

The Myth and Meaning of the Gandhian Concept of *Satyagraha*

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Introduction

Satyagraha, popularly known as a “technique of non-violent public protest”, is one of the greatest contributions Gandhi made to the modern world. Gandhi’s contribution was unique in that it offered a solution to conflicts without the use of physical force. Further, in contrast to the traditional means – physical force or violence, *Satyagraha* emphasized more on the means - non-violence - than on the end - attainment of truth. Gandhi’s uncompromising insistence on non-violence in the pursuit of *satyagraha* made it a distinctive as well as a controversial technique of social and political change.

The concept of *satyagraha* is less understood than practiced today. The situation was not different even when Gandhi was alive. More than Gandhi wrote and talked about *satyagraha*, he practiced it. Although the concept of *satyagraha* did cause confusion at times among Gandhi’s followers, his charismatic leadership overshadowed their confusion. Gandhi’s sudden death and his incomplete and inconsistent writings on *satyagraha* forced his followers to make inferences based on their experiences as to what exactly is the philosophy of *satyagraha*. This has resulted in a lot of misunderstandings and misinterpretations of the Gandhian principle of *satyagraha*. In this paper, the author looks into some of the misconceptions of the concept of *satyagraha* and its true meaning.

Some Misconceptions of *Satyagraha*

Like other Gandhian concepts, *satyagraha* too was not an exemption to misunderstandings and misinterpretations. Following are some of the major misconceptions of *satyagraha*:

- (1) *Satyagraha* is referred to any form of opposition to government or any direct social or political action short of organized violence.
- (2) *Satyagraha* is equated with demonstrations with shouting of slogans, fasting, and strike with boycott.
- (3) *Satyagraha* is equated with non-violence, with passive resistance, and even with the

Gandhian concept of *sarvodaya*.

- (4) Gandhi's reference to his life as "experiments with truth" and of himself as a persistent *satyagrahi* (one who practices *satyagraha*) lead people to consider a *satyagrahi* as either merely a "seeker after truth," or one who has adopted the Gandhian system of morals and values.
- (5) A *satyagrahi*, understood as one who has adopted the Gandhian system of morals and values, is believed to be a vegetarian, someone observing *brahmacharya* (continence), and one who is practicing *aparigraha* (non-possession) etc.

There are certain characteristics specific to Gandhian *satyagraha* which makes it possible to distinguish movements that can be classified as *satyagraha* and that are not.

Satyagraha

The word *satyagraha* is a compound of two Sanskrit nouns, *Satya* which means "truth" and *Agraha* which means "grasp". (Bondurant, p. 11) *Satya* is derived from *Sat* which means "being". Gandhi believed that "nothing is or exists in reality except Truth." Therefore, Gandhi said "it is more correct to say that Truth is God, than to say that God is Truth." (Gandhi, 1931, p. 196) Gandhi used *satyagraha* for two goals – one was personal and the other was social or political. For Gandhi the ultimate goal in life was the realization of the Truth – seeing God face to face. The second goal was social and political change for which he used *satyagraha* as a means to that end.

Satyagraha, when used as a tool for social and political change, aims to win over an opponent. There are three stages in this process: The first stage is that of persuasion through reason. The second stage is characterized by persuasion through suffering. The *satyagrahi*, at this stage, dramatizes the issues at stake by willingly undergoing self-suffering instead of inflicting suffering on the opponent as a test for the truth element in his cause. If neither persuasion through reason nor self-suffering does succeed to win over the opponent, the *satyagrahi* resorts to non-violent coercion characterized by tools such as non-cooperation or civil disobedience.

One of the strong images most people have of *satyagraha* is that of civil disobedience. This was because civil disobedience was one of the powerful weapons Gandhi often used in *satyagraha* campaigns for social and political change. With Gandhi, *satyagraha* became something more than a method of resistance to particular legal norms; it became an instrument of struggle for positive objectives and for fundamental change. Although *satyagraha* is widely used even today, it is not properly understood by

its own adherents.

The true meaning of *satyagraha* cannot be explained without exploring the Gandhian meaning of the concepts of truth, non-violence, and self-suffering.

Truth

According to Gandhi, “*Satyagraha* is literally holding on to Truth, and it means therefore Truth-force.”(Bondurant, p. 16) Truth, for Gandhi, was God. Gandhi defined his personal goal as to “seeing God face to face.” Gandhi explains Truth-God relationship as follows: “There are innumerable definitions of God, because His manifestations are innumerable. They overwhelm me with wonder and awe and for a moment stun me. But I worship God as Truth only.” (Bondurant, p.19) Gandhi, at the same time, was aware of the fact that the human mind cannot know the Absolute fully. To have found the Truth completely, Gandhi believed, would mean that one has realized oneself and reached his destiny; in other words, he has become perfect. Being aware of human beings’ inability to know the Truth wholly, Gandhi insisted on the importance of being open to those who differ with us. Although, Gandhi never claimed to have known the Truth, he did claim to have found the way to it.

Although Gandhi’s personal goal was the realization of the Truth (seeing God face to face), the truth element Gandhi referred to in *satyagraha* – a technique for social and political change – was not that of the Absolute. Gandhi, in his experiments with *satyagraha*, both in South Africa and in India, became more and more aware of the relative character of truth as an operative principle. The relative character of truth became evident to Gandhi as each time the social and political problems he took up for reform differed. In this respect, *satyagraha* is not a dogma. It is neither static nor substantial. For Gandhi, holding on to truth in *satyagraha* is a dynamic concept and *satyagraha* is a technique of action.

There still remains a question that how confusion can be avoided if striving after truth differs in every case. Gandhi finds the answer to this confusion in the relation Truth has with *ahimsa* (non-violence).

Non-violence (*Ahimsa*)

The Sanskrit word *ahimsa* is translated as non-violence. It is composed of a negative

prefix “a” and a noun “*himsa*” which means “injury.” Although *ahimsa* has a negative connotation when translated as non-violence, its etymological meaning is “action based on the refusal to do harm.” Albert Schweitzer points out to the positive meaning of *ahimsa* as follows: “Etymologically, *himsa* is the desiderative form of *han* meaning to kill or to damage, so that *himsa* means to wish to kill. *Ahimsa*, then, means renunciation of the will to kill or damage.” (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1899) Gandhi, when explaining the positive meaning of *ahimsa* equates it to “love”. He says “*ahimsa* is not merely a negative state of harmlessness but it is a positive state of love, of doing good even to the evil-doer.” (Gandhi, 1921) To Gandhi, *ahimsa* was not simply non-killing; it took him to a much higher realm of “being humane”. A true follower of *ahimsa*, Gandhi taught, must refuse to offend anybody, not even harbor an uncharitable thought even against an enemy.

Emphasizing on the inseparableness of truth and non-violence in *satyagraha*, Gandhi describes *satyagraha* as follows: “It is a movement intended to replace methods of violence and it is a movement based entirely upon truth...” (Bondurant, p.15) In his *satyagraha* movement, Gandhi considers truth and non-violence (love) as the two sides of the same coin. Gandhi continues, “...without *ahimsa* it is not possible to seek and find Truth. *Ahimsa* and Truth are so intertwined that it is practically impossible to disentangle and separate them... Nevertheless *ahimsa* is the means; Truth is the end. Means to be means must always be within our reach, and so *ahimsa* is our supreme duty. If we take care of the means, we are bound to reach the end sooner or later.” (Gandhi, 1932) In short, in *satyagraha* movement for Gandhi, truth is the ultimate goal and non-violence is the means to it.

The only dogma one could see in Gandhi’s *satyagraha* movement is the principle of “*ahimsa*” which he adhered till the end. Gandhi maintained that the way of a *satyagrahi* must lead through the testing of truths as they appear to the individual performer. And the testing of the relative truth can be performed only by strict adherence to *ahimsa* – refusal to do harm. Gandhi in his pursuit of truth sets *ahimsa* as the supreme value, “the one cognizable standard by which true action can be determined.” (Bondurant, p. 25) Exploring the dynamic meaning of *ahimsa*, Gandhi leads every *satyagrahi* into the third fundamental element of *satyagraha* which is *tapasya* – self-suffering.

Self-Suffering (*tapasya*)

As mentioned earlier, Gandhi’s concept of *ahimsa* goes far beyond “renunciation of the will to kill or damage”; *Ahimsa*, to Gandhi, is love as well. Gandhi relates love and

self-suffering (*tapasya*) as follows: “Love never claims, it ever gives. Love ever suffers, never resents, never revenges itself... The test of love is *tapasya* and *tapasya* means self-suffering.” (Bondurant, p. 26)

In *satyagraha*, self-suffering is willingly accepted by the *satyagrahi* himself with the specific intention of the moral persuasion of the enemy. Self-suffering is neither an inability to win over the opponent through violence nor a meek submission to the will of the evil-doer. It is a fight against an evil system and a tyrant with one’s soul force. In other words, self-suffering is the way of the strong. Gandhi says, “Non-violence cannot be taught to a person who fears to die and has no power of resistance.” (Gandhi, 1935) To the critics who said *satyagraha* is the way of the cowards, Gandhi replied, “I do believe that where there is only a choice between cowardice and violence, I would advise violence.” (Gandhi, 1920) Self-suffering is clearly different from cowardice as well as violence against the opponent.

Self-suffering, in *satyagraha*, is directed to resisting humiliation as well. Gandhi gave supreme value to the dignity of a person. That is why, he believed that submitting to humiliation should be resisted even at the cost of self-suffering of the body, even unto death. Further, Gandhi considered being forced to act against one’s own conscience is dehumanizing. Therefore, Gandhi insisted that every *satyagrahi* “...must refuse to do that which his conscience forbids him to do and must preserve the dignity of the individual though it means loss of property or even life.” (Gandhi, 1944, p. 360)

Self-suffering is integral to non-violence as it is a means in *satyagraha* to overcome fear. Gandhi says, “One must learn the art of dying in the training for non-violence... The votary of non-violence has to cultivate the capacity for sacrifice of the highest type in order to be free from fear... He who has not overcome all fear cannot practice *ahimsa* to perfection.” (Gandhi, 1940) Although the *satyagrahi* does not inflict direct violence to the opponent in practicing self-suffering, it has been severely criticized for inflicting violence upon the *satyagrahi* himself. Responding to this criticism, Gandhi says that he doesn’t value one’s life low but ultimately it will result in “the least loss of life, and, what is more, it ennobles those who lose their lives and morally enriches the world for their sacrifice.” (Gandhi, 1944, p. 49)

***Satyagraha* in Action**

Satyagraha, characterized by adherence to truth, non-violence, and self-suffering, by operating within a conflict situation, aims at a fundamental social and political

change. In order to effect change, it uses soul force against conventional violence. Non-cooperation, civil disobedience and fasting are some of the major non-violent means employed by *satyagraha* movements. Non-cooperation includes actions such as strike, walk-out, *hartal* (voluntary closing of shops and businesses) and resignation of offices and titles. Non-cooperation is a refusal to follow a requirement which fundamentally violates truth and is against mass conscience. Civil disobedience is a non-observance of certain specific laws which are dehumanizing, and against one's conscience. Civil disobedience includes activities such as non-payment of taxes, jail-going campaign etc.

Although Gandhi never put down in words the procedure and the process of *satyagraha*, observing the innumerable *satyagraha* campaigns one could tell them. Bondurant (Bondurant, pp. 38-41) explains in detail the (1) fundamental rules, (2) code of discipline, and (3) the various steps in a *satyagraha* campaign as follows:

Fundamental Rules

- (1) *Self-reliance at all times.* Outside aid may be accepted, but should never be counted upon.
- (2) *Initiative in the hands of the satyagrahis.* *Satyagrahis*, through the tactics of positive resistance, persuasion, and adjustment, must press the movement ever forward.
- (3) *Propagation of the objectives, strategy and tactics of the campaign.* Propaganda must be made an integral part of the movement. Education of the opponent, the public, and participants must continue apace.
- (4) *Reduction of demands to a minimum consistent with truth.* Continuing reassessment of the situation and the objectives with a view to possible adjustment of demands is essential.
- (5) *Progressive advancement of the movement* through steps and stages determined to be appropriate within the given situation. Direct action is to be launched only after all other efforts to achieve an honorable settlement have been exhausted.
- (6) *Examination of weakness* within the *satyagraha* group. The morale and discipline of the *satyagrahis* must be maintained through active awareness of any development of impatience, discouragement, or breakdown of non-violent attitude.
- (7) *Persistent search for avenues of cooperation with the adversary on honorable terms.* Every effort should be made to win over the opponent by helping him thereby demonstrating sincerity to achieve an agreement with, rather than a triumph over, the adversary.

- (8) *Refusal to surrender essentials in negotiation.* Satyagraha excludes all compromise which affects basic principles or essential portions of valid objectives.
- (9) *Insistence upon full agreement* on fundamentals before accepting a settlement.

Code of Discipline

The following points were laid down by Gandhi as a code for volunteers in the 1930 movement:

- (1) Harbor no anger but suffer the anger of the opponent. Refuse to return the assaults of the opponent.
- (2) Do not submit to any order given in anger, even though severe punishment is threatened for disobeying.
- (3) Refrain from insults and swearing.
- (4) Protect opponents from insult or attack, even at the risk of life.
- (5) Do not resist arrest nor the attachment of property, unless holding property as a trustee.
- (6) Refuse to surrender any property held in trust at the risk of life.
- (7) If taken prisoner, behave in an exemplary manner.
- (8) As a member of a *satyagraha* unit, obey the orders of *satyagraha* leaders, and resign from the unit in the event of serious disagreement.
- (9) Do not expect guarantees for maintenance of dependents.

Steps in a *Satyagraha* Campaign

- (1) *Negotiation and arbitration.* Every effort to resolve the conflict or redress the grievance through established channels must be exhausted before the further steps are undertaken.
- (2) *Preparation of the group for direct action.* Before any direct action is taken in a conflict situation, motives are to be carefully examined, exercises in self-discipline must be initiated, discussions are to be conducted within the group regarding issues at stake, appropriate procedures to be undertaken, the circumstances of the opponent, the climate of public opinion, etc.
- (3) *Agitation.* This step includes an active propaganda campaign together with such demonstrations as mass-meetings, parades, slogan-shouting.
- (4) *Issuing of an ultimatum.* A final strong appeal to the opponent should be made

explaining what further steps will be taken if no agreement can be reached.

- (5) *Economic boycott and forms of strike.* Picketing may be widely employed, together with continued demonstrations and education of the public. Sitting *dharna* (a form of sit-down strike) may be employed, as well as non-violent labor strike, and attempts to organize a general strike.
- (6) *Non-cooperation.* Depending upon the nature of the issues at stake, such action as non-payment of taxes, boycott of schools and other public institutions, ostracism, or even voluntary exile may be initiated.
- (7) *Civil disobedience.* Great care should be exercised in the selection of laws to be contravened. Such laws should be either central to the grievance, or symbolic.
- (8) *Usurping of the functions of government.*
- (9) *Parallel government.* The establishment of parallel functions should grow out of step (8), and these should be strengthened in such a way that the greatest possible cooperation from the public can be obtained.

Having laid down the basic principles and procedures of a *satyagraha* campaign, it must be borne in mind that the actions taken in a *satyagraha* campaign greatly depends on the nature of the issue at stake. Similarly, whether a campaign could be called *satyagraha* or not can be determined by the above mentioned standards, the success of a *satyagraha* campaign depends equally on the opponent as well. However, most of the *satyagraha* campaigns initiated by Gandhi in India were successful.

Conclusion

It is generally accepted that Gandhi's consistent use of certain traditional terminology to refer to his new ideas caused the initial confusion in understanding Gandhi's philosophy of *satyagraha*. Secondly, the idea of *satyagraha* was not fully developed even in Gandhi's own mind when he began his mass social and political campaign. The idea of *satyagraha* grew into a clear philosophy of action as Gandhi involved in various types of social and political campaigns and faced with mostly challenges than successes in the initial stage. Thirdly, confusion also arose out of Gandhi's reference to his personal goal in life as the realization of Truth - seeing God face to face - which he also called *satyagraha*. However, in a later period when questioned by Lord Hunter, Gandhi himself distinguished *satyagraha* as a spiritual goal from *satyagraha* as a tool for social and political change. It is the latter which is widely known and used around the world as "*satyagraha*" today. Finally, confusion still lingers

around *satyagraha* because as Gandhi himself accepted that *satyagraha* is not a dogma but it is a dynamic concept just as the circumstances in a society where *satyagraha* finds its place and relevance. However, *satyagraha* as a technique for social and political change, has certain definite characteristics and features among which adherence to truth, non-violence and self-suffering have paramount importance. Since the goal of *satyagraha* - the attainment of truth - having a relative nature to it, will always evade comprehensive definition of *satyagraha*.

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