
GANDHIAN SATYAGRAHA AND THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD

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Abstract:

This paper discusses in brief the origin and characteristic features of Gandhian Satyagraha and its application and success in South Africa and dwells at length on the burning issues of the contemporary world and the relevance of Satyagraha in this context. In the modern world which is threatened by the alarming rate of global warming, weapons of mass destruction, international terrorism, growing materialism and wholesale erosion of human values- which are ,by and large, the products of unjust and exploitative policies followed by the developed countries of the West- peace has remained as elusive as ever. Herein lies the need and relevance of Satyagraha as it is based on unfailing virtues like truth, love of mankind, non-violence, moral integrity and spirituality. In modern times there appears no other option but Gandhian ideology for the survival and progress of mankind.

Key words: Satyagraha, Truth, materialism, and Non-violence.

INTRODUCTION

The bard once said, ‘What is in the name; a rose by any other name would have smelt as good’. But there are some names in human history which resonate in the heart and soul of every man in the world. ‘Gandhi’ is one such name. Because he is the concrete embodiment of all that is desirable and universal in any human being. Gandhi’s life is just a reflection of this – the actualization of the vision of life as a purposive action directed by, what Erikson (1969:29) calls, ‘the spirit of identification with humanity as a whole on the basis of love, dignity, personal responsibility and solidarity’.

Gandhi lived in the era of European imperialism and in India under the British Raj. He grew up in the traditional Indian society which was under the clutches of the British rule. What made Gandhi the ‘Mahatma’ was the ‘feel’ of the times in which he lived. To have a sense of the times is nothing but to have a sense of history and historical processes. Gandhi, in due course of time, discovered his destiny in relation to history and emerged as ‘Mahatma’ by defining his thoughts and deeds in relation to the entire mankind. He pitted himself and his ideology of *Satyagraha* vis-à-vis the ideology and practices of the Western world, that is, of capitalism, imperialism and materialism. He provided an alternative and just mode of life.

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The origin of the philosophy of *Satyagraha* could be traced in Gandhi’s upbringing and the evolution of moral values in him. He was born in a religious family. The shy but honest and

obedient boy, on whom *Ramayana*, *Gita* and the two plays of *Shravan Pitrabhakti* and *Harishchandra*, inculcated love of Truth early in his life. After the pitfalls and lapses during his adolescence – of meat-eating, smoking and stealing – and his confession to his father revealed the *power of Truth* to him. After seeing his father's tears indicating forgiveness, *persuasion* and *change of heart* became his guiding principles. By the time he left for England after his pledge to his mother that he will not touch meat, wine or women, we find a different Gandhi – a young man steadfastly *committed to a cause*. In England, as a result of reading *Gita*, *Bible*, *The Light of Asia* and *Hero and Hero Worship*, etc. an attitude of *respect for all religions* was born. He passed the Bar Examination in 1891 and sailed for India. Gandhi had already become an image of simplicity and asceticism.

When Gandhi landed in South Africa in 1893 as a lawyer, he developed a self-consciousness which began to create wider social consciousness. His vibrant mind came in vital contact with the social realities around – the Africans virtually enslaved; Indian indentured labourers treated as semi-slaves; his own bitter experiences as a coloured person; the discriminatory laws and practices of the Europeans against Indians; and to top it all, the savagery of the Anglo-Boer War(1899) and the brutality of the white settlers in Natal – may well have inspired Gandhi to discover a doctrine of life which would effectively counter all forms of oppression and suffering. This doctrine was what came to be known as 'Satyagraha'. The caveat against killing was there for all to see. Gandhi's moral indignation at the White people's colour prejudice, cruelty and exploitation made him realize that the Whites called themselves Christians, were better educated and better dressed, but they were not the moral superiors. Their policy of imperialism was nothing but assertion of racial superiority, suppression of political and economic freedom of other people, the exploitation of the resources of other countries for the benefit of the imperialist country and the use of force or violence to keep them under subjugation - is nothing but untruth. Gandhi, the practical man that he was, saw that the only way to take on such an opponent had to be founded on Truth. Thus, he discovered 'the matchless weapon of Satyagraha' (*Collected Works*, Vol.85:298-299). The conditions in South Africa provided him with the historic opportunity to put to test the values and principles he had cherished all along, that is, truth, love of mankind, non-violence, moral integrity and spirituality. Out of these, he fashioned the ideology of *Satyagraha* to fight the mighty weapons of the imperialists. Gandhi wrote in his *Autobiography* (1927:293), 'The magnificent campaign extending over six years (from 1906 to 1912) were the days of Satyagraha. Satyagraha had not been a pre-conceived plan. It came on spontaneously, without I having willed it. But I could see that all my previous steps led up to that goal'.

Satyagraha or passive resistance had emerged in South Africa. It eventually paved the way for easing of tensions in South Africa and later for the freedom of India from the British. Gandhi's concerns were not limited to Indians only. Within South Africa, the Africans, Chinese miners, Turkish Muslims and Christians were also in the frame of his mind. As early as 1908, in his thirties, Gandhi's vision of the world was this : 'If we look into the future, is it not a heritage we have to leave to posterity, that all the different races commingle and produce a civilization that perhaps the world has not yet seen?' (Gandhi in his Johansnesburg Speech, May 18, 1908).

The doctrine of *Satyagraha* may be summed up in a few words. The term 'Satyagraha' is a blend of two words: 'sat' = 'truth' and 'Agraha' = 'firmness' meaning 'affirmation of truth'. It came to be known by other phrases such as passive resistance or non-violent resistance. In his *Autobiography*(1927:167), Gandhi explained the characteristic features of 'Satyagraha :'Passive Resistance is not the weapon for the weak; it is the soul force; it is matchless; it is superior to the

force of arms; Satyagraha entails immediate suffering and calls for self-sacrifice; it does not require training in army; control over the mind alone is necessary; if so, man is free like the King of the forest; it requires direct participation of the people.' A Gandhian scholar, DuBois (1922: 47), remarks about the efficacy about *Satyagraha*: 'It kills without striking its adversary. It can only be carried to a successful conclusion if the cause is just'.

Non-violence, non-cooperation, *Sarvodaya* and *Swaraj* are different manifestations of *Satyagraha*. It had the ideal of establishing welfare of one and all. Human values were the core of *Satyagraha*. Its purpose was unity of all mankind. Its success in the freedom struggle movement in India proved its worth and earned world-wide esteem. Gandhi created history. The world had witnessed bloody revolutions in the past. But Gandhi proved that without a sword, the battle can be won. This is the triumph of *Satyagraha*, not as a theory, but as a weapon against injustice and as a mode of life.

The twenty first century world is beset with formidable challenges hitherto unheard of: the alarming rate of global warming that threatens the extinction of human race, the threat of weapons of mass destruction, growing materialism, international terrorism and wholesale erosion of human values, to name a few. These are the products of the same policies the developed countries in the West have relentlessly followed throughout twentieth century. The contemporary policies of globalisation, liberalisation and privatisation have resulted in economic imperialism, which are based on exploitation, injustice and oppression of particularly third-world countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America. On the one hand, they have resulted in vulgar materialism, greed, profiteering and consumerism for a few, and on the other hand, they have created poverty, over-population and unemployment for the majority of mankind. Injustice and inequality amongst the peoples and nations have become the order of the day.

In the contemporary times, violence of a monstrous kind is being used to achieve certain ubiquitous goals. International terrorism, fed and fuelled in the name of religion and ideology, has been destroying countries like Afghanistan, Iraq and Ukraine. Thousands of innocent lives and property are destroyed in this mindless mayhem. And this situation appears to spread to other countries and regions in the near future. Nations all over the world are amassing weapons of mass destruction in the name of security and safety of their country. Man was supposed to be the rational being who thinks and acts in the interest of his and others' well-being. But in today's world, man appears to have become a blood-hound, hungry for human blood. This shows the lowest level- the barbarian- man has sunk to and which requires hard efforts to bring him back to his human roots. Gandhian philosophy of *Satyagraha* in its various manifestations is capable of achieving this.

In addition, in the name of global progress and prosperity, exploitation of nature and its resources is threatening to leave the earth barren and unproductive. The so called weapons of mass destruction which are fashioned to protect the 'interests' of the powerful countries are in danger of threatening the very existence of life on earth. These have led the global society towards tension, turmoil, poverty, grief and devastation. Peace is as elusive as ever in the world.

Herein lies the relevance of Gandhi's ideals incorporated in *Satyagraha*. To see the Truth and act for it, don't we need a massive change of heart, clear conscience, love and compassion for all? Sometimes science and technology have been projected as the panacea for all the ills of the world. These may be able to feed the stomachs, but do they heal the wounds of the hearts? Science and technology have helped improve material conditions of life. Have they enhanced the *quality* of life? Have they enhanced our sense of truth, integrity or spirituality? Technology has brought people nearer. But has it united the people of the world to carry forward human

civilization in a purposive way? Gandhi was not God, but was a man with God-like qualities. But let us not place him on the pedestal and worship him. Because the name ‘Gandhi’ still resonates with humane significance and meaning for the human race.

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