



SATYAGRAHA IN SOUTH AFRICA – A BEGINNING

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Gandhi resolved to re-fashion history, to write a new history, with the weapons of love and truth.

He started in humble surroundings, Consequently however, England made him a barrister and son of the British Empire, Africa made him a resistance leader and India a Mahatma.

Thus he became more than an ordinary man and no longer a son of the British Empire. He became a rebel saint, a saint-politician, and as much a rebel and politician as a saint.

He, more than any one else, led India towards independence. As referred to in the previous chapter, just like Thoreau, if there was anything that Gandhi tried to follow steadfastly throughout his life, it was the sovereignty of individual conscience. This was the basis of Gandhi's thought in relation to the concept of civil disobedience. Equality important was the interrelation between his political action and thought.

Gandhi's approach towards action was based on his unflinching belief in truth and non-violence.

Beginning of an Experiment :

Gandhi made a unique discovery in a unique laboratory. The laboratory was South Africa. And the discovery was Satyagraha. It was history which threw Gandhi into the South Africa crucible. The situation in South Africa was itself unprecedented in history. It was not merely that a white minority government brutalized itself and discriminated against the millions of colored people in an attempt to enslave them permanently. Slavery was nothing new in the world, but this one was unique in that it was grounded in a new metaphysics and ethics buttressed by reasons which were apparently scientific. Every thought and action conceivable to diabolic human ingenuity was drawn upon to perpetuate the subjection of the many that were physically weak to the few whom were physically strong. Any rebellion was made totally impossible. The very thought of rebellion was made totally impossible. The very thought of rebellion was made treason under the law. The white minority government was armed to the teeth not only with weapons but with twisted laws, institutions and philosophy. It was in this prison house of slavery that Gandhi lived many years.

He plunged into one of the greatest experiments of our time to discover the weapon with which the weak could fight the strong, not individually but in the mass.¹

Gandhi regarded truth, satya, and non-violence, ahimsa, as reflections of cosmic law. He then judged their opposites, untruth and violence, as violations of existential truthfulness and reality. This intimation of a relation between truth and non-violence points beyond their education as inseparable values and instead indicates a dynamic



interrelationship. Since Gandhi considered non-violence to be the least conceivable affirmation of the value of love, in that non-violence avoids harming, then non-violence could be considered an instrumental value in the realization of truth. As Gandhi wrote: “Ahimsa I my God and Truth I my God. When I look for ahimsa, Truth, says Find it out through me. When I look for Truth, ahimsa says, ‘Find it one through me’”²

Absolute Stand on Truth ‘Satya’ :

The connection between truth and non violence is a corollary to the distinction Gandhi made between absolute and relative truth. Truth, for Gandhi, I “what the voice within tells you (as well as) the existence of what we know and of what we do not know.”³ this letter definition of truth, as an impersonal, object reality reflects Gandhi’s views of absolute truth for Gandhi, the universe and the moral order reflect a nominal reality, Sat, which may also be defined as ‘Being’. The Sanskrit word for truth, Satya is derived from Sat, and Gandhi considered this derivation to show that “nothing exists in reality except Truth, everything else is illusion.”⁴

The absolute nature of the underlying reality gave the concept of truth holding priority as the highest priority as the highest moral value. Clearly, for Gandhi this issue of truth was ontological rather than epistemological.⁵ when Gandhi declared that “Truth I God nothing so completely describe my God a Truth,⁶ he affirmed his vision of the sacred nature of all that share in truth. This transcendental view of truth grounded all ethical as well as epistemological truths in an all-inclusive, archetypal reality and thus provided the basis for an eternal principle of moral law. Thus Gandhi’s view of absolute truth served as the fountain head for absolute values in the ethical realm. For him, absolute values were crucial for moral action.

The term Gandhi uses for truth, Satya, is based on the Sanskrit verb meaning ‘to be’. It implies a connection between truth and existence. Truth, in this sense, I what Gandhi claimed that like the natural order, the realm of human values contain a level of truth deeper than what meets the eye. For him moral reality was a certain as physical reality there is truth in thought, truth in speech, and truth in action. There was no doubt in Gandhi’s mind that eventually one could find the right way to act I any situation.

Moral reality is not so obvious as physical reality, and for many of us even to accept the existence of such a thing is largely an act of faith. Gandhi himself implicitly conceded this point. He often spoke of truth in a religious sense and often said that Truth is God.

For him the reverse was equally valid all of God and religion could be summed up as a search for truth. The notion of Satyagraha is rooted in moral reality.⁷

Non-Violence-Indispensable to Truth :

Truth can be realized only by means of ahimsa. In Gandhi’s opinion, constant Endeavour (abhyasa), indifference to other interests of life (vairageya) and the vows of truth, non-violence, brahmacharya, non-stealing, non-possession, etc. are indispensable for the realization of truth. Only those who undergo this moral discipline can properly claim to hear the voice of conscience in regard to truth. Gandhi holds that



there observances are deducible from Truth and are meant to subserve it. ⁸ Non violence was the litmus test of truth for him. The reason for this is that in Gandhi's lexicon, violence is very close to being the same thing as untruth. It stands for all the same traits-the obstructive, destructive, life-negating, alienating tendencies-which one finds in the camp opposite to truthfulness. In the context of conflict, ahimsa means not harming you opponents but being concerned about their welfare.

“Satyagraha”-Gandhi's Expression :

The term Gandhi coined for the practice of non-violent action, Satyagraha, literally means holding on to truth and connotes truth-force or soul-force. Thus it is clear that non-violence is not merely necessary to Gandhi vision of truth, or reality; rather it is the active expression of the determination to reach truth.

Satyagraha can be seen as a moral stance which involves an attitude of mind as well as action on the physical plane. The Satyagrahi defends just causes, converts wrongdoers, and corrects wrongs by a skilful invocation of truth in the practice of non-violent sacrifice. He or she seeks the good of all through service, and if opposition arises, the satyagrahi invites suffering rather than inflict it on others. Even the final sacrifice of life itself is accepted since both success and death equally vindicate the truth of the oneness of life. ⁹ Since the body is seen as merely vehicle for the realization of truth through love, the Satyagrahi would prefer to sacrifice the body and preserve the soul than to condone a falsehood. Obviously such a total commitment to truth reflects an attitude towards life than just a series of actions.

Gandhi set about to discover the instruments of love for the battle of the weak against the strong. Discoveries came to him one after the other. The weak can refuse to obey, the weak must not surrender, the weak must invite suffering instead of inflicting it. The weapons of love must make the weapons of hate as useless as possible and above all, the slaves must stand together as one united community. It must be remembered that the challenge was to use the weapons of love collectively. It was clear as crystal to Gandhi that the whole of this battle must inevitably be non-violent.

Fearless Disobedience-Another Ingredient :

Gandhi's aim was to match fearlessness against fear and disobedience against submission to injustice. Gandhi came to the ingredient in his experiment which made disobedience a duty. It became the only duty.

Gandhi's premise was that the soul in every human being was equal to all. From his faith in this equality spring the conviction that there was no man or woman so small, weak or helpless but could discover the strength of the soul inside and make use of it when it was in peril before tyranny. Gandhi thus put his faith not only in the transcendent God but equally in the God immanent in every man and woman. Gandhi then put together all these ingredients and welded them into the concept and practice of Satyagraha. Thus, step by step again, the experimenter in the laboratory of South Africa arrived at his radiant discovery of the power of collective non-violence which evolved in time into the revolutionary weapon of Satyagraha.



He was simultaneously undergoing a basic transformation within himself. He found out that fear along with non-violent action would be completely contradictory. He therefore gave his people the call to awake, arise and act non-violently. The response astonished and justified Gandhi's faith in God and man. His people rose as one man and followed him valiantly in the non-violent struggle, the meaning of which came to them instinctively and with growing conviction. What happened in South Africa in the epic struggle which lasted for seven years is now a part of our history. It jerked the whites into wonder and dismay. It also flashed the message of a new revolution across the world. Tolstoy, in far-away Russia, recognized it as a new power for good in the world.¹⁰

Gandhi discovered that as a coloured person he was not allowed to ride in the first class compartments of trains. If he were to ride at all, he would have to do so in third class. To Gandhi, this would have been tantamount to lending his tacit support to a practice he regarded as shameful and worse. When Gandhi boarded the train he did not have the luxury of discussing with the authorities the principles at issue of presenting an alternative to the difficulty. Rather he was faced with having to decide whether to go along with their system of racial segregation. Gandhi decided to refuse to have anything to do with the arrangement. He sat where he pleased, first class, and was promptly bounced off the train.

This may not seem much like Satyagraha, but in fact it was the first step in that direction non-cooperation with everything humiliating, as Gandhi would have put it. An act of defiance may eventually lead to a Satyagraha solution if it allows the fighters to sever ties with an unjust and turbulent past and make way for a more fair and harmonious future.¹¹

This hope is precisely what led on the South African Indians, followed by the Indian nationals to follow the Indian national to follow the difficult line of action suggested by Gandhi.

The so-called "Coolies" thus began the Satyagraha in South Africa. The whites became angry and in their blind fury they struck out at Gandhi and his followers with all their weapons. Thousands were thrown into prisons, properties were confiscated and crowds were beaten up brutally. Disobedience continued nevertheless. Nobody surrendered and nobody obeyed. The whites sought for the submission of the non-whites, and it was not forthcoming. It became a long drawn-out struggle which ended in the Smuts Gandhi Agreement. The struggle enabled the "coolies" and gave them confidence and strength.¹²

Satyagraha-The New Powerful Weapon:

A tremendous transformation took place in the Indians who, with this new weapon could fight those who were physically mightier than them. Along with them Gandhi, their mentor, got transformed, as the first awareness of a great mission stirred within him.

Gandhi was a fighter and after he discovered the might of his best weapon, his fight with the forces of imperialism began. He sometimes compared a Satyagraha



struggle with war and Gandhian fighters with soldiers. "In Satyagraha and military warfare the position of soldier is very nearly the same," he claimed, pointing out that a Satyagraha like a soldier, "know no rest, no certainty of movements". Both "face heavy odds and even death, " and both are bound "to be under discipline and obey the general's command.." he insisted that non-violent strategies had to be planned with as much discipline and care as if they were battle maneuvers.¹³

It was Gandhi's constant Endeavour to awaken the dormant spirit of Indians to instill in them this spirit of fighting and courage. His various struggles, first in South Africa and latter in India were all lessons to a sullen and down-hearted people to shake off their inferiority complex and stand up in defense of their dignity and status free men. He often said that he would prefer violence to cowardice and that it was not to be concluded that since Satyagraha involved non-violence, it was weapon of the weak, instead it was weapon of only the strong. That is, the mentally strong.

Simply and strength are not opposites. This is why Gandhi said, "In my opinion, the beauty and efficacy of Satyagraha are so great and the doctrine so simple that it can be preached even to children."¹⁴

Gandhi always maintained that he preferred violence to cowardice and anarchy to misgovernment. He never flinched from the consequences of taking an uncompromising stand against injustice. Once in 1946, he told the Viceroy that if a bloodbath was necessary India would have it. Nirmal Kumar Bose narrates a revealing incident which took place in Calcutta in September 1947. Some young men, greatly influenced by Gandhi's finding fault against the outbreak of violence against Muslims, told Bose that they could protect the Muslims only if they could use stenguns against the communal Hindus, Bose reported this to Gandhi. Recalling the incident, Bose writes: Gandhi gave a most unexpected reply. He asked me to tell the young men that he was with them. If Prafulla Babu, the Chief Minister, could not [protect the minority with his government force and the young men decided to do so they deserved his support. "¹⁵

The fact that Satyagraha was not to be associated with weakness is made clear by the fact that Gandhiji insisted on changing the name of the somewhat abstract but historic instrument of passive resistance. He felt that the differences between his form of non-cooperation and the passive resistance that others had sometimes employed were as great as the difference between the North Pole and the South Pole.

Active Resistance-the Main Feature :

Gandhi at first let the struggle be known as passive resistance as he could not find an exact Gujarati equivalent. But then, "the phrase gave rise to confusion and it appeared shameful to permit this great struggle to be known only by an English name."¹⁶

As the struggle continued, he also realized that new principles had come into being. He subsequently announced a prize through his newspaper "Indian opinion" for the best name to designate the movement. 'Sadagraha' suggested by his nephew Maganlal, meaning 'firmness in a good cause' appealed to him. Gandhi said, "I liked



the word, but it did not fully represent the whole idea; I wished it to connote. I therefore corrected it to 'Satyagraha'. Truth (Satya) implies love, and firmness (Agraha) engenders and therefore serves as a synonym for force. I thus began to call the Indian movement 'Satyagraha'. That is to say the Force which is born of Truth and love or nonviolence, and gave up the use of 'passive resistance'.¹⁷

The Gandhian concept of Satyagraha was basically different from passive resistance. One was as much based on love as the other was on hate, Gandhi also asserted that passive resistance has been conceived as a weapon of the weak and does not exclude the use of physical force or violence for the purpose of gaining one's end whereas Satyagraha has been conceived as a weapon of the strongest and excludes the use of violence in any form.

Gandhi's assertion in his newspapers made this clear. He said: "In passive resistance non-violence is adopted as a matter of outward form: the basic motive of love, as it is understood to be functioning in Satyagraha, remains absent. Hatred becomes the prime mover. While there is no scope for love in passive resistance, hatred has no place not only, in Satyagraha, but is a positive breach of its ruling principle."¹⁸

Again, he said- "Passive resistance, unlike non-violence, has no power to change man's hearts."¹⁹

"no one", says Romain Rolland, the French writer "has greater horror of passivity than this tireless fighter, who is one of the most heroic incarnations of a man who resists. The soul of his movement is active resistance-resistance which finds outlet not in violence, but in the active force of love, faith and sacrifice. This three-fold energy is expressed in the word "Satyagraha."²⁰

Gandhi found for the passive and fatalistic Indians a new political function by turning them into reserves of hidden power. He built up a non-cooperation movement instead of an aggressive and militant struggle in which the passivity and endurance of the Indian masses were turned into sources of strength and energy. Their static forces became dynamic as the Indians moved forward to political action. They regained their self respect, and this was in itself a restoration of the values of spirituality.

Essentials for a Satyagrahi:

According to Gandhi, there are three types of human beings:

1. the coward,
2. the brave and,
3. the superior.

The coward in order to save his skin, supinely acquiesces in injustice and wrong. The brave hero, on the other hand, violently resists injustice and wrong in order to overcome injustice and wrong. The superior is he who, in the fullness of his strength, forgives the wrongdoer and tries to redeem him and convert him to the ways of doing good.²¹ This superior person is the Satyagrahi. Gandhi wanted an ideal Satyagrahi to subscribe to Truth and non-violence as his creed; Satyagraha can be offered only by the person who understands Truth and who has justice on his side. Moreover, a Satyagrahi must be pledged to non violence in thought, word and deed, without which



Satyagraha cannot be launched. In other words, the Satyagrahi must cultivate a living faith in God, i.e. a living faith in his inner voice.²²

It is not easy to comprehend truth as it is and therefore Gandhi laid down many rules for the guidance of Satyagrahi, Joan V. Bondurant has very systematically given the points that were laid down by Gandhi for volunteers in the 1930 movement.

1. Harbor no anger but offer 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 truth 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.²³

It is surprising to many that with such stringent rules and regulations making demands on the masses, so many followed Gandhi. Obviously he succeeded in touching their hearts by providing them with an action-oriented programme.

This code of discipline was not just lip service; Gandhi very strenuously followed it and expected the same from his followers. C.F. Andrews another journalist friend of Gandhi, has cited one such example while fighting the war of the Indian settlers against the government of South Africa that lasted for over eight years, Gandhi did not take advantage of the plight of his adversary. During the Satyagraha campaign, the European employees of the Union Railway struck work, greatly embarrassing the government, and when many people suggested that Gandhi should take advantage of the situation by joining hands with the "Railway workers to deal the final blow which would prove decisive for the victory of the Indians. Gandhi followed his usual "non-embarrassment policy" and refused. General Smuts as a matter of fact was overwhelmed by such a gesture and as one of his secretaries wrote to Gandhi; "I do not care to assist them at all. But can we lay hands on you? I often wish that you took to violence like the English strikers and then we would know at once how to dispose of you. But you will not injure even the enemy; you desire victory by self suffering alone and never transgress your self imposed limits of courtesy and chivalry. And that is what reduces us to sheer helplessness."²⁴

Thus Gene Sharp is right in observing that "Gandhi's philosophy of life and his method of opposing evil are both called Satyagraha"²⁵

'Hind Swaraj' showed plainly how Satyagraha was for Gandhi not a mere political tactic but part of a total philosophy of life and ideology of action. And why he felt that to call it passive resistance was a misnomer bordering on blasphemy²⁶



Satyagraha The Ultimate Solution:

Hence, Satyagraha as a technique marks the culmination of Gandhian religiosity, spiritualism and an ethical and spiritual approach to the solution of individual and social problems. It synthesises all the supreme and subtler values, cherished by Gandhi such as Truth, Love and Non violence.²⁷

The South African Government, despite Gandhi's epoch-making work therein, relented precious little towards the Indian living in that country, but through providing near-laboratory conditions gave India the unintended gift of a liberating dynamo. South Africa offered a unique opportunity to him for exercising leadership. None amongst The Hindu coolies, Christian clerks and Muslim traders had the requisite education, professional competence and personality to take up cudgels with government, officials or their press. Here was an ideal chance in experimenting in the sphere of social and political work. What started as the wresting of a few concessions through representations and protests emerged in the form of high stakes in a life and death struggle. It was in this environment that Satyagraha gradually took shape-maddeningly baffling to its opponents and exhilaratingly creative to its votaries. His achievements in South Africa have been very well summed by Pyarelal, who puts it thus: "A lone individual and a member of a despised race, who had arrived as a brilliant barrister with no experience of politics or of public life. Gandhiji had in four years transformed the situation in a colour prejudicial colony. At a time when public life even among the white colonists was yet in a rudimentary state of development, he had built a solid tradition of public life among his people, who before that had been utter strangers to it. What more, he had instilled into a community composed of heterogeneous elements a sense of common identity and a common purpose, kindled in them a keen awareness of their rights and taught them to walk with their heads erect as a people proud of their country and its culture and civilization."²⁸

The views and sentiments of the enlightened members of the European community came out clearly in leading newspapers like 'Natal Advertiser'.

The 'Natal Mercury' wrote: "Mr, Gandhi has won the position he holds today specially among the European community by sheer merit and ability."

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