

## Satyagrah: A Gandhian Context

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Received on 18.04.2020

Accepted on 28.05.2020

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### Abstract

Satyagraha is the most important contribution of Gandhi to social philosophy and movement. It emerged as a weapon of conflict resolution. The concept of *satyagraha* could be understood in the broader context of Gandhian socio-political thought that developed out of actions, which he called 'Experiments with Truth'. It was aimed not merely at political change, but at the complete social, political, economic and cultural transformation. So far as its contemporary relevance as a means for attainment of justice and conflict resolution is concerned, diverse worldwide social movements drew and continue to draw inspiration from the Gandhian Way. Gandhi's approach to peace is based on *satyagraha*. Satyagraha is the moral alternative to war. Gandhi showed us the way to use it for problem-solving and conflict-resolution from micro-level to macro-level. Gandhi's *satyagraha* proved to be an effective means for political redress. Many of the contemporary challenges related to war and peace, terrorism, human rights, sustainable development, climate change, socio-political unrest, and politico-administrative corruption could be faced through adoption of the Gandhian Way.

**Keywords:** Satyagraha; Non-violence; Trusteeship

### BRIEF BACKGROUND

At the outset, let us believe that Gandhi witnessed the most violent world having fought two world wars and apex of asymmetrical power equation between metropolitan and colonial countries. These geopolitical realities would have certainly affected his thought process among other things. Besides his family background, studies, professional situations and some events happening to him in South Africa proved catalyst in shaping his mind and propelled him into action in South Africa as well as in India. Among many of his agenda of actions, *Satyagraha* is of utmost importance and known as the most sophisticated tool of protest in a totally non-violent manner. *Satyagraha*, in fact, was and is, indeed, an innovative invention of Mohan Das Karamchand Gandhi in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century South Africa and that continued in India till the end of his life in mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. This methodology of Gandhian Protest proved so popular that it is being carried out globally even after his death. For example, Dr. Martin Luther King (Jr.) in America, Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela in South Africa, Dalai Lama

in Tibet and Aung Suu Kyi in Myanmar etc., have emulated Gandhian *Satyagraha*. This tradition of *Satyagraha* was carried out in India by Vinoba Bhave earlier when Gandhi was alive and also after his assassination. Anna Hazare, a social activist, along with his followers revived popular tradition of Gandhian *Satyagraha* at large scale under the banner of the India against Corruption. Small-scale local and regional *Satyagraha* by farmers and leaders of different political parties etc., are being carried out routinely even today to register their peaceful protest. The latest mass scale spontaneous movement against Citizenship Amendment Act in India between December 2019 and March 2020 till before lock down declared due to corona virus pandemic also remained largely peaceful. The women, youth, melinials, theatre artists, cinema celebrities, students from centre of learning and above all general public participated in large number. Withal, other movements for democracies like Arab Spring and jasmine revolution in North Africa, Middle East, Gulf countries, Velvet revolution in Yugoslavia and umbrella revolution in Hongkong are instances of lasting relevance of nonviolent Gandhian method of protest i.e. *Satyagrah*. Precisely *Satyagrah* is a pristine Gandhian technique invented and successfully tested initially in South Africa and latter during freedom struggle in India. This is still in practice and activists around the world use and appropriate this *Satyagrah* as per available particular conditions even in contemporary times.

So far as theoretical formulation of *Satyagraha* is concerned, it is safer to say that there is no concrete theory as such. It is simply because *Satyagraha* is not a theoretical rather it is action-oriented and action-centric entity. K. Ramakrishna Rao (2011: 85) has rightly said that Gandhi did not prescribe any set of theory to go by. He repeatedly emphasizes that Gandhi's techniques including *Satyagraha* is essentially experimental in character. It is an instrument of social action and quite spiritual in nature. *Satyagraha* literally means holding on to truth. The central principle governing *Satyagraha* is the spiritual commitment to pursue truth by opposing all that is opposite to it. Non-violence is an integral component of *Satyagraha*. Due to such a strong non-violent commitment bond to truth that it is known as *Satyagraha*. Elaborating importance of non-violence in *Satyagraha*, K. Rama Rao (2011: 85) further states that *Satyagraha* is a non-violent social action to resolve conflicts between inter and intra groups as well as between states and society and also among the states and the citizens. It is a non-violent weapon to win mind and heart of the opponent without hurting him physically or without harming even his shade. It is through putting in self to the hardest suffering.

Gandhi believed that every human being is a mixture of good and bad soul and symbolizes bad with brute and good with noble divine virtue. And *Satyagraha* appeals to good soul which is sophisticated and superior to brute force and that latter always yields to it. Consequently, social and political conflicts can be resolved by appealing to the good nature and spiritual course of the opponent. Gandhi gave an extensive and exhaustive details as to why did he choose to opt *Satyagraha* in stead of dialogue, argument or agitation to oppose arbitrary Asiatic Act in 1907 that inflicted a lot of discrimination against Indians and other Asians living in South Africa and got it successfully withdrawn with means of non-violent *Satyagraha*. It is simply because he wanted to appeal to the sympathetic chord of the opponent i.e. the then Government of South Africa.

To make the concept of *Satyagraha* crystal clear, Gandhi tries to distinguish between *Satyagraha* and passive resistance. *Satyagraha*, according to Gandhi, is intensely active state and non-violence is its cornerstone. A suitable satyagrahi never uses physical force to deter his adversely or resort to violence or coercion in any circumstances. The *Satyagraha* is a method of conversion by gentle persuasion of an opponent and that also by self suffering of a satyagrahi and his followers. Passive resistance, on the other, is also an active rather more active stage than physical resistance or violence. It is not essentially non-violent like *Satyagraha*. Passive resistance does not prohibit the use of arms on some unavoidable urgent occasions. Precisely, passive resistance is not necessarily non-violent nor does it abstain from use of violence, if needed. So, passive resistance is anti-thesis to *Satyagraha*. It is something more than abstaining from violence or passive resistance.

*Satyagraha* again is one of the most powerful methods of direct action. It is an active mobilization of a force generated by love, compassion and altruism along with unwavering commitment to truth. Gandhi compares *Satyagraha* with war to strong intensity of commitment and hard determination along with unlimited amount of suffering. The practice of *Satyagraha* proves catalyst in resolving

conflicts in non-violent manner with total trust in truth which is the cornerstone of the principles and practice of Gandhian *Satyagraha*.

Besides this simplistic theorization of the *Satyagrah*, there are other complex and advance Western theories. Among these, attribution theory in social psychology is significant. From Gandhian perspective, the objective of *Satyagraha* was to arouse the conscience of the opponent. However, it has been observed by social psychologists like Brehm, Kassin & Fein (1999) that people make attribution or attempt to determine the causes of their own and other people's behavior all the time. While elaborating attribution theory, Daniel Mayton II (2001: 311), says that when we attempt to understand as to why other are behaving the way they are, we often focus on the situation; however, when their behavior is vastly different from what we would expect of people in their situation, then our tendency is to attribute their behavior to their disposition. Applying this analogy of attribution theory to Gandhian concept of *Satyagraha*, Mayton II further opines: "Ordinarily, we would expect the *Satyagrahis* to respond violently to the violence of the British. Because the *satyagrahis*' nonviolent behavior deviates from the norm or what we would expect of people in their situation, we are likely to attribute their nonviolence to the disposition of Gandhi and his fellow Indians" (Ibid.). Similar stance has been reiterated by Louis Fisher (1954: 102) when he characterizes the effects of Salt *Satyagraha* in a manner consistent with this attributional interpretation and says that it made the British aware that they were "subjugating" India. However, this attributional interpretation of Gandhian *Satyagraha* is regarded as too mundane and the attribution theory is too simplistic to account for the success of *Satyagraha*.

Erikson (1969), while proposing spiritual theory of *Satyagraha* and explaining its implications, also argues that non-violent conversion of the adversary is some kind of psychotherapy of the patient. Gandhi's non-violence is quite opposed to Hobbesian theory of power and violence. According to Gandhi, *Satyagraha* is quite natural and intrinsic to human nature and condition. This theory of *Satyagraha* is grounded on strong psychological foundations and Gandhi, to an extent, practiced *Satyagraha* to impress upon the mind-set to create a mesmerizing psychological effect and that fortunately worked.

### SATYAGRAH AND GANDHI

Though *Satyagraha* is certainly a Hindi word made up of '*Satya*' and '*Agraha*' i.e. a call for truth and wedded or holding on to truth. But the Gandhian concept of *Satyagrah* coincidentally originated and experimented for the first time in the deep south of the African continent i.e. South Africa (Antim Jan, 2017). As is well known, Gandhi was once forcefully thrown out of a first-class compartment at Pietermaritzburg station while travelling from Durban to Johannesburg. This incident proved a turning point in Gandhi's life, because after this, he decided to fight against all the unjust laws, especially against racial practice affecting people of Asian origin living in South Africa. Pondering over the method and its nomenclature Gandhi called a meeting in 1906 and requested people to suggest a proper name for the non-violent protest for truth. In response to this, his cousin Magan Lal advised *sadagrah* (a call for good work) which was later improved and its refined version became to be popularly named as '*Satyagraha*' (a call for truth). Since then, this word has got accomplished as the most popular iconic word of Gandhian vocabulary. It is commonly believed that some of the literary works like Jesus's *Sermon on the Mount* and Tolstoy's *Kingdom of the God is Within You* had wielded some of the formative influences on Gandhi's mind apart from Jainism etc. Under the influences of the books and some of the contemporary events, Gandhi gradually became a strong *Satyagrahi* and made its maiden experiment during 1907 in South Africa to protest against Asian Registration Act, which was finally repealed in the aftermath of long and popular *Satyagraha* launched by Mahatma Gandhi. This act was replaced by Indian Relief Act which extended all kind of relief to the Indian diaspora there. Gandhi mentioned this relief act as a memorable and as monumental as Magna Carta for Indians living in Natal, Transvaal and other cities of South Africa.

Gandhi's commitment to *Satyagraha* can be witnessed by setting up of phoenix and Tolstoy's Farms for future potential *Satyagrahi* who can carry out this noble tradition of non-violent *Satyagrah* after or in absence of Gandhi. Besides ashram etc., Gandhi started to popularize and preach relevance of *Satyagrah* through his writings in his edited journal like *Indian Opinion* in Africa and in *Young India*

and in *Harijan* during his *Satyagrah* experiment in India. Later, all of his crystalized thoughts got finally collected and compiled in his compact and concise collection '*Hind Swaraj*'. It is indeed a pristine work of Mahatma Gandhi.

This nonviolence-centric agenda of direct action as *Satyagrah* is known, can be manifested in various forms. Nazareth (2010) refers to various techniques, which inter alia, include: a) Non- Cooperation, b) Boycott, c) Civil Disobedience, d) Padayatra, e) Fast and finally exodus from land of atrocities to unknown destination i.e. f) Hijarat. Gandhi experimented all these kinds of *Satyagrah* during his life-time. In India, Gandhi made maiden experiment of *Satyagrah* at Champaran in Bihar. It was undertaken to annul unjust laws of mandatory Indigo production imposed on peasants and also to do away with undesirable tax and almost inhumane method of its collection. This *Satyagrah* was to address plight of the farmers and peasants. His many other *Satyagrahs* at Kheda and Bardoli were also related to provide justice to the peasants only. In these *Satyagrahs*, Gandhi consistently and religiously carried out his painful *Satyagrah* just to end all the unjust laws related to high rent, harsh collection and inhumane treatment meted out to rural folks engaged in farming.

Besides the *Satyagrahas*, Gandhi gave a clarion call for Mass Non-Cooperation in 1920 as he believed that all including colonial regions survive due to cooperation by the enslaved masses. The non-cooperation, however, couldn't prolong and was withdrawn half way due to instances of violence at Chaura Chauri. This non-cooperation movement also had experimented boycott of foreign institutions and offices and also of foreign made goods. Gandhi offered a suitable and sustainable alternative to opt for Swadeshi institutions and swadeshi goods and spinning charkha was made an integral part of Swadeshi campaign. It had electrifying impact on freedom movement in more than one way. Non-cooperation and its components like civil disobedience are again major components or techniques of Gandhian *Satyagraha*. In other words, *Satyagrah* is based on truth and non-violence. *Satyagrah* is an organic whole of which civil disobedience is a constituent. Gylen Richards rightly argues that it wouldn't be accurate to equate *Satyagrah* with either civil disobedience or non-cooperation, although both are related to *Satyagrah*. Civil disobedience is Gandhian version of thorough civil resistance. Former articulates the notion of non-violence in a better way. Gandhi continued to regard civil disobedience and non-cooperation as just branches of the same tree called *Satyagrah*. Highlighting the relevance of civil disobedience, Rudolf & Rudolf (1967: 184) opine that the civil disobedience along with other forms of *Satyagrah* was a means to awaken the best of opponent. The best example of Gandhian Civil Disobedience was Gandhi's famous Dandi March to protest against British salt law. Like earlier *Satyagraha*, this too became successful by a quick withdrawal of the cruel and the arbitrary salt law. Gandhi further experimented his technique of fast-based *Satyagraha* during 1930s against an infamous communal award. This award was also withdrawn due to Gandhi's fast in jail. The fast-based *Satyagraha* of Gandhi was replicated at Noa Khali for Hindu-Muslim unity and sustainable communal harmony on the eve of partition. However, his fast gave only temporary relief and unfortunately India continues to be plagued with this problem even after seven decades of Independence. Finally, Hijarat is the last and extreme form of *Satyagrah*. Gandhi advised people to migrate from the land of habitation to any unknown destination if all methods failed to get justice. During the national freedom struggle, a large number of families from the North-West frontiers migrated to Pakistan as they were fed up with atrocities of feudal lords. Even today a large number of victims of oppression, especially from Dalits and Minorities' communities migrate from their habitats to other places. Precisely, we have tried to summarize *Satyagraha* and its types in some detail, besides analyzing *Satyagrah* from theoretical and Gandhian point of view.

## SATYAGRAH IN ACTION

We have discussed the concept, kinds and techniques of *Satyagrah* in a possible detailed manner. Now, an attempt is being made to chronicle the Gandhian *Satyagraha* activities in a systematic way. As we all know, India is primarily an agricultural country and most of the people depend for their livelihood on agriculture. Peasantry is still the basis and the largest occupation. At the same time, Mahatma Gandhi fully understood the realities during his tour to discover his motherland and be face to face with plight of the people throughout the country. He could notice acute poverty and social problems of untouchability, caste hierarchy, miserable condition of women and above all

communal hatred among groups belonging to different religions. Gandhi was quite pained to see those and expressed his pain through writings in *Harijan* and *Young India*. Though Gandhi was responding to all these issues but coincidentally, he started *Satyagraha* with peasants and problems related to them and he carried out three consecutive *Satyagrahas* for peasants only. These include Champaran (1917), Kheda (1918) and Bardoli (1926). A brief description of these *Satyagrahas* is given below:

**Champaran (1917):** Champaran *Satyagraha* is a 100-year old event and everywhere its centenary is being celebrated as tribute to Gandhi. Champaran is a peasant dominated backward district of North Bihar. During the British period, peasants of this area were forced to produce indigo on Teen Kattha in any out of twenty kattha (One Bigha) and therefore this system is popularly known as Teenkathiya system in local vernacular languages. This indigo was very harmful for the fertility of the agricultural land and in turn many hectares of land got turned into almost barren one. It became a burden on the farmers. This burden was further aggravated with sudden hike of rate and high-handedness in collection by the Zamindars with the help of their henchmen. Thus, indigo production, high rent and forceful collection made life of peasantry quite miserable one. Peasants were helpless and wanted somehow to get rid of it. They organized small local agitations with the help of the local leader Rajiv Shukla. But things didn't change much. Rajiv Shukla brought miseries of the peasants of Champaran into notice of Gandhi in 1916 when he met him at Lucknow session of the Congress. Gandhi was convinced and agreed to visit Champaran and finally he came to Champaran in March 1917.

It was Gandhi's debut public appearance. An unprecedented crowd came to welcome Mahatma and this gathering made British government quite worried. Gandhi was arrested and brought before the judge in the court of law. He was asked to vacate Champaran at earliest, failing which he would be put behind the bars. Gandhi didn't care and decided to stay and go on for *Satyagraha*. People gave a huge response to his call for *Satyagraha*. Leading lawyers like Dr. Rajendra Prasad, Braj Kishor Prasad and Anugrah Babu along with many intellectuals from the university campus joined the Satyagrah movement. Most important figure among them was Acharya J.B. Kriplani. Satyagrah gradually expanded and intensified with huge public support from all the classes across the state. British government was, in fact, at the horns of dilemma as to decide what to do with *Satyagrah*, *Satyagrahis* and Gandhi and finally it was decided to reduce the rent, relax the collection and wave off rent during famine caused due to drought and flood. This is how Gandhi's maiden *Satyagrah* experiment produced lasting effect. It is here that Gandhi's popularity was tested but Gandhi got established as a mass leader and a popular political icon. People preferably addressed Gandhi as 'Bapu'.

**Kheda (1918):** Kheda *Satyagraha* was the second one launched by Gandhi and again coincidentally for the cause of peasants like Champaran. Kheda is a small district of Gujarat. It is blessed with fertile soil for cotton and tobacco. The British government, here too, imposed every taxation on land as well as tightened its collection. As per government notification, in case of failure of paying rent on time peasants were to be harassed in many ways. Their lands, house, furniture, including cattle, could be confiscated and auctioned to collect rent. Patidars refused to pay these rents and demanded for no taxation during famine. Patidars and other peasants started popular agitation under the leadership of Sardar Patel along with Narhari Parikh and Mohan Lal Pandya. But movement didn't get proper momentum and to provide further impetus to the movement, Patel invited Gandhi to intervene to settle the issue.

Once Gandhi took up the issue of Kheda and started *Satyagraha*, large following jumped in to join him. The movement became deeper and wider. British government got alarmed and started to workout for a mutual settlement. A commonly agreed formula was worked out. It was decided that rich Patidar peasants would pay the rent and the poorer ones would be granted remission. It gave a great relief to poor peasants; Besides, confiscated properties and cattle were returned to original claimants. This non-violent *Satyagraha* proved successful and its impact was also realised and felt among peasants of neighbouring areas. Commenting on the success of the Kheda Satyagrah, Sujahat Chaudhary observes "The acceptance of peasants' demand brought a new awakening among the peasantry. The struggle brought home with them some kind of semblance of complete emancipation from justice and exploitation."

**Bardoli (1926):** Gandhi's third *Satyagrah* experiment at Bardoli is also related to issues of peasantries. Peasant-dominated community at Bardoli was badly divided into high caste rich white (Ujlapreej) patidars, patel, baniya & brahmins. On the other poor and low-class peasantry (Kalepreej) consisted of weak workers (Durbalhalia) from landless and marginalised farmers. It was almost like Marxian notion of haves and have-nots. Dr. Dhanangare has analysed the relationship between Ujlapareech and Kalepareech of Bardoli and found it very close to medieval, feudal and serf kind of exploitative relationship. The Kalepareech or poor peasantry was already suffering from exploitation. To add to this misery, British government imposed 30% additional tax and this pushed poor men's misery to a pinnacle. The Kheda-like experiment of confiscation of land, house, furniture and cattle was repeated. Due to these multiple miseries peasants became restless and resorted to agitation. But it was quelled with high-handedness.

Sardar Patel again tried to lead the agitation with a team but couldn't succeed. Ultimately, Gandhi was requested by Patel and others to visit Bardoli and sort out the tense situation. Gandhi reached Bardoli in 1926 and started his *Satyagrah* to fight for justice for the peasants of Bardoli. As a result, increased 30% rent was withdrawn, confiscated things were returned and peasants were relieved. The entire credit for this goes to Gandhi and his *Satyagrah*. Thus, Bardoli was the third and the last *Satyagrah* launched by Gandhi for the peasants, other two being Champaran and Kheda.

Besides peasant-centric *Satyagrah*, there were other Gandhian *Satyagrahas* like Quit India Movement (1942) for the larger issue of complete independence and another one was at Noa Khali (1947) for communal harmony and Hindu-Muslim unity, before his assassination. The most positive and fortunate part of Gandhian *Satyagrah* is that most of them and in all the forms proved largely successful.

Due to this innate success, *Satyagrah* discovered by Gandhi gradually became global non-violent weapon of direct action. This legacy is to be carried out by honest and exceptionally upright individual or group of individuals. Some extraordinary leaders from different countries around the globe have pursued and practiced *Satyagraha* and these inter alia, include: Desmond Tutu, Nelson Mandela, Mother Teresa, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Dalai Lama, Ang Su Ki and recently Anna Hazare. Many more unknown little Gandhians might be appropriating *Satyagrah* in their own way and in a given set of situations. This is the most popular way because non-violence also appears to be only silver linen in the decisively violent world full of weapons of mass destruction. It would, at the end, be apt to conclude with Martin Luther King's words, "There are only two alternatives left to humankind- non-violence or non-existence". This shows the utmost importance of non-violence down the line.

## TRUSTEESHIP

The theory of trusteeship is the bedrock of Gandhian economics. It received wider support and appreciation by economists like J.C. Kumarappa and German economic scholar Earnest Schumacher who called Gandhi as people's economist. Trusteeship is essentially a theory and practice of inclusive economics in which both affluent and impoverished can peacefully live together and co-exist. That also in a sacred atmosphere of mutual cooperation and trust. It may certainly prove catalyst in marinating sustainable non-violence in society. Gandhi believed in spiritual superiority of human beings, especially rich landlords and industrialists who are expected to lawfully acquire property and use it for personal purpose and surplus is to be used for others particularly for the plebeians, paupers and the poorest of the poor. Gandhi was a confirmed communitarian and was convinced that all belongs to nature and community. Human beings are trustees only and therefore resources are to be used by community. The owners should collectively use for collective well-being and common use. Neither unlimited ownership of individual has prevailed in capitalist society nor can total ownership of state like communism provide suitable answers. But a middle path or mixture of both can be appropriated because either extreme can bid violence out of discontent in distribution and deprivation. An ideal society is that in which all have easy access to basics like food, health, clothes, housing, education etc. Taxing rich and subsidizing poor may not achieve that ideal objective.

According to Gandhi, trusteeship and trusteeship alone can help in realising non-violent egalitarian and reasonably equitable society.

However, Gandhian idea of trusteeship has been questioned on pragmatic grounds. Gandhi himself admitted that absolute trusteeship is an abstraction and is equally unattainable (Mehta, 2013: 227), but he further adds that it is not altogether utopia. If we strive seriously, a state of some kind of equality can be achieved. Rich people too can be persuaded to come forward as a trustee and sacrifice voluntarily some substantial portion of the prosperity for common good. Gandhi practised this and also got substantial success in it; e.g., Indian capitalists like J.R.D. Tata, G.D. Birla and Jamuna Lal Bajaj responded to Mahatma's call and wilfully agreed to be trustees during Gandhi's time.

Today, in the era of Globalization and even in post-globalization, trusteeship stands reinvented and re-appropriated. Its new incarnation is Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). A large number of celebrated contemporary capitalists like Wipro's owner Azim Premji, Infosys man Narayan Murthy and steel tycoon Lakshmi Mittal have initiated to sponsor many pro-poor schemes and project. So, it would not be axiomatic to conclude that the trusteeship of Gandhi is not altogether achievable. It is certainly attainable and may be with great difficulties and rare number of trustees.

### CONCLUSION

At the end, it can be safely said that Gandhi's invention and experiment of *Satyagrah* proved amazingly successful. As an instrument of non-violent direct social action, it proved catalyst in enlarging base of freedom struggle and to a large extent in achieving independence of India under Mahatma's leadership. Besides, it continues to inspire future generation of national and global leaders to use this peaceful and non-violent method to protest against any act of injustice and unjust piece of laws imposed by howsoever powerful regimes. Gandhi's experiment with *Satyagrah* was so bold and successful that leaders around the world are trying to replicate, reinvent and re-appropriate this method even today and that also at large level. This justifies the universal relevance of Gandhi and his *Satyagraha*.

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