Indian culture too, it has been developing in many forms. The core value of *ahimsā* has exerted a profound influence on the Indian thought tradition over the centuries, the influence of which can be easily seen even today in the philosophical analysis, religious discussions and social and political thought of the Indian tradition. If all the ideals of the Indian ethical tradition are summed up in one word, one idea emerges: *ahimsā*. *Ahimsā* is the most revered moral value of India's great Indian spiritual heritage. It is the quintessential achievement of Indian ethos and an unbiased appraisal of the higher ideals of Indian culture. The great idea of *ahimsā* is the essence and leading spirit of Indian spirituality. The entire Indian way of life is based on the concept of *ahimsā*. The principle of *ahimsā* stemming from love, kindness and compassion towards living beings has been prevalent in Indian tradition since ancient times, due to which harming any living being is prohibited, and is considered a sin in India. In conjunction with personal spiritual fulfillment and social good, Indians have always practiced *ahimsā* as a core principle in their lives.

The famous German philologist and orientalist Friedrich Max Müller believed that the study of any theory is incomplete unless it is studied in the context of India. As he argued, "Take religion, and you can better study its true origin, its natural growth, and its inevitable decay, than India, the home of Brāhmanism, the birthplace of the Buddhist tradition, and the refuge of Zoroastrianism."<sup>[1]</sup> The Indian idea of *ahimsā* has co-existed in almost all the traditions of India for many centuries. Different scholars and philosophers have tried to define *ahimsā* in their own way. From the ancient sages to the present great men have emphasized on the spirit of *ahimsā* and made every possible effort to make *ahimsā* ideal. They have always been preaching the superiority of *ahimsā* in the Indian tradition. *Ahimsā* is equally recognized in both the Vedic-Śramaṇic practices and both traditions have contributed significantly to the preservation of India's non-violent culture. *Ahimsā* is a core principle in major Indian religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism.

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<sup>1</sup> Müller, India, What Can it Teach Us?, p. 13.

It is considered equivalent in the sense of *dharma* or moral law in Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism. It is also an essential part of Patañjali's spiritual discipline called *yama* rules. *Ahimsā* is a means to both temporal and supernatural goals. It is also an essential path to *mokṣa* or salvation [2]. From self-realization to world peace, *ahimsā* is the only means to achieve all these objectives. For all these reasons, the principle of *ahimsā* is found in the texts of all the major religions of India, which throw light on the superiority of the idea of *ahimsā* in human life. Therefore, it can be argued that, before examining the concept of "*ahimsā*" elsewhere, it would be necessary to see it in the context of the Indian tradition. Before considering other contexts of *ahimsā* in general, it is necessary to know what *ahimsā* exactly means in the Indian tradition. Does *ahimsā* have a literal meaning in the Indian tradition, or does it connote something more than words?

### The Negative and Positive meanings of *Ahimsā* in the Indian tradition

The idea of *ahimsā* has been defined in both minimal and maximal meaning in the Indian tradition and has been interpreted by different schools in their ways. Generally, two meanings of *ahimsā* are used - 1. Negative and 2. Positive. A *himsā* literally means 'non-injury,' i.e., the absence of violence or, more narrowly, 'non-killing.' The absolute cessation of all violent or evil tendencies is *ahimsā*. Nevertheless, this is the negative meaning of *ahimsā*. It is often understood that *ahimsā* is confined to the utterance of 'not to kill.' Nevertheless, defining *ahimsā* as mere negation is a one-sided interpretation of it. *Ahimsā* is much more than that. It is not only a theory but also a life experiment. From its narrow negative connotation based on literal etymology, it has a broad positive connotation. Its positive meaning gives it completeness. Its broad connotations include harmlessness, renunciation of the desire to kill or injure any living thing, abstaining from hostile behaviour, etc. [3] If you look at its meaning in Indian tradition, here '*ahimsā*' is not merely non-injury, not only the absence of physical violence, but it also means not to hurt anyone by thought (*manasa*), word (*vāchā*) and deed (*kārmana*). That is, not only by actions but also by speech and thoughts, completely abstain from harming any living being.

"*Ahimsā*" has innumerable meanings in the Indian tradition. Its meaning is not limited to any one definition. Positively, '*ahimsā*' is bound by all moral disciplines. The development of *ahimsā* as a complete moral discipline has resulted from incorporating all these moral qualities into itself. The most beneficial way of looking at the idea of *ahimsā* is to see the moral qualities of Equality, Compassion, Peace, Forgiveness, Mercy, Friendship, Love, Truth, Non-anger, Moderation, Harmony, Tenderness, Simplicity, Benevolence, Non-aggression, Gentleness, Chastity, Fraternity, Fearlessness, Renunciation, Charity, Modesty, Courage, Kindness, Selflessness, Non-possession, Celibacy, Non-stealing, etc. as its integral part. All these are included in its definition and are synonymous with *ahimsā*. *Ahimsā* is not limited to this only; it also means self-restraint, sacrifice, control of feelings of hatred, abstinence from harsh words, and absence of various oppression. *Ahimsā* is attaining pure consciousness, inner energy, strength, and achievement development. In a word, *ahimsā* is the absence of malice and the maintenance of

equanimity. People should not see *ahimsā* as separate from all these qualities, as they are also supported in ancient Indian texts. Even *Bhagavad Gītā* says, "Harmlessness, equanimity, contentment, austerity, beneficence, fame and failure, all these, the characteristics of beings, spring from Me only" [4].

### Meaning of '*Ahimsā*' in the Vedic tradition

Let us look at the Vedic meaning of the word *ahimsā*. In the *R̥gveda*, It is primarily used in the sense of "physical non-injury" rather than being confined to the etymological meaning of killing. Taking the example of some verses, in one verse, a deity named Mitrā is described as non-violent. Looking at the Vedic references, it seems clear there are many other widely accepted meanings of *ahimsā* besides "non-killing." Sanskrit dictionaries, like *Sabdārtha* by Cintamani; and *Vacaspatyam*, written by Taranatha, defines the word "*ahimsā*" as abstinence from causing pain to others by speech, mind, and body; and To free living beings from suffering. If we look at *Manusmṛiti*, *ahimsā* has many meanings in many places; in one place, it is used in the sense of "the cutting of medicinal trees." Furthermore, In many other contexts, "*ahimsā*" is referred to as "destroying knowingly or unknowingly the properties of another," "injury to other harmless beings (*ahimsāka*) just for the sake of one's pleasure," and "hurting another person by words (*durukta bhasana*)" and "going against the wishes of parents and teachers." If we talk about the Upaniṣadic sources, *Darśana Upaniṣad* says that *himsā* is that which is committed physically, mentally, or vocally. Consequently, Vedic *ahimsā* has a much broader meaning than passive non-injury. This includes relieving pain as well as avoiding giving pain. Vedic '*ahimsā*' is the optimistic notion of not hurting anyone by word, deed or thought. *Ahimsā* in the Vedas is a disciplinary process to achieve spiritual growth. Spiritual development is essential for the ultimate goal of human life, "*mokṣa*." It requires verbal, mental, and physical restraint and a gradual and genuine purity of thought. Compassion and purity of heart are also essential. From this dialogue, the Vedic people systematically developed the concept of *ahimsā* and tradition [5].

The *Yoga sūtras* of Patañjali recommend and support the *yama* rules, of which the five most important are: *ahimsā* (non-violence), *satya* (truth), *aparigrahā* (non-possession), *asteya* (non-stealing), and *brahmacharya* (celibacy). *Ahimsā* occupies the most prominent place in the five *yama* rules in Indian tradition. *Ahimsā* is counted first in the *yama* rules because the existence of all living beings is associated with it, and the creation and preservation of eternal human values are valid only after human existence. *Ahimsā* is both the beginning and the end of the five *yama* rules. All other *yama* rules are intrinsic to the specific aspects of *ahimsā* [6]. Other *yama* rules should be practiced only to the extent that they do not conflict with *ahimsā*. All the same rules after *ahimsā* are understood as adjuncts of *ahimsā*. All other *yama* rules are present in *ahimsā* and are related [7]. By imbibing *ahimsā*, all *yama* rules, including truth, are imbibed. Therefore, when *ahimsā* wins, truth also wins. Due to untruth, a person inflicts pain on himself as well as other beings. It is only through truth that different points of view can be appreciated. It is *ahimsā* that acknowledges the diversity of autonomous

<sup>2</sup> Iyer, The Moral and Political Thought of Mahatma Gandhi, p. 178.

<sup>3</sup> Iyer, The Moral and Political Thought of Mahatma Gandhi, p. 178.

<sup>4</sup> The Bhagavad Gītā, tr. P. Swami, verse 10.5.

<sup>5</sup> Puri, Gandhi and the Moral Life, p. 47.

<sup>6</sup> Hiriyanna, Outlines of Indian Philosophy, p. 295.

<sup>7</sup> Ranganathan, Patañjali's Yoga Sūtra, p. 127.

approaches <sup>[8]</sup>. Even the one who does not steal does not trouble the people. By observing celibacy, a person is saved from many types of violence. Accumulation of wealth allows violence to develop. Therefore the other *yama* rules have an essential role in the practice of *ahimsā*. Except for one of these, the vow of *ahimsā* cannot be fully fulfilled. *Ahimsā* is the sole essence and basis of all other *yama* rules, all other *yama* rules are its complements.

### Meaning of 'Ahimsā' in the Jain tradition

If we talk about Śramaṇa traditions, then the concept of *ahimsā* has developed in them similar to the Vedic tradition. Jain tradition has contributed significantly to developing the idea of *ahimsā* in the Indian tradition. The understanding of *ahimsā* is more radical in Jain tradition than in any other tradition and is most appreciated and emphasized by the Jains. While *ahimsā* was declared the supreme *dharma* by the Vedic tradition, the Jain tradition accepted it as the basis of the highest moral law and called it *Paramabrāhmaṇa*. Jains have tried to explain the idea of *ahimsā* with different definitions of violence. According to them, "*himsā*" means to hurt life principles because of intense activity. Moral degradation is also violence in the way of self-realisation. Ācārya Amritchandra has defined *himsā* in *Puruṣārthasiddhyupāya* as follows: "The term *himsā* may be defined as the committing of injury to the dravya *prāṇas* and the *Bhāva prāṇas* through the operation of intense-passion infected-*yoga* (activity of mind, body, and speech)" <sup>[9]</sup>.

According to the *Puruṣārthasiddhyupāya*, violence consists of both the internal mind and external behaviours. Passion and anger in the soul are the root cause of '*himsā*.' All vices arising out of passion, such as falsehood, theft, unchastity, and acquisition, are all forms of violence. If a person does not physically commit violence, but if he thinks about it mentally, it is considered violence. Moreover, on the other hand, the person is not responsible for the consequences of violence even after physically committing violence when he is not engaged in it mentally. Ultimately violence is a state of mind, and violence done without passion will not be called violence. On closer look, all these definitions of violence indirectly exemplify the Jain principle of *ahimsā*, Injuring any living being with passions is called violence, and abstaining from such actions is called *ahimsā*. <sup>[10]</sup> Therefore *ahimsā* in Jain tradition is universally obligatory toward all living beings. It is accepted as a critical vow for both monks and laymen. The entire Jain ethics is built based on the idea of *ahimsā*.

### Meaning of Ahimsā in the Buddhist tradition

*Ahimsā* has been defined in many ways in the Buddhist tradition. According to Buddha, *ahimsā* is the spirit of friendship, love, and compassion for all beings. However, "*ahimsā*" is not a technical term in the Buddhist tradition. The words "*vihiṃsā*" (injury, killing) and "*avihiṃsā*" (non-injury) described in the pāli texts are understood as *ahimsā*. In the Buddhist tradition, "*avihiṃsā*" means mental *ahimsā* (*avihiṃsā sankappa*). Here, physical non-injury has been given the meaning of various terms, such as "*panatipata veramani*," "*avihethana*," "*anupaghata*," and "*Anoparambha*" etc. In Buddhist philosophy, *ahimsā* is the basis of universal friendship. *Ahimsā* can be developed through compassion and purity and by staying away from anger. Here such people are

conceived as faithful saints who are endowed with the nature of friendship (*mettā citta*), non-anger (*avera*), non-ill-will (*akakkasa*), and non-hurting (*na abhisajjana*); and adhere to *ahimsā* at all three levels, mental, physical and verbal <sup>[11]</sup>.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be said that *ahimsā* is the most generous love in the Indian tradition. God and truth cannot be followed in one's religious or moral life unless one practices *ahimsā*. Since *ahimsā* protects all human values and is the basis of all morality, the need for *ahimsā* is everywhere, regardless of time, place, and circumstance; there is immense power in *ahimsā* by which even our enemies can become our friends; For all these reasons, the Indian moral tradition texts unanimously regard *ahimsā* as the predominant or supreme *dharma* (*ahimsā paramo dharmah*), that there are no more excellent moral merits than *ahimsā*. It is worth noting here that *ahimsā* is described not only for humans but also for "all living beings,"; A universal sentiment that applies equally to all beings. Although the idea of *ahimsā* is philosophically complex, it naturally exists before us today as a heritage of Indian culture. India's ancient intellectual tradition is vibrant and has the world's most significant number of written texts, which are logically accepted in society. India also has a rich tradition of many religious and philosophical saints; they always tried to present a detailed history of the glorious practice of *ahimsā*. To understand the idea of *ahimsā* in the Indian philosophical tradition, one has to understand the dialogue of *ahimsā* with ancient Indian texts; and at the same time to understand it more deeply, it is necessary to find out its noticeable impact on the Indian people, and its use in the living out of ordinary life. Therefore, to adopt *ahimsā* in our life, it is necessary to know its true meaning, which has been widely explained in the Indian tradition.

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<sup>8</sup> Ranganathan, Hinduism: A Contemporary Philosophical Investigation, p. 150.

<sup>9</sup> Puri, Gandhi and the Moral Life, p. 49.

<sup>10</sup> Puri, Gandhi and the Moral Life, p. 50.

<sup>11</sup> Puri, Gandhi and the Moral Life, p. 48.