

**ENHANCING CAPABILITIES OF RESOLVING CONFLICTS THROUGH  
NON-VIOLENT COMMUNICATION**

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*Abstract*

At a time when societies across the world are facing conflicts at different levels like societal and individual, there is an emergent need to nurture techniques and approaches which would promote nonviolent resolution of conflicts. Coercive methods of resolving conflicts result in win-lose situations. This results in disenchantment and continuation of discontentment. In this context, conflict resolution through non-violent means may open up new vistas for out-of-the-box outcomes creating prospects for a win-win situation. Hence it is significant to analyze different techniques of non-violent communication which can be encouraged in conflict resolution. With a theoretical grounding of John Burton's Human Needs Theory and Amartya Sen's Capability Approach, this article aims to draw an overview of how non-violent communication may enhance conflict resolution capabilities, delving deep into the root causes of conflict.

**Keywords:** Non-violent, communication, Human Needs Theory, Capability Approach, conflicts, violence, conflict resolution, techniques, altruism, pragmatism.

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**Introduction**

Human and social conflicts never end. They are an integral part of life. Our existence on this earth hinges on how we manage various sorts of conflict, driven not only by the conflicting interests and values but also by hostilities. Every morning while taking our daily breakfast, we come across numerous stories of violence and conflicts in newspapers, television, or on our

mobiles. Horrible stories of violence, including rapes, killings, and murders, seem to hit the headlines more than stories of compassion and humanity. Almost every day, newspapers and television channels report incidents on sexual assault on women and children, and brutal murders. Conflict and violence are now a global challenge today. Conflict is not only limited to physical violence but also embraces societal damage and personal loss. Every year we experience a wide range of news on conflict worldwide. In this connection Mazur and Wood (2016) observes,

increasing violence, devastation of our planet and disconnection from our families and communities continues. Our hearts are breaking. There are wars on many fronts. We are at war with each other, with our neighbors, with our communities, with our nations. The earth has lost half of its wildlife in the past forty years. Rapid climate change is contributing to devastating natural disasters. Children are killing children. There is a palpable climate of disconnect, violence and neglect." (11-12).

Mansouri & Barrero, (2017) points out,

Internationally, the last two decades have witnessed an upsurge in intercultural tensions, xenophobia and social disharmonies, in particular inter and intra-state conflicts driven by religious, sectarian and ethno-cultural disagreements. Indeed, since 9/11, new forms of extreme ideologies, radicalization, populism and estrangement have dominated national and global agendas. (318)

In the mid-1970s, Cambodia was marked by more than a million deaths. It had also experienced the regime's enemy classes' unheralded mass extermination. Civil wars in Sudan and

the Congo represented the most brutal internal wars, involving the deaths of as many as four million people. Tragic Rwandan genocide between the Hutus and the Tutsis, and the ethnic cleansing of innocent Muslims by the Serbian military group in Bosnia-Herzegovina, are some of the conflicts that the world has ever experienced. The civilian populations in Iraq have become terror victims and are captive to religious, sectarian violence unleashed due to the US invasion and the fall of Saddam Hussein's government. The human rights violations in Chechnya are another prominent instance. (Jeong 4) In his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech, the former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan (2001) had said,

We have entered the third millennium through a gate of fire... New threats make no distinction between races, nations, or regions. A new insecurity has entered every mind, regardless of wealth or status...In the early beginnings of the 21st century, a century already violently disabused any hopes that progress towards global peace and prosperity is inevitable; this new reality can no longer be ignored. It must be confronted...The 20th century was perhaps the deadliest in human history, devastated by innumerable conflicts, untold suffering, and unimaginable crimes. Time after time, a group or a nation inflicted extreme violence on another, often driven by irrational hatred and suspicion or unbounded arrogance and thirst for power and resources...In this new century, we must start from the understanding that peace belongs not only to states or peoples but to every member of those communities...(Nobel lecture delivered by Kofi Annan, 2001).

When violence and conflict had been the cause of destruction in various parts of the world, some other instances set a successful transformation model for the conflict. For many decades, the South African struggle ended with building new institutions that transferred government power to the black majority. Decades-old sectarian violence in Northern Ireland has been stopped. Three decades of civil war in Angola finally ceased in 2002, moving toward a political transition. The reconstruction of war-torn societies was accompanied by negotiated settlements of civil wars in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Mozambique in the early and mid-1990s. (Jeong 4)

Humans experience conflict in every walk of life, right from childhood, schools, institutions, workplaces, and family. Much of the conflict arises from power differences, miscommunication, cultural disconnects, ego, misunderstandings, stereotypes, and overall lack of adequate respect for the other person. A conflict may also originate from economic and other material sources; it can be quickly expanded to identity differences with escalation. Even the unmet human needs and scarcity of resources can cause conflict. There are many instances of fake news, disinformation, hate speeches, memes, trolls flooded in the social media with the least number of stories of compassion. The constant desire to acquire material objects or the mad race for achievements forces many individuals to use coercive methods, aggression, and competitiveness as instruments. Though this tendency to acquire material possessions and become a champion has been a driving force for ages, in modern times, these individuals and societies tend to push such efforts with exemption using new technologies.

Communication imbues all levels of human experience. It is a mechanism through which human relations exist and develop. We communicate to share our hopes and dreams, ideas, attitudes, feelings and thoughts. We communicate to create understanding with others.

Nevertheless, it is far more complicated than most of us think. Poor communication can turn friends into enemies and plunge nations into wars. It is the most frequently cited source of human conflict.

## **Objective**

When societies across the world face conflicts at different levels like societal, individual et al, there is an emergent need to nurture an alternative communication approach that would enhance the capabilities to resolve conflict among individuals in different level societies. Therefore, this article aims to draw an overview of how non-violent communication can enhance conflict resolution capabilities.

## **Review of Literature**

Studies on non-violent communication that encourages the non-violent approaches of conflict resolution still remains in a very nascent stage, although few studies have encapsulated the essence of non-violent communication. Gorsevski (2012) pointed out that non-violent rhetoric has been largely ignored. Taking the cues of peace apostles like Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., she looked for the pragmatic non-violence of Macedonian President Kiro Gligorov, the visual rhetoric of Nobel Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi, and an anti-racist campaign in Billings, Montana. She suggested how conflict can be understood, prevented, managed, or reduced by employing peace-laden rhetorical means. She further suggested a need to study non-violent rhetoric that encourages non-approaches to handling conflicts. While making a detailed study of Gandhi's verbal and non-verbal communication, Gonsalves (2010)

says that Gandhi's verbal output was the product of a tremendous desire to communicate through dialogue to express himself and stay in contact with people. He writes, Gandhi's adherence to truth in communication was best seen in the way he managed conflicts. Jeong (2010) had underscored prolonged conflict, mutual understanding of the dialogue exchange, which further investigated the causes and investigation of a way out. He further points out emphasizing the importance of communication; that “when deep mistrust and suspicion dominate negotiation, mediation can be introduced to improve communication and change perceptions of each other. These processes can be better elucidated by our knowledge about conflict relationships embedded in power, identity, and structures which are directly or indirectly related to inducing changes in hostile behaviour.” In his monograph (2019), Kundu promoted the Gandhian values and philosophy and pointed out the various Gandhian approaches to resolve any conflict at different societal levels highlighting the importance of non-violent communication. Roy (2019) argues that particularism's virtues produce new cultural conflicts. In such conflicts, religious traditions play a unique role. In other words, she has highlighted the importance of intercultural dialogue in resolving conflicts.

### **Theoretical Underpinning**

Communication performs three primary functions for an individual. Firstly, it helps to satisfy a personal need. Secondly, it defines his position concerning others. Thirdly, communication helps a person to adapt to the social environment. Within a group, communication serves to socialize, control, motivate, express, and inform. Communication functions are essentially linked to human needs, material and non-material. Self-reliance, cultural identity, independence, respect for human dignity, mutual aid, participation in reshaping the

environment are some of the non-material aspirations which human beings seek to achieve through communication. As the world grows increasingly complex, communication has become even more vital to contribute to humankind's liberation from want, oppression, and fear and unite it in community and communion, solidarity, and understanding. There are also material needs like enhanced efficiency, improved health, and higher productivity, which cannot be achieved without communication. Missing any of these can be the source of conflict. This article will base itself on the Human Needs Theory of John Burton and the Capability Approach of Amartya Sen as a theoretical grounding in understanding the root causes of conflict and imbibing the capability to resolve them through non-violent communication.

John Burton (1979) has identified the importance of basic human needs theory. In Burton's view the great promise of human needs theory is that it would provide a relatively objective basis, transcending local political and cultural differences for understanding the sources of conflict, designing conflict resolution processes, and founding conflict analysis and resolution as an autonomous discipline. He (1993) further identifies a set of needs, which he considers universal in their occurrence but with no hierarchical significance. His list of needs comprises distributive justice, safety and security, belongingness, self-esteem, personal fulfillment, identity, cultural security, and freedom. Burton (1987) further emphasized that conflict is likely to be caused by the need for identity, recognition, identity group security, and other such human societal values. Conflict resolution must aim at shaping human needs and values and then supporting parties to deduce what alterations in structures, institutions and policies are required to fulfill needs. Resolution of any conflict must involve satisfying those needs of the parties involved that are being frustrated by existing conditions and relationships. To Burton, need-based conflicts are likely to meet a win-win outcome.

It is also essential to understand the importance of well-being and happiness through the lens of Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen's Capability approach and its utility in resolving conflicts. According to Sen, "capability" is determined by the different life-styles that an individual can choose. A capability is "a person's ability to do valuable acts or to reach valuable states of being"; it "represents the alternative combinations of things a person is able to do or be" (Sen 1993; 28). Thus, capabilities represent various "combinations of functionings" (Sen 1999; 14). Capability is also a set of vectors of functionings, reflecting a person's freedom to lead one type of life or another. (Sen1995; 40). According to Sen (1993), a person's capabilities depend on various factors, namely, personal characteristics and social arrangements. That is to say, capabilities as real opportunities engulf personal abilities and societal opportunities such as safety nets, social facilities, and economic opportunities. This combination produces a capability set which refers to the various available functioning from which the person can freely choose. A set of capabilities depicts one's freedom to choose from possible livings (Sen 1995; 52).

### **Understanding Non-violent Communication**

According to Roy (2020), communication is a simple act naturally. If we start looking at our communication process, we will realize the wide range of factors that come into play when we interact, right from the level of intrapersonal communication to mass communication. Careful analysis will reveal how our emotions, cultural background, beliefs, and ideas come into play during verbal or nonverbal communications. Further, it also involves how we speak, our tone and voice, volume, pace with which we speak, what we are thinking of the others, with whom we are involved in the conversation, and what we want from our conversation and discussion. Our ego, feelings of hegemony and superiority, differences with others, our living conditions, and many other reasons could be why we indulge in unhealthy communication. Therefore, we need to be



involved in a communication process that nourishes and de-stresses us and is more mindful and non-violent in its approach. In this connection, Hanh (2013) pointed that

we tend to think of nourishment only as what we take in through our mouths, but what we consume with our eyes, our ears, our noses, our tongues and our bodies is also food. The conversations going on around us, and those we participate in, are also food. Are we consuming and creating the kind of food that is healthy for us and helps us grow? When we say something that nourishes us and uplifts the people around us, we are feeding love and compassion. When we speak and act in a way that causes tension and anger, we are nourishing violence and suffering. (Hanh page no? )

Daisaku Ikeda (2007), a contemporary peace scholar, gave three principles and guidelines for communication: (1) exchange among civilizations as a source of value creation; (2) a spirit of open dialogue; and (3) the creation of a culture of peace through education. Roy (2020) further emphasized that many people find it challenging to communicate effectively because they have so much frustration and anger built up inside. Even when we come to another person with sincere goodwill and the intention to listen, if we cannot use calm and loving speech, there is no hope that the other person will hear us and understand what we are trying to say. We may use calm and loving speech, but our pain, despair, and fear emerge when we often start speaking. Despite our best intentions, we start to blame, complain and judge harshly. Our speech begins to reverberate with the kind of energy that turns people against us because they cannot bear to hear what we say. When this happens, we need to learn or re-learn how to communicate.

Mahatma Gandhi's strict adherence to the principles of truth and non-violence in all his actions, his speech, his writings, or his movements form an important guiding post for the

practice of non-violent communication. In his autobiography, Gandhi (1960, 367) observes that if one does not practice non-violence in one's relations with others and hopes to use it in more significant affairs, one is vastly mistaken. Non-violence like charity must begin at home. Nevertheless, if it is necessary for the individual to be trained in non-violence, it is even more necessary for the nation to be. According to Bode (1995), the Gandhian approach to non-violent communication includes: a) non-violent speech and action, b) maintenance of relationships and enrichment of personhood, c) openness, and d) flexibility. For Gandhi, communication was to build and maintain human relationships and personhood. Gandhi's insistence on non-violence recognized others' importance, valued humanity, and appreciated human relationships and personhood. Gandhi's non-violent communication theory included the valuing of personhood throughout the world, but he also stressed the importance of individual relationships and friendships. Openness was manifested in Gandhi's rhetoric and characteristic of his non-violent communication theory. For Gandhi, openness included communication practices as free speech and press, public discussions, and direct negotiation. Marshall Rosenberg (2015), using the Gandhian approach to non-violence, explains that nonviolent communication is founded on language and communication skills that strengthen our ability to remain human, even under trying conditions. It guides us in reframing how we express ourselves and hear others. Instead of habitual, automatic reactions, our words became conscious responses based firmly on awareness of perceiving, feeling, and wanting. We are led to express ourselves with honesty and clarity while simultaneously paying others respectful and empathetic attention. In any exchange, we come to hear our own deeper needs and those of others. It trains us to observe and specify behaviors and conditions affecting us. We learn to identify and clearly articulate what we concretely want in any given situation. The form is simple yet powerfully transformative.

Rosenberg (2005) further added that NVC is a combination of thinking and language and using power designed to serve a specific intention. This intention is to create the quality of connection with other people and oneself that allows compassionate giving. In this sense, it is a spiritual practice: All actions are taken for the sole purpose of willingly contributing to the well-being of others and ourselves. The primary purpose of non-violent communication is to connect with other people in a way that enables giving to take place: compassionate giving. It is compassionate in that our giving comes willingly from the heart.

### **Integrating Nonviolent Communication in Conflict Resolution Technique**

The world has recently celebrated the 150th birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi. His idea of conflict resolution by transforming enemies into friends gains greater significance in the global scenario witnessing a surge of conflicts and intolerance. Conflict resolution through non-violent means involves accommodation and conversion of the opponent. Even an element of non-violent 'coercion' may be present, but this too may lead to changes in attitudes in the long run. Through 'conversion,' the opponent changes inwardly through the conscience and thus tends to conciliate with the non-violent activist, leaving no aftermath of resentment or revenge. Gandhi evolved Satyagraha as the most pragmatic and potent technique of conflict resolution and as the morally correct way of life, based on the dialectics of 'conversion' through which alone can truth, human life's ultimate mission approached.

Gandhi's conflict resolution approach was an essential component of his non-violent communication philosophy. On the criticality of non-violence in communication, Gandhi writes:

My mission is to teach by example and precept under severe restraint the use of the matchless weapon of Satyagraha which is direct corollary of non-violence and truth. I am

anxious indeed, I am impatient, and to demonstrate that there is no remedy for the many ills of life save that of non-violence. It is a solvent strong enough to melt the stoniest heart. To be true to my faith, therefore, I may not write in anger or malice. I may not write idly. I may not write merely to excite passion. The reader can have no idea of the restraint I have to exercise from week to week in the choice of topics and my vocabulary. It is training for me. It enables me to peep into myself and make discoveries of my weaknesses. Often my vanity dictates a smart expression or my anger a harsh adjective. It is a terrible ordeal but a fine exercise to remove these weeds." (Gandhi 252)

The basic premise to initiate conflict resolution using non-violent communication comes from the five pillars of non-violence. In conflict resolution, these five pillars viz respect, understanding, acceptance, appreciation, and compassion are the essential keys. Arun Gandhi (2017) attributed these as the foundations of non-violence and recommended that they be cultivated in our daily life-style to bridge the differences within ourselves and society at large. He remarked that, "respect and understanding of other people, whatever their religion, race, caste, or country, is the only way the world can go forward. Putting up walls and divisions always backfires in the end, leading to anger, rebellion, and violence (207).

In contrast, when we respect and understand each other, we naturally evolve to that third pillar – acceptance. Accepting other views and positions allows us to grow stronger and wiser. The other two pillars of nonviolence-appreciation and compassion- help bring about personal happiness and fulfillment as well as greater harmony in the world." Galtung (1995) observes that non-violence is successful when communication between the oppressor and the oppressed is open and two-way in the form of "speech, writing, or demonstrations and affirms that "non-violent action is a communication." Therefore, understanding non-violence as a communication

tool in resisting violence and conflict is an essential and sophisticated way for democracy to be promoted and upheld. Similarly, Martin and Varney (2003) echoed that communication is central to non-violent action's effectiveness. If protest and persuasion methods are fundamental means of communication, non-cooperation and non-violent intervention have crucial communicative dimensions. Gene Sharp (2013) defines

non-violent action as a generic term covering dozens of specific methods of protest, non-cooperation and intervention in all of which resisters conduct the conflict by doing or refusing to do certain things without physical violence. As a technique, therefore non-violent action is not passive. It is not inaction. It is action that is non-violent. (18)

In his book *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*, Sharp (1973) mentions several non-violent action methods considered under the pragmatic dimension of non-violence. He mainly classifies methods of non-violence into three broad categories like non-violent protest and persuasion; non-cooperation; and intervention, which itself have it connotes means of communication. All the methods he categorizes as protest and persuasion can be understood as communication forms. Methods of non-cooperation, including abundant types of strikes and boycotts, also have influential communicative roles to both opponents and third parties by representing willingness to act. Methods of intervention, such as sit-ins, fasts, banners, picketing, wearing symbols, fraternization, singing, pilgrimages, demonstrative funerals, teach-ins, and walk-outs, have similar communicative functions.

Commenting on the importance of conflict resolution, Kundu (2020) charted out a few non-violent communication elements, which help understand the root cause of conflict and enhance resolution skills.

- i. Lack of violence in the way we communicate with others through both verbal and nonverbal communication.
- ii. We may start learning to communicate with ourselves and engage in self-introspection.  
We can practice non-violent communication by observing our inner self and deeply listening to our self-talk. Self-awareness and being present when we communicate are essential attributes to practice.
- iii. Using appropriate and positive words and languages can solve most of the problems.  
Inappropriate use of language and words can contribute to conflicts, while the use of non-violent expressions can help in the resolution of conflicts. We are attuned to being evaluative when we communicate. Even the mass media is evaluative. In non-violent communication, we should avoid evaluative language.
- iv. Avoidance of stereotypes in communication efforts is an essential component of non-violent communication. We often fall into the trap of stereotyping individuals without understanding their points objectively. We stereotype individuals based on their race, ethnicity, religion, gender, caste, disabilities, and many other criteria. We generally make our responses based on the stereotypes which we construct. This may cause unhealthy communication.
- v. To avoid being judgemental is another component of non-violent communication.
- vi. Avoiding evaluative language: Non-violent communication is based on language skills that bring forward our inherent compassion, apathy, and anger dissolve and mutual understanding are cultivated. In non-violent communication, we should avoid evaluative language.

- vii. Avoid being aggressive: An essential element of non-violent communication is personal criticisms: we should avoid being aggressive. More than often, in situations, when we start facing criticisms, we lose our cool and end up using words that can be termed as aggressive. Through regular practice of non-violent communication, we will start using non-aggressive language that will hurt no others.
- viii. Encouraging mutual respect among all is an essential ingredient of non-violent communication. Most of the problems we face due to communication breakdown can be resolved when we respect each other.
- ix. Empathy: In non-violent communication, empathetic listening, mutual toleration, and expressing honestly is essential.
- x. Compassion: A basic premise of non-violent communication is that all human beings can be compassionate. When we reach out to others with compassion, we can expect others to be compassionate with us.
- xi. Connecting with others' needs: An essential aspect of non-violent communication is caring for others' needs. It is critical to look at the other person's views from the 'needs' level.
- xii. Flexibility in communication is essential in order to practice non-violent communication.
- xiii. Practicing active listening skills is critical for non-violent communication. Conscious attempts need to be made to listen to others sincerely. In our daily lives, we can quickly feel when the other person is listening to us with sincerity and is engaging. We can easily understand that the other person is present. It gives us the space for

conversation, and even if there are differences of views, it keeps the door open for further engagement.

- xiv. Expressing gratitude: We must practice expressing gratitude to whatever we have and whatever anyone does for us. This is an essential ingredient of non-violent communication, and it makes us more aware.

## **Conclusion**

Communication implies equality and understanding. It leads to cooperation, collaboration, coordination, cohesion, and consensus. Communication also works as a mental lotion that reduces conflict and confusion, and all these words are connected to communication. Therefore, our way of communication has a more significant role to play. If we look at the sources of conflicts, the root causes are perceptions, stereotypes, moralistic judgments, attitudes, and assumptions. If we look at different non-violent conflict resolution methods like collaboration, negotiation, mediation, promotion of dialogues, and conciliation, it depends on effective communication strategies to succeed; hence, non-violent communication as a powerful tool for resolution of conflicts comes into play. The different non-violent communication elements- use of appropriate and positive language, compassion, empathy, understanding other person's issues at the needs level, flexibility, openness, and practicing active listening- all aid in resolving conflicts. Further, a close view of other non-violent communication elements like avoidance of stereotypes, moralistic judgments, and avoidance of evaluative language enhances the capacity to resolve conflicts.



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