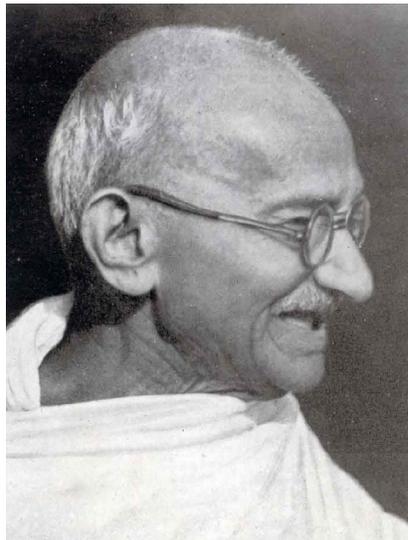


Satyagraha - Meaning and Application

Dr. Atul Chandra Pradhan

In a meeting of immigrant Indians, held in the imperial theatre of the South African town, Johannesburg on 11 September 1906, which had been convened by Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, a young Indian barrister, a resolution was adopted to carry on a non-violent agitation for the withdrawal of the discriminatory and humiliating registration ordinance against the Indians which was to be passed into an Act by the Transvaal government. This non-violent agitation, initially called passive resistance and afterwards Sadagraha and Satyagraha which was first carried on by Mahatma Gandhi in South Africa and achieved some success there was launched in the Indian sub-continent under his leadership through Indian National

Congress after his return from South Africa. This movement made India free and Mahatma Gandhi the Father of Nation. Satyagraha, meaning firmness for the cause of truth is as old as human culture. It has all along been a value or virtue in domestic life and inter-personal relations. The uniqueness of Mahatma Gandhi lay in the fact that



he used it as a technique for mass mobilisation, for political movements against the injustice of a government. The strength of Satyagraha lay not in application of physical force or brute force but in the application of soul force or moral power. Gandhi preached and practised the glory of moral

power and believed, that a single individual, if morally strong, is capable of bringing about transformation in the environment in which he lives. This was a new concept quite contrary to the Western political tradition which relied upon external rather than internal restraints, on institutional rather than ethical limits to control those who held reins of power. Gandhi believed in the importance of private morality in public life and emphasised in the traditional Hindu manner the

ethical and not institutional restraints. How did he develop courage and capacity for launching the unique movement, called Satyagraha ? From his point of view the capacity for self control that grew in him while working as a volunteer during Zulu rebellion and Boer war and as the inmate of Phoenix Settlement led him to organise Satyagraha

against Registration Ordinance and go to jail. As some scholars have observed, "Phoenix and the Brahmacharya vow were indispensable pre-conditions for his first great non-violent resistance campaign." As he himself said later, "Without Brahmacharya the Satyagrahi will have no lustre, no inner strength to stand unarmed against the whole world ...; his strength will fail him at the right moment" (Harijan 13 October 1940).

The scholars have traced various sources Indian and Western, such as Jainism, Upanishads, Gita, Patanjali's Yogasutra (which he read in 1903), Bible (New Testament), Tolstoy, John Ruskin and Henry David Thoreau from whom Gandhi might have possibly drawn his ideas on Satyagraha. Once in conversation with Joseph Doke, one of his earliest biographers Gandhi told about the early influence of a Gujarati poem by Shamal Bhat. The substance of the poem is - "If a man gives you a drink of water and you give him a drink in return, that is nothing. Real beauty consists in doing good against evil." The story of the mythological Maharaja Harishchandra's adherence to truth and sacrifices, it is said, had deep influence on his mind in childhood. Gandhi appears to have been greatly influenced by the moral character of a Gujarati jewel merchant and poet, named Raichandbhai. Next to him, three Western thinkers - Leo Tolstoy, Henry David Thoreau and John Ruskin exercised decisive and formative influence on him through their writings. Deeply influenced by Tolstoy's Kingdom of God Is within you Gandhi called himself a follower of the former and had correspondence with him. Tolstoy wrote to Gandhi, prophesying that the movement in South Africa which Gandhi was leading "was destined to bring a message of hope to the down-trodden people of the earth." About Satyagraha Tolstoy wrote to Gandhi, "that which is called passive resistance is in reality nothing else than the teaching of love uncorrupted by false

interpretations. That love which is striving for the union of the human soul and the activity derived from it is the highest and only law of human life; this law was proclaimed by all - by the Indian as by the Chinese, Hebrew, Greek and Roman sages of the world. I think this law was most clearly expressed by Christ who plainly said, "In love alone is all the laws and prophets." On another occasion Tolstoy wrote to Gandhi, "The renunciation of all opposition by force ... means the law of love unperturbed by sophistries. Love or in other words the striving of men's souls towards unity and submissive behaviour to one another that results there from represents the highest and indeed the only law of life any employment of force is incompatible with love as the highest law of life and as soon as the use of force appears permissible even in a single case, the law itself is immediately negated."

Henry David Thoreau the American anarchist who used the term 'civil disobedience' in one of his speeches in 1849 propounded the theory that maximum of cooperation should be extended to people and institutions which lead towards good and non-cooperation should be followed when they promote evil. Unlike Gandhi Thoreau advocated not only passive but also active and violent resistance to the American Government in the struggle against slavery.

From John Ruskin's *Unto This Last* which Gandhi read in South Africa he derived the following ideas :

- "1. That the good of the individual is contained in the good of all.
2. That a lawyer's work has the same value as the barber's in as much as all have the same right of earning their livelihood from their work.
3. That a life of labour, i.e. the life of the tiller of soil and handicrafts man is the life worth-living."

Gandhi's concept of Satyagraha has been criticized (by materialists as well as spiritualists), misunderstood and misused. Some who professed disbelief in Gandhian Satyagraha carried on parallel movements following the path of violence during freedom struggle. Some people found Gandhi's constant reference to 'God', 'truth' and 'non-violence' 'nauseating' and 'stinking'. Gandhi's Satyagraha is "truth in its dynamic form unattended with violence." Though initially he used the expression 'passive resistance' to designate his movement, subsequently he pointed out the following differences between 'passive resistance' and Satyagraha :

1. Love has no place in passive resistance. It will have no place in Satyagraha.
2. Passive resistance is frequently a precursor of armed resistance. Satyagraha precludes armed resistance.
3. Passive resistance cannot be offered against one's own kith and kin. Satyagraha can be offered even against those one loves.
4. The idea behind passive resistance is to worry and harass the opponent. Satyagraha precludes any such idea."

Satyagraha is the soul force which one can develop and use by the practice of truth and non-violence and faith in God. Now a days many use Gandhian methods like strike and *dharana* without following the norms which Gandhi prescribed for a Satyagrahi such as

1. A Satyagrahi must be truthful. Gandhi regarded truth as synonymous with God.
2. A Satyagrahi must be non-violent. While he himself might suffer, he would not inflict any pain or penalty on the opponent.
3. A Satyagrahi must not adopt unfair means for the achievement of his goal however noble. For him means justify end.

4. A Satyagrahi must have control over senses and palate.
5. A Satyagrahi must be fearless. Fearlessness means fearing and frightening none. Gandhi preferred violence to cowardice, and regarded cowardice as the worst form of violence.
6. A Satyagrahi must not steal.
7. A Satyagrahi should not possess property and make provisions for future.
8. A Satyagrahi must not hesitate to do physical work for earning his bread. He should follow the principle enunciated by Jesus Christ in New Testament - "In the sweat of thy brow shalt thou eat thy bread."
9. A Satyagrahi should be a votary of swadeshi i.e. dedicate himself to the service of his immediate neighbours. According to Gandhi, "The broad definition of swadeshi is the use of all home-made things to the exclusion of foreign things, in so far as such use is necessary for the protection of home industry, more specially those industries without which India will become pauperised."
10. Since all religions converge to the same goal, the Satyagrahi must respect all religions. He must practise tolerance. "Tolerance gives us spiritual insight which is as far from fanaticism as the north pole from the south. True knowledge of religion breaks down the barriers between faith and faith."
11. A Satyagrahi must not treat anybody as untouchable.
"None can be born untouchable as all are sparks of one and the same fire."

A Satyagrahi's path is not an easy one. It is beset with thorns and thistles. As Mahatma Gandhi once said, a Satyagrahi has to pass through five difficult phases: "First people will greet you with indifference; next they will ridicule you; then they will abuse you; next they will put you in jail or even try to kill you. If you go through these five stages successfully, you will get to the most dangerous phase — when people start respecting you. Then you can become your own enemy unless you are careful."

Gandhi considered Satyagraha to be a positive movement. During the struggle for freedom he placed before the Satyagrahis a constructive programme. He is reported to have said that "if once constructive work was accomplished there would not be any need left for outward Satyagraha." But in pre-independence situation, because of the compulsion of overthrowing foreign rule the Satyagraha movement had assumed a somewhat negative character and many had accepted Satyagraha as a matter of policy and not of creed.

Now since India is independent and democratic, there are ample scope and necessity for the implementation of constructive works through the methods of Satyagraha followed by Gandhi. In today's Indian society we see contrary trends. While some efforts are being made for constructive work, violence and disruptive forces sometimes seem to threaten the very foundation of our social fabric. In such a situation constructive work needs to be intensified as the only remedy for social maladies. As pointed out by K.G. Mashruwala constructive work will create "proper conditions for the urge for goodness, inherent in man to grow and gather strength to effectively check the forces of violence and to put on the right track man's age-long endeavour to eradicate poverty, ignorance, filth, disease, narrow-mindedness, inequality and open or concealed slavery which make his earth a living hell."

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