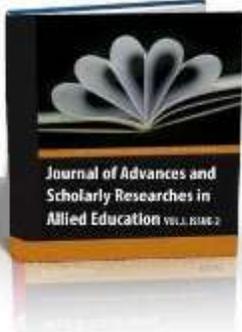


Satyagraha – Contemporary Political Thought



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ABSTRACT

Socrates being compelled to drink hemlock, and the dilemma of Antigone has underscored the problem of obligation and competing and conflicting moral values the universal of sincere citizens to disobey particular law on right a ground that it is repugnant to the moral law to which all persons ought to, and do owe allegiance. In the tradition of Socrates, Antigone and Thoreau, there emerged in India, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, who through his technique of Satyagraha gave mankind an extremely potent instrument for effecting fundamental change – an answer (clothed in traditional and familiar terms) to the agony of the aggrieved.

Today, ahimsa and Satyagraha have become subjects of academic interest, with scholars pondering over their implications, some with serious misgivings viz-a-viz their efficacy in the face of ICBMs and Star Wars, some with fond memories of actual participation and others with cynicism. Satyagraha according to Bondurant is "... a technique more widely used than understood and one which yet called for testing in the field of social and political action. When, in 1948, Mahatma Gandhi died by an assassin's bullet, the experiments in truth' which he had begun, remained far from complete."

In this research paper, it has been my endeavour to analyses the Foundations of Gandhi's Satyagraha, both in relation to contemporary political thought and Indian philosophical tradition, and examine, its relevance to the prevailing situation, showing at the same time how Satyagraha is the culmination of what is sometimes referred to as "Gandhism'. Another fact that it is hoped will emerge from this part is the role of Gandhi in using Hindu tradition, not to revive the spirit of conservatism, but transform these concepts in such a way that only the Hindu terminology remained familiar – but now symbolized a different set of values.

INTRODUCTION

In the Course of his movement against racial discrimination in South Africa in 1906 Gandhi searched for a term to describe his movement. Through his journal, 'Indian Opinion', he offered a small prize to the person who could suggest the best name, i.e., one which could touch the hearts of the common people. His nephew and trusted lieutenant Maganlal Gandhi suggested the expression 'Satyagraha' which literally meant firmness or adamancy in the cause of truth. Mahatma Gandhi later modified this to 'Satyagraha' because "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), and therefore serves at 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..."²

Before he coined this term, Gandhi had used the term 'passive resistance to describe the principle of non-violent action.

Soon he came to realise the inadequacies of the term. Apart from the fact that a foreign name would not go down well the Indian community. this term because it was also employed by another contemporary movement - the Suffragettes, was open to misinterpretation. Indeed, Gandhi was at pains to distinguish between his non-violent resistance and passive resistance'. Passive resistance may arise from hatred, anger or frustration and may thus be motivated by feeling of retribution or retaliation, but not so with Satyagraha which is accompanied with love for the other party and possibly with prayer that he may see reason without coming to personal harm. In passive resistance there is room for the use of violence, should a suitable opportunity present itself; while in Satyagraha the employment of force/violence is ruled out, against an apparently weaker adversary even Besides, Satyagraha is not really passive, as we shall see elsewhere in this Part; it calls for tremendous mental preparation as evidenced from Gandhi's claim that a true Satyagrahi/ must have the sterling qualities of Satya, Asteya, Aparigraha, and Brahmacharya. Passive resistance may be undertaken against persons, while Satyagraha is never directed against any particular person as such. It is directed only against institutions, systems, politics and wrong doings, and not the wrong doer. Finally, passive resistance is merely a technique of fighting wrongs, or a policy resorted to by the unarmed against a superior force, while Satyagraha as seen by Gandhi is matter of faith creed grounded in integrated philosophy of the universe and life and fundamental ethical principles.

PEOPLES' MOVEMENT:

If passivity implies inaction, then there is nothing falsier than calling Gandhi's campaign passive resistance. Romain Rolland at one place remarks "No one, 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'."

Mahatma Gandhi's active nonviolence did not emerge as a corporate action or tool for remedying social wrongs till he happened to be in South Africa and suffered from humiliating racial discrimination. The South Africa to which Gandhi went in 1893 consisted of four units, Natal, the Orange Free State, the Transvaal, and the Cape Colony, with socio-economic conditions of the Natives/coloureds/ Asiatic, being very much the same as it is today, - apartheid compartmentalizing and fragmenting society.

The Indians in South Africa lived in squalid conditions, making money by cunning and acumen, but cramped up in unhygienic and unsanitary settlements. The concept of esprit de corps did not find expression except when they collectively faced some common enemy. The rest of the time the Muslim Indians, as per governmental regulations, were referred to as Arabs' the Parsis as persians' and other Hindus as 'coolies', (irrespective of their occupations). In addition to merely acquiescence to derogatory nomenclatures, the Indians without so much as a whimper of protest were compelled to accept a host of disabilities and indignities perpetrated by their European overlords.

Besides the well to do Indian merchants, much larger population of Indian workers had been brought to South Africa under indenture! - as contract labourers for a period of five years. These workers mostly from Southern India, (speaking Tamil or Telugu) were all illiterate, a depressed community, with practically no rights. It was for obtaining basic human rights for these unfortunate brethren that Gandhi took on the combined might of the European governmental machinery in South Africa. It would not be Wrong state that the barrister to Gandhi, having come to South Africa for a special legal assignment at the instance of one Abdullah Sheth, did not realize the magnitude of the problem of racialism until he was victimized.

From his Autobiography we learn that in Durban, when his employer Abdullah Sheth presented him in court as his attorney, Gandhi had donned a turban which he kept wearing even upon entering the courtroom. The magistrate asked him to remove the headgear, which Gandhi rightly refused to do so, explaining that quite unlike a hat Indian decorum required that a turban is never taken off, indoors or out. This obviously bruised his self-respect, and he soon came to realise that such incidents were common fare so far as Indians in South Africa were concerned.

But the real turning point in Gandhi's life occurred as he was embarking upon a train journey from Durban to Pretoria. At Maritzburg, an intermediate station, and the capital of Natal, white passenger entering the first-class compartment in a which Gandhi was travelling called upon railroad officials to evict the "coolie and send him to the van compartment', where Indians and other coloured were usually accommodated. Gandhi refused to vacate his seat pointing out that since he had purchased a first-class ticket, he had as much right as any white person under similar circumstances to travel in the present compartment. A constable summoned, the Indian barrister was forcibly removed, and unceremoniously dumped along with his baggage on the platform.

Gandhi dwells upon this incident in his Autobiography "It was winter and winter in the higher regions of South Africa is severely cold; So I sat and shivered... I began to think of my duty. Should I fight for my rights or should I go back to India? Or should I go on to Pretoria without minding the insults and return to India after finishing the case? It would be cowardice run back to India without fulfilling my obligation. The hardship to which I was subjected was superficial - only a symptom of the deep disease of colour prejudice. I should try, if possible, to root out the disease and suffer hardships in the process... So, I decided to take the next available train to Pretoria. The distinguished pacifist, Dr. John R. Mott too mentions that in 1938, Gandhi had hinted to him that the aforementioned incident had changed the course of his life and his active nonviolence. (at least in theory if not in practice) began from that day. That the Maritzburg incident was not an isolated accident is supported by evidence to the effect that Gandhi humiliated at least twice again, in rapid succession.

Resolving to carry on the struggle, Gandhi left Maritzburg station enroute to Pretoria and reached Charles-town, where he engaged stagecoach to take him to Johannesburg. At first the coach agent refused him a passage, Gandhi was insistent, relented provided he travelled on the box outside along with the coachman. Gandhi even accepted this insult, but later in the day when the coach agent wanted to sit next to the driver and smoke, he asked Gandhi to sit on the floor board. When Gandhi refused, the agent set to belabour him with kicks and blows in full view of the passengers who entreated him to stop, but to no avail. Once having reached Johannesburg, another problem faced Gandhi - He could not be accommodated in the Grand National Hotel, merely because no Indian could stay in any hotel in that country. These indignities were an eye opener for him. During his spare time (after devoting his fullest energies to Abdullah Sheth's case he studied the conditions of indented labourers and found that it was only another name for slavery, albeit mitigated by many circumstances like time limit, but slavery all the same, in that the individual had no freedom of action, he could not leave his employment without risking criminal proceedings and even imprisonment. The law seldom wished to see brutal European masters punished, and if an Indented labourer complained of brutality the state usually branded him as indisciplined and merely transferred him to another master. sometimes more brutal than the previous one.

Indians in general, both in Transvaal and the Orange Free State were crushed under crippling legislations. They had no votes and could not own land except in special locations', and had to pay a poll tax merely to enter Transvaal. They could not go out at night after 9 o'clock without a special permit, and could not walk on the public footpaths but only on the road or drain. These, and other similarly draconian rules were administered according to the whims of the police who acted with indescribable brutality. These trying circumstances made Gandhi sit up and think. He asked Indian merchants to obliterate all distinctions of religion and race, at least in their own dealings with one another, and form a permanent association to defend the rights of Indians and represent their grievances before the authorities from time to time. It would be important to note that like the Moderates of the Indian National Congress Gandhi too believed that the European rulers were not intrinsically bad or satanic, merely misguided. They had consciences, he claimed, which only needed to be aroused. The basic goodness - man is essentially good by nature-seemed to be his guiding principle, an utopian view of the human psyche, which he stuck to till the bitter end when Godse put three bullets into his chest and extinguished the 'light'.

This association thus was on a small scale, the foundation stone of Gandhi's world mission. The very first task it took upon itself, (which generally has gone unnoticed) was to seek redressal for the Maritzburg incident; he on behalf of the association wrote to the railway authorities pointing out that even under their own rules, Indians were entitled to travel in any class for which they bought a ticket. No great measure of success was achieved in so far as authorities replied that first and second class would henceforth be open to Indians if and only if they were properly dressed" - leaving the interpretation of this phrase entirely to the discretion of the conductor!

Satyagraha as a novel technique of human struggle in South Africa, really began from September 11, 1906. In August the Transvaal government had introduced a bill calling 1906, for the registration of all Indians above the age of eight, under which they were to be finger printed, and obtain certificates, which had to be carried at all times. Failure to do so, led to imprisonment or deportation, or both. Gandhi took the initiative, and before a gathering of three thousand persons at the Imperial Theatre Johannesburg, pledged to disobey the iniquitous law, unto death, entreating everyone present to do the same. Gandhi was jailed for two months in January 11, 1908, in an effort to break his resistance. After release, seeing that conciliatory overtures were not producing the desired results, Gandhi, on August 16, 1908, led a mass meeting of Indian registrants in Johannesburg where some two thousands of them burnt their registration certificates, openly courting imprisonment and tanning the flames of world public opinion. The message was clear, Indians had awakened to their identity and self-respect, they were not prepared to be serfs, branded like cattle; they asked to be treated like human beings that they were, emphasising that different in epidermal pigmentation did not imply differentiation of species.

Once again Gandhi was arrested on October 10, 1908. This time he utilized the forced rest in goal to brush up his

knowledge of Indian scriptures, especially the Bhagavad Gita. It was also around this time that he made another epochal literary discovery -- Thoreau's essay "Civil Disobedience", a fiery piece of writing containing many ideas which Gandhi had inculcated into his movement without knowing they existed elsewhere too. Strengthened by this corroboration of his views, Gandhi carried on his struggle with renewed vigor, calling for a general assurance of "legal or theoretical equality in respect of immigration". He even visited London between July and November 1909 to raise public opinion and succeeded to the extent that Smuts was forced to repeal the objectionable Asiatic Act and permit the immigration of selected Indian into Transvaal - but only Indians who were educated, English speaking professionals of some sort or the other, which really amounted to no concession at all, since Gandhi's endeavour was to rip off the "badge of inferiority" which has remained even to this day.

Still smarting under the onslaught of Gandhi's brand of Satyagraha, Smuts soon tired another salvo; The Supreme Court in Cape colony declared that only Christian marriages could be valid in South Africa. This made all Indian wives' concubines, and their children bastard. Embittered more than ever before, for the first-time women leapt into the fray. full of determination in sacrifice. Satyagraha had come of age. I will not dwell on details of the developments that transpired, which can be quite easily obtained from any good band book on history of Indian Nationalism, but only point out that this stage when Gandhi succeeded in inciting the miners of New Castle to go on strike and fill the jails really marked the zenith of his method of social change. Marx and others had to resort to violence to overthrow the Czarist regime which from all accounts was as inhuman as the South African regime. It is to Gandhi's credit that he pointed out, albiet on a limited scale, how efficacious sheer tenacity and nonviolence could be in the face of armed columns. Smuts finally had to realize, "you can't put twenty thousand Indians into jail". It was clear that he had come to regard Gandhi with respect bordering on affection. This contention is borne out by facts to the effect that Gandhi before leaving South Africa on July 18, 1914, asked Sonya Schlesin and Henry Polak to present Smuts with a pair of sandals he had made in prison. Smuts wore these for twenty-five years and wrote to Gandhi in 1939 "I have worn these sandals for many a summer since then, even though I may feel that I am not worthy to stand in the shoes of so great a man".

Gandhi's Satyagraha in South Africa did produce 'some results in so far as an Indian Relief Bill was passed in July declared Indian marriages (Hindu, Parsi Moslem) legal; it abolished the 3-poll tax on indentured laborer's, cancelling all arrears, and even declared that the iniquitous system of importing indentured laborer's from India would end by 1920. It made provisions so that though Indians could not leave one province for another without permission, those born in South Africa could enter the Cape Colony.

Although the Indian Relief Bill was passed, the vexing questions that often arises is why is South Africa still groaning under the tyranny of apartheid or why did Gandhi's efforts not bear fruit? With reference to the South African Campaign, should Gandhi be labelled a failure or a success? The problem with Gandhi was that he always remained an Indian only. Vincent Sheean says "Two decades in South Africa left him more Indian than before, indeed it was in South Africa that he learned Sanskrit (as much as he ever learnt it), that he memorized the Gita, renounced the world, and became the Mahatma. He went there in a stiff collar and a frock coat, determined to travel first class and live in a style becoming a barrister of the Inner - Temple. He left South Africa determined to revert to houses pun and the life of the Indian poor.

One reason why he did not have a phenomenally high rate of success in South Africa is because during his stay, he lived for and thought only of the Indians, the struggles and travails of others concerning him if and only if they affected lives of his own people. Although he studied the situation and its background, he did nothing concrete to formulate a general overview of South Africa's future, (as he did for India) except as it might concern Indians settled there. I am sure Gandhi never intended to be chauvinistic, but that is the impression anybody gets upon reading standard textbooks on history of the Indian struggle for independence or even his Autobiography where hardly anything exists by way of helping the oppressed Asiatic - (many of whom were not Indians). His activity, its purity unalloyed and unsullied, bore little relation to the general life and welfare of society as a whole. The difference between Gandhi of South Africa and Gandhi of India is simply that the iniquitous conditions in India galvanized him to spearhead a movement culminating in liberation for the motherland and dissolution of the British Empire. While in South Africa the young Gandhi (he was in his twenties) was satisfied with testing out his techniques on a few social changes, that too only with reference to Indians. He had stayed in South Africa a full twenty-one years, during which time there was nothing to prevent him from using the same techniques of Satyagraha Swadeshi etc. to win them their freedom, just as he did for India in twenty-six years.

CONCLUSION:

What emerges from this is the fact that Satyagraha alone was not the weapon which abetted the wresting of independence, but Satyagraha techniques, in conjunction with the prevailing socio-political conditions. It might well that Gandhi is utterly blameless in so far as his victories in South Africa were static, not snowballing into a mass movement,

but more on that (what he ought to have done, and what we can do to complete the task) will be discussed later. Nobody denies that his achievements were magnificent, but will hasten to add that they went no further than the frugal efforts he inspired. After Gandhi left for India in 1914, the Indians, indeed all the other coloureds' in South Africa, gained not an iota more than what he had already won for them. Their plight under the South African regime today with Britain openly bestowing her blessings on apartheid, is identical with that in which Gandhi found them in 1893 even though Nelson Mandela has been released after 25 years of incarceration and Namibia granted independence.

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