

# THE MEANING OF GANDHI'S SILENCE

Relevant for: null | Topic: National Movement: Towards Freedom and Partition (1939-1947)

Mahatma Gandhi using a spinning wheel to make cloth. | Photo Credit: [Universal History Archive](#)

The horrific bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 did not immediately draw condemnation from leaders across the world. This is not particularly surprising. It was a deeply polarised world, very much in the throes of World War II, and still largely under colonial dominion. Leaders with the global reach and the moral stature capable of speaking out on such an event were in short supply.

But these were not M.K. Gandhi's problems. Widely celebrated by then as a global apostle of non-violence and a critic of Western imperialism, he wielded immeasurable moral force. Yet for months, Gandhi refused to speak about the event.

In September, *The Times* in London sought confirmation of astonishing rumours that he had endorsed the use of the atomic bomb. To this, Gandhi merely stated that he had not made any "public statement on the atomic bomb". To a U.S. correspondent, Gandhi said in October: "The more I think of it, the more I feel that I must not speak on the atomic bomb. I must act if I can." What do we make of this mystifying silence?

Was this a tactical silence that waited for events to play out? While this may be an entirely plausible, even prudent, explanation, it does not accord with Gandhi's reasoning at the time. Recall that he felt he "must not speak", but act.

Was Gandhi's compulsory silence about the atomic bomb an analogous form of protest? While it is tempting to draw this conclusion, it would not be accurate. For Gandhi, desisting from speech had a specific meaning that was neither a poetics of revolt nor could it be universalised; it had to be experienced individually.

This leaves open two less commonplace possibilities. Many religious traditions link the abstinence from sound with divinity. Was Gandhi's silence the activation of such a theological silence? This is not the case. Gandhi's form of silence was neither a form of total obedience to a deity nor a way of discovering one's relation with the world.

Was Gandhi's silence a form of mindfulness? In 1935, he explained that he was resigning from the Congress to "impose silence" so he could "explore the yet hidden possibilities of non-violence." For him, life was lived in the domain of activity. It was through individual action that a vow of silence could be cultivated.

For Gandhi, ahimsa and *mauna* were inextricably linked in a framework, wherein non-violence was about carrying out practical actions that entailed self-purification and self-control. What differentiated *mauna* from mere silence was that it did not necessitate cessation of speech as much as controlled activity. The emphasis was on selfless and disciplined activity rather than negative abstinence of speech or action. It is important to point out that in his periods of silence, Gandhi continued with his daily discipline, correspondence, and selective interactions with visitors to the ashram. The role of *mauna* in his ahimsa was a break from the circulation of violence and counter-violence. Gandhi intoned that while an atom bomb can cause physical harm, it cannot kill the soul. This is also a way he inverted ideas of victory and defeat, suggesting that the victors were vanquished in their loss of self-control but courageous death of

the victims was a form of transformation. *Mauna* enabled him to convert violence into a learning experience because like in any learning, it required making modifications on oneself.

The magical quality of unspoken-action is again revealed in an interview with Margaret Bourke-White on January 30, 1948, a few hours before he was assassinated. He reaffirmed the practice of ahimsa in relation to the atom bomb and observed that he would not escape from the pilot dropping the bomb but confront him with wide open eyes. He said, "The pilot will not see our faces from his great height, I know. But the longing in our hearts... would reach up to him and his eyes would be opened." Gandhi's silence after the calamity suggests how he transformed a spectacular tragedy into spiritual action.

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