



Satyagraha: Theory and Practice

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I hold the opinion firmly that civil disobedience is the purest type of constitutional agitation. Of course, it becomes degrading and despicable, if its civil, i.e., non-violent character, is a mere camouflage.

MAHATMA GANDHI

Satyagraha is one of the most seminal contributions of Gandhi both in terms of theory and practice. So much so that he had come to be identified with *satyagraha*. What is more, it has become a fitting instrument for universal application in a somewhat different mode and with slightly different connotations. In this part of our study, we seek to trace out its origins, meanings, applications and its continued relevance to our times.

Origins of *Satyagraha*: Gandhi, both in his 'autobiography' and *Satyagraha in South Africa*, has extensively described how the idea of *satyagraha* originated and evolved. Briefly stated, since his coming to South Africa in 1893, he had been a victim as well as a keen observer of the process of racial discrimination being directed against the people of Indian origins. He had also been engaged in the task of resisting them in his own non-violent way. Simultaneously, he was also trying to find his feet in the realm of spirituality through his study of the *New Testament* and the *Bhagavad Gita* and the writings of a number of intellectuals from the 'Other West'. What gave a real depth to his spiritual quest were his intellectual interactions

with Rajchand Bhai. He reached a major milestone in his spiritual journey when he founded Phoenix Ashram in 1904, under the impact of Ruskin's *Unto This Last*. It goes without saying that the Phoenix had greatly impacted his life-style, as well as his thought-process. But a greater turning point in his life's journey was yet to come. He reached that point while organizing and working with the Ambulance Corps during the Zulu rebellion in 1906. What moved Gandhi to the depth of his being were the utter helplessness of the Zulu rebels, particularly of their womenfolk and their incessant need for human sympathy. The impact was so deep on his life that one is reminded of Lord Buddha's *Mahaabhiniskraman* after coming face to face with some of the most depressing side of human existence – disease and death.

Gandhi's deep emotional and intellectual experiences prompted him to arrive at the two major conclusions of his life. One, any one who would like to serve others, would have to lead a life of purity and detachment. Two, any violent resistance on the part of the weak and helpless against the strong and the powerful would boomerang on them, making their life still more miserable and helpless. The first led to his vow of *brahmacharya* (1906) and the second to the idea of non-violent resistance, which subsequently came to be characterised as *satyagraha*. Of course, the study of the 'Sermon on the Mount' a part of the *New Testament*, Tolstoy's *The Kingdom of God is Within You* and the *Bhagavad Gita* further deepened his faith in non-violent resistance. Thus, the year 1906 marked a high point in his life, as a 'mission-call' came to him prompting him to dedicate his life for the spread of truth and non-violence in the world.

To test and measure the depth of his 'call', soon an opportunity in the form of a challenge came to him. This was the draft of a new law in Transvaal published in a 'gazette extraordinary'. The proposed law required every Indian who were of more than eight years of age, whether male or female to obtain a new certificate of registration. What was worse, they would have to provide finger and thumb impressions and other marks of identification, failing which they would be liable to imprisonment and/or deportation. What was more, they would be required to carry these certificates on their persons and would have to produce these papers if asked by the police. Besides, the

police would have power to enter Indian houses to inspect these papers.

Indians led by Gandhi held a meeting on 11 September, 1906 and decided to defy the law. That led to the birth of the idea of *satyagraha*, though the term *satyagraha* was not used at that time. Subsequently, Gandhi wanted to search for a new term which would capture the spirit of the Indian non-violent resistance to the discriminatory law. An advertisement was put in the *Indian Opinion* to which Maganlal Gandhi, a nephew of Gandhi who was already with him in South Africa, suggested *sadagraha*, which would adequately capture the spirit of the Indian struggle. In September 1907, Gandhi changed it to *satyagraha*. In short, this is the story of the birth of *satyagraha*.

Satyagraha: Definition and Meaning

Satyagraha is a compound word of Sanskrit origin comprising *satya* and *agraha*. In plain language, *satya* means truth and *agraha* stands for insistence. Gandhi himself defined *Satyagraha* as 'insistence on truth' or 'firmness for truth' with its outer manifestation being non-violence. In other words, *satyagraha* is primarily rooted in truth and non-violence. Here, both truth and non-violence are being used in a much deeper sense than in their usual meaning of verbal truthfulness and physical non-injury, respectively. Here, truth is virtually a synonym for God and non-violence more in thought, words and deeds than merely as non-injury at the physical level. Subsequently, *satyagraha* came to be identified with any act of non-violent resistance, in which infliction of suffering is not directed against the opponent, but against the *satyagrahi* himself. As Gandhi himself asserted that it is putting the 'soul force' against the 'brute force'. It was much more than boycott and passive resistance. It was no weapon of the weak. It was a weapon of the strong, willing to undergo self-invited sufferings with soulful refusal to accept any act of injustice. The beauty of *satyagraha* is that it leaves no trail of bitterness and future revenge, as it is based on the principle of resisting the evil and not the evil-doers. Thus, it uplifts all parties involved in a dispute both morally and spiritually. It also puts a limit to the ferocity of counter-attack by the opponent. If the other party crosses the *lakshman rekha* of decency and indulges in the blatant act of

oppression, he would fall in his own eyes, as well as in those of the society. What is more, it could be used by the lowliest of the low and the weakest of the weak against the highest of the high and the mightiest of the mighty. Besides, it is no static and stagnant principle. It is a living, dynamic and growing concept, acquiring new shapes and shades as per the needs and challenges of the situation. And that is why, it has become such a popular and handy instrument in the hands of the people, including the hapless and helpless individuals. As Gandhi put it in *Hind Swaraj*, 'the force of arms is powerless when matched against the force of love or the soul'. Gandhi was so much convinced of the power of *satyagraha* that he confidently averred that if and when it becomes a universal force, it would prove to be a sovereign weapon for doing away with all forms of injustices, social inequities as well as militarism and despotism. In a word, it would prove to be a royal road leading to *Ramarajya*. What was more, even a single perfect *satyagrahi* could 'defy' the whole might of the unjust Empire and could 'save his honour, his religion, his soul and could even lay the foundation for that Empire fall or its regeneration'.

The Philosophical Basis of *Satyagraha*

Admittedly, for a better understanding of *satyagraha*, its meanings and implications, a probe into its philosophical basis is needed. In fact, the roots of *satyagraha* lie in Gandhi's advaitic vision of God, the man and the world and their symbiotic relationship. From such an advaitic vision he derived his firm faith in the unity of all beings. In such a perspective, there is no 'other', as you are in 'other' and 'other' is in you. It is such a holistic vision which the *Bhagavad Gita* underlined by saying that such a person visualises his own self as an integral part of the universal self and also perceives the universal self in his own self. In other words, every atom in the cosmos is from the same source, viz., *Brahman*. As there is no 'other', hence, the politics of the enemy symbol is totally ruled out. He also insisted that he had nothing against the British people, but his fight was against their misdeeds and misrule only. Again it is his holistic vision which explains his statement that his resistance is against the evil and not against the evil doer. The second implication of his advaitic vision is reflected on his insistence

on the interdependence of all beings. In other words, whatever is done by any of us, others also become a party to it. Hence, it becomes a sacred duty for everyone, to right the wrong. It is clear from the above that the philosophical roots of *satyagraha* lay in such an advaitic vision of Gandhi.

Similarly, his views on absolute truth, relative truth and their interconnections have a lot to do with his conception of *satyagraha*. As we have seen earlier, Gandhi always asserted that no embodied soul could grasp the absolute truth in its entirety. All that one could assert and insist upon is one's own view of relative truth. But there is always a distinct possibility of one's relative truth coming into conflict with that of another person. Not only that, there is no definite way to know whose truth is more correct. Hence, no one has the right to impose his views on others. And yet one has to act on the basis of his own vision of truth. In this perspective, one way to assert one's own vision of truth is to engage in a sincere dialogue with his opponent with a view to persuade and convince him about the correctness of his own position. More often than not, the basis of such dialogue is human rationality, an appeal to the other through his head. While in some cases, such an effort might succeed, in others it might fail. *Satyagraha* enters into human dealings only at the stage when dialogue has collapsed. Underlining the need and basis of *satyagraha*, Gandhi wrote: '...I have come to this fundamental conclusion that if you want something really important to be done, you must not merely appeal to the reason, you must move the heart also. The appeal of reason is more to the head but the penetration of the heart comes from suffering. It opens up the inner understanding in man'.

Besides, Gandhi was firmly of the opinion that every man carries a speck of divinity within himself and, therefore, no one is beyond redemption. In fact, he is quite capable of going through self-transformative process. Hence, no one is so devoid of humanity as to remain unaffected by some one's innocent suffering. Hence, a self-suffering *satyagrahi* would ultimately succeed in touching the soul of the opponent. As such, the success of *satyagraha* is inherently built in the system. Besides, Gandhi's view on social inter-dependence also provided a sound basis for *satyagraha*. For the society was not a collection of self-seeking, atomised individuals. He has an organic view of the society and

as such all its members are part of an organic whole. In such a perspective, every one is responsible for every one's deeds and misdeeds. In such a perspective, *satyagraha* is nothing but an attempt to take corrective measure for the miscarriage of justice in any walk of human life. That is the real meaning of what he wrote about *satyagraha* in 1920, 'My goal is friendship with the world and I can combine the greatest love with the greatest resistance to wrong' (*Young India*, 1920).

Gandhi's theory of *satyagraha* was also based on his spiritual understanding that there exists morally high cosmic law which transcends the entire idea of secular law and authority. Thus, law as the command of the sovereign, whether that sovereign is individual (in the case of absolute monarchy) or Parliament (in the case of the liberal democratic polity) or even a popularly elected dictator as in the case of Stalin, Hitler and their like, could not be taken as being that sacrosanct as it is made out to be. For Gandhi, state is a 'soulless' machine rooted primarily in violence. But the man has a soul which is spiritually committed to obey the cosmic laws which are much above the state made laws. Hence, the institution of state could not demand total obedience from its citizens as it lacks moral authority. Such being the nature of the state, it is left to its citizens to decide about the nature and extent of their obedience and/or disobedience depending upon its just and unjust character. It was such a view of cosmic law, state made law and the nature of *satyagraha*. This is his major contribution in the realm of political philosophy.

Another philosophical foundation of *satyagraha* lies in the symbiotic relationship between means and end. Gandhi strongly believed that it is ultimately the means that decides the nature of the end. In his *Hind Swaraj*, he wrote, 'The means may be linked to a seed, the end to a tree, and there is just the inviolable connection between the means and the ends, as there is between the seed and the tree.'

Perhaps, it was his strong faith in the law of *karma* which inspired him so strongly to believe in such a close linkage between the means and the ends. According to the law of *karma*, the relationship between action and its fruits are organic and symbiotic. In other words, the moral quality of the ends is always

causally dependent on the means. The theory of *niskam karma* (dispassionate action) also influenced his theory of close linkage between the means and ends. In plain language, the principle of dispassionate actions means that the ultimate ends may not be in our hands, but the means we employ are certainly in our hands. Thus, Gandhi not only rejected the theory that the ends justify the means, he also went to the extent of saying that moral means are the ends in themselves. As he put it: 'They say that means are after all means. I would say that means are after all everything, as the means, so the ends.'

Application of Satyagraha

After tracing out the meaning, dimensions and philosophical roots of *satyagraha*, let us turn to the question as to when and in which situation *satyagraha* could be resorted to by individuals, groups or the entire nation. Gandhi made it clear that resorting to *satyagraha* is a serious affair. Hence, it should never be launched lightly and casually. It could be used only as the last resort. And prior to the resort to *satyagraha*, a number of other steps must be taken in all earnestness. One, a serious attempt must be made to the authority or group or individuals against whom *satyagraha* is to be resorted to engage the opponent in the rational dialogue with a view to persuade and convince them of the just and correct nature of the demands of *satyagrahies*. For Gandhi this is essential, as an integral part of the entire process. Two, an attempt should also be made to create a favourable public opinion by underlining the just nature of the *satyagrahi's* cause. If needed, a written statement may be circulated which would serve as a notice to the persons against whom *satyagraha* is to be launched. In particular cases, where *satyagraha* is to be launched against the civil society on issues like untouchability, *sati*, child marriage, widow remarriage, a vigorous campaign through public meetings, door to door campaign, *prabhat pheri* and other methods of publicity and propaganda must precede the initiation of *satyagraha*. Besides, for such a noble cause, the services of trained *satyagrahies* might be engaged. And a number of people who are held in high esteem by the community also should be roped in. If possible *satyagrahies* might be persuaded to undergo a brief training, so that they do not find it difficult to withstand the rigours of