



Gandhi's Concept of Satyagraha and an Ideal Satyagrahi

Dr. Shambhulinganand S. Shireshi

Shivashanta Nilaya', 'H.No-48, Bhavani Nagar, Saraswatpur, Dharwad- 580 002.,Karnataka State

ABSTRACT

Gandhi's concept of Satyagraha does not involve passivity, weakness, and helplessness. It stands for greatest courage man is capable of. It is essentially an approach of mind and a way of life based on the firm desire for vindicating just causes, correcting wrongs and converting wrong doers by voluntary self-suffering and by patient and active use of the means which are non-violent and essentially just. Gandhi's concept of Satyagraha is comprehensive and universal. It crosses the barriers of time, place and person. It can be offered at any time and at any place, and is effective in all state of affairs. Any person who possesses the various qualifications prescribed by Gandhi, or follows the leader who possesses them can employ it. Both, men and women can use it

KEYWORDS

Satyagraha, Satyagrahi

Gandhi instigated a mass movement against the apartheid policy of the rulers of South African colonies in 1896. He styled the movement, provisionally, as "Passive Resistance" for want of a proper term. However, he believed that "Passive Resistance" was a "misnomer" as it did not signify the meaning he had in mind. Having failed to find an appropriate term, he invited suggestions of the readers of 'Indian Opinion'. The most suitable one came from Magan Lal Gandhi, who suggested the word "Sadagraha", meaning firmness in a good cause. Gandhi appreciated the term, but as it conveyed only part of the idea, he corrected it to "Satyagraha".¹

Gandhi elucidated the term "Satyagraha" from various viewpoints. Once, distinguishing Satyagraha from passive resistance (the nearest English equivalent of Satyagraha), he pointed out that the former involves resistance but not passivity. Like passive resistance, Satyagraha is not the weapon of the weak, the coward, the unarmed and the helpless. It is a weapon of the morally attentive and active.

Gandhi's Satyagraha involves active confrontation to evil. But it is not the traditional resistance of evil by evil. It is resistance of evil by its opposite, i.e. by good. He maintained that evil could be destroyed only by good, just as fire can be extinguished only by water, not by fire. Fight of evil-by-evil multiplies evil. Fight of violence by violence merely intensifies violence. Satyagraha, on the other hand, is a fight between contrary forces, not between alike ones. The conformation of these views Gandhi first found in the New Testament which states: Resist evil not by evil. The Bhagavadgeeta deepened the thought and the essays of Tolstoy and Thoreau further conformed it.²

In its origin, the term "Satyagraha" is a compound Sanskrit word formed by *satya* and *agraha*. '**Satya**' means truth and '**agraha**' means holding fast, firmness, adherence or insistence. The compound word "Satyagraha" means sticking to truth, holding fast to truth, insistence on truth or firm adherence to truth. Defining the term Satyagraha, Gandhi once wrote: "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, i.e., the force that is born of truth and love or non-violence and gave up the phrase 'passive resistance' in connection with it.

In Indian Opinion, he described Satyagraha as "firmness in a good cause". In Young India, he pointed out that Satyagraha was just a new name for "the law of self suffering". In Hind

Swaraj, he proclaimed that " Sacrifice self is infinitely superior to sacrifice of others", and that a self-sufferer does not make others suffer for his mistakes. Self-suffering brings the desired relief quicker and with greater certainty than does the imposition of suffering on the opponent.³

Gandhi's concept of Satyagraha does not involve passivity, weakness, and helplessness. It stands for greatest courage man is capable of. It is essentially an approach of mind and a way of life based on the firm desire for vindicating just causes, correcting wrongs and converting wrong doers by voluntary self-suffering and by patient and active use of the means which are non-violent and essentially just.

Gandhi as a substitute to rebellion and war for solving human conflicts, political, social or economic, evolved Satyagraha as a method. He was convinced of the uselessness of violence, both in organized and unorganized forms, for solving conflicts and deadlocks on a strong basis. He conceived Satyagraha as one of the suitable methods for seeking correction of wrongs perpetrated or unnoticed by the political authority. He regarded it as a way, which the obedient citizens could adopt for seeking rectify of their grievances. In South Africa, Gandhi used it against the apartheid policy of the government. In India, he offered it for seeking redress of particular grievances, it can, in general be used for the vindication of just, clear, unequivocal and impersonal public causes. It can also be engaged as an instrument of self-education and self-perfection.⁴

Gandhi's concept of Satyagraha is comprehensive and universal. It crosses the barriers of time, place and person. It can be offered at any time and at any place, and is effective in all state of affairs. Any person who possesses the various qualifications prescribed by Gandhi, or follows the leader who possesses them can employ it. Both, men and women can use it. The latter, he believed, were rather better at it.⁵ Satyagraha can be practiced by a single individual or by a group. Minority group can offer it against the majority group and Vice Versa.

An Ideal Satyagrahi of Gandhi's Concept:

The long series of Satyagraha experiments made Gandhi almost an ideal Satyagrahi. He offered Satyagraha as regularly as the occasions arose, concurrently trying to understand its deeper implications. Sometimes he succeeded in obtaining the desired goal, sometimes he failed and sometimes the success came not at the time and in the way he had expected it. He strove to discover his own faults and those of his co-workers. He not only improved the technique of Satyagraha, but also

determined the qualities, which ideal Satyagrahi must possess.

very first qualification that Gandhi prescribed for an ideal Satyagrahi was that the later must be an actual sufferer. In Harijan, he observed: "It is the essence of Satyagraha that those who are suffering should alone offer it". Young India also records his similar statements. Gandhi wanted an ideal Satyagrahi to subscribe to Truth and non-violence as his creed, as 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, a Satyagrahi must cultivate a living faith in God, i.e. a living faith in his inner voice.⁶

Gandhi conceived Satyagraha as a method only of the spiritually strong and not of the weak. He was certain that a Satyagrahi must be strong in mind and soul, for a weak-minded man can never be a Satyagrahi. Satyagraha is a weapon of a man of steady wisdom, a Sthitapradnya (balanced mind) of the Gita's conception. It is not merely a matter of mind. It is also a matter of the soul. Satyagraha seeks to concert, not to pressurize, the opponent. A Satyagrahi is required, therefore, neither to retaliate nor to submit to the opposite party. He must strive through reason, discussion and self-suffering to arrive at a solution agreeable to all.

Gandhi conceived Satyagraha only as a weapon of the law-abiding citizens and not of those who come in conflict with law due to their criminal traits. Hence, the following statement in his autobiography: "Before one can be fit for the practice of Civil Disobedience, one must have rendered a willing and respectful obedience to the state laws".⁷ He thought that only those who are disciplined and watchful, and who possess qualities like compassion and civility could accept Satyagraha as a way of life. He also required the Satyagrahis not to take any unlawful advantage of the opponent's weak points. Nor would he like them to take a single step not acceptable by the principles of Satyagraha.

Gandhi wanted Satyagrahis to be above suspicion. He therefore, was eager that they should not touch opium, liquor or any other intoxicant. They should regard every woman, other than their wife, as mother, sister or daughter according to her age. They should never lust after women in their heart. In short, they must lead a chaste life and must be teetotalers.⁸ He expected them not to maintain confidentiality about anything, for Satyagraha is a publicly undertaken.

It seems that Gandhi's description of Satyagraha is his own description. His ideal Satyagrahi is he himself. One such person was enough for involving the whole nation in their fight for freedom. Finally, the discipline of Satyagraha requires that the wishes of the leader must be respected. Individual opinions should not be expressed once the man at the top has spoken. Differences of opinion there may be within the group, but once the group takes a decision, it is final and binding on all concerned.

Situations where violence is unavoidable:

Gandhi's theory of complete non-violence is "like Euclid's point or straight line". In actual practice, untouched violence is impossibility. The best that man can do is to avoid the use of violence as a matter of sheer necessity, as an exception to the general rule of non-violence. In the first place, he allowed the use of violence if it is employed for "the benefit of the person against whom it is used". For example, a surgeon using a knife in the interest of his patient, a person using violence to prevent a child from rushing towards fire, a social worker using violence to protect a women from her attacker, or a husband being severe to his wife in order to make her an ideal wife.

He also allowed the use of violence for the protection of society against the Violent and harmful acts of the lower animals. He did not object to the killing of animals that devour

or cause hurt to man, e.g. Monkeys, birds and insects who eat up the crops, and the stray dogs who often become a trouble to the people. His permission to kill the harmful animal was, however, not without exceptions. In the first place, he wanted that dangerous animals should be put to do death "in an instantaneous and painless manner". Secondly, cows should not be killed in any case. He thought that, unlike other animals, cow was as precious as a human being.⁹

In the circumstances then prevailing in India, Gandhi did not object to the use of violent methods by the Government for protection of society from the misdeeds of the anti-social elements. He, therefore, allowed the government to use violence against the goondas, robbers, dacoits, thieves, kidnappers, and even aggressors. The use of violence for fighting the aggressor found special mention in the contest of Pakistan's aggression in Kashmir. He justified the action of the Indian Government to rush troops to Srinagar in order to fight the Pakistani aggressors. He said: "If there was no other way of securing justice from Pakistan, if Pakistan persistently refused to see its proved error and continued to minimize it, the Indian Union Government would have to go to war against it."¹⁰ This was an allowance to the weakness of the Government, which did not subscribe to the creed of non-violence in thought, word and deed.

Gandhi also tolerated egg eating and meat eating by those who believe in it. To force them not to eat these things would have amounted to undue interference with their freedom. It would have been contrary to the creed of non-violence, which allows everyone to adhere to his own conscience. Moreover, there was a considerable risk of his losing those co-workers who would never persuade themselves to change to vegetarianism.

Gandhi insisted that the methods adopted for the correction of wrongs and conversion of wrongs and conversion of wrongdoers must not merely be consistent and non-violent. These must also be in tune with time and circumstances.¹¹

Reference:

1. Gandhi M.K, 'Satyagraha in South Africa', translated by V.G.Desai (I Edition; Madras: S. Ganesan, 1928), 172-73.
2. Gandhi M.K, An Autobiography or Story of My Experiment with Truth, translated by M. Desai (I Edn; Ahmedabad; N.P.H, 1956) p-243.
3. Harijan (Ahmedabad), 09-07-1938, 173.
4. Harijan, 06-05-1939, 113.
5. Young India (Ahmedabad) 10-04-1930, 121.
6. Harijan, 25-3-1939, 64.
7. Gandhi. M.K, An Autobiography p-470.
8. Harijan, 18-01-1948, p-517.
9. The CWMG, 1966, XX, 110.
10. Gene Sharp, 'Gandhi's Defence Policy', Gandhi Marg (New Delhi) V.X, No-4, pp-303-17.
11. Harijan, 22-09-1946, p-317.