



## UNEARTHING THE CONCEPT OF NON-VIOLENCE FROM GANDHIAN CORPUS

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### Abstract

*The present paper chiefly deals with Gandhi's concept of satyagraha and non-violence. Whenever we hear about aggressive outburst in society for social injustice or any other reason, one immediately brings Gandhi amidst the contrast. Gandhi's principles remained much discussed issue among moderates and extremists since the beginning. Merely getting our desired result by any means without consideration of ends is not, according Gandhian ideology, an appropriate way of dealing with socio-political exploitation and injustice. But still many people are of opinion to apply brute force if we may achieve satisfactory result. This contradiction leads us towards the dilemma what Gandhi thinks of satyagraha and how it can be applied in the struggle for truth. Therefore, it is noteworthy also to look at how it can be practiced in extreme cases. The paper elaborates what is the scope of satyagraha in battling with social injustices and discriminations through non-violence and soul-force. Whether widening the range of sympathy and self suffering would be suffice to eradicate all social evils is a recurring question and how much it is probable to get transformation in opponent's heart. Thus, it might be interesting to excavate how Gandhi felt and interpreted the concept of truth and non-violence.*

**Keywords:** Satyagraha, non-violence, soul-force, truth, injustice



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The period of 1850s to 1950s constantly remained the era of different sorts of political movement in Indian history. The ongoing political controversy which resulted in both the World War I and World War II including other political events across the world influenced Indian Political Movement in great depth. It is the time when various political events took place in India to get independence from British Rule. Political leaders adopted different methods to

tackle with these upheavals; some of them were opinionated to raise weapons to get freedom and other believed in non-violent resistance. We all are familiar with the word ‘Satyagraha’ and its association with Gandhian philosophy.<sup>1</sup> But in order to understand the emergence of Satyagraha one needs to refer the history of the two parties: Moderates and Extremist in the context of Indian nationalism specifically after 1850s and the formation of Indian National Congress (INC) in 1885. The aim of these both parties was to get independence from British Rule but their ways were different. Moderates were of opinion to get independence by peaceful agitation, prayers, petitions, persuasions, passive resistance etc. In short, moderates believed in the method of non-violence. Even their perception of ‘Swaraj’ or ‘self rule’ was quite different from extremists. They were against any sort of injustice and inequality whether within the society or outside the society. Thus, for moderates Swaraj meant ‘self rule.’ On the other hand, extremists were radical in their nature. They believed in the means of violent action than non-violence. For them ‘Swaraj’ meant mostly ‘political independence’. Their aim was to first end up British Rule in India and then to think about social injustice and inequality at India level i.e. their first priority was to make British leave India even using brute force. Extremists were of thought that in order to get independence we need to apply counter violence. In response to such ideology, Gandhi writes *Hind Swaraj* where he discusses about the possible outcomes of violent and non-violent responses. In *Hind Swaraj* Gandhi also tries to simplify the misunderstanding and confusion towards the notion of Satyagraha.

The genesis of Satyagraha is traced from the soil of South Africa. During their struggle in South Africa Gandhi gave the name “passive resistance” to their movement but later on he felt that the term “passive resistance” did not carry the real essence of their struggle. Moreover, people conceived the term in considerably wrong sense. They took passive resistance as a “weapon of the weak”, i.e. when they felt all their actions and ways proved insufficient against the opponent; they would take refuge to passive resistance.<sup>2</sup> Gandhi writes “Satyagraha is soul-force pure and simple, and whenever and to whatever extent there is a room for the use of arms or physical force or brute force, there and to that extent is there so much less possibility for soul-force.” (Gandhi 96) Thus, Satyagraha; the soul-force or love-force (as there is no place for hatred in it) is the strongest weapon in the world which can melt the stoutest heart in the world. Gandhi considers Satyagraha as “a dharma-yuddha, in which there are *no secrets to be guarded*, no scope for cunning and *no place for untruth*, comes unsought; and a man of religion is ever ready for it.” (5, emphasis added) As Satyagraha is a struggle for truth there cannot and should not be place for either untruth or secret in it because 1) as it is a battle of truth; it cannot

be fought on the basis of untruth 2) unlike untruth; truth does not need to be veiled 3) and when there is truth there is no need for any sort of secrecy 4) being a Satyagrahi one is strong enough to face any sort of trouble for the sake of truth; for the Satyagrahi knows that the path of Satyagraha is like walking on the edge of sword and s/he would prefer death for truth but not yield to untruth.<sup>3</sup>

It is noteworthy to delineate some basic elements of Satyagraha which are *truth*, *non-violence* and *self-suffering*. These three elements are at heart in Satyagraha which are interconnected with each other. Without proper understanding of it, Satyagraha cannot be initiated. These principles are associated with each other in such a way that the failure of one may result in the failure of rest of two. Truth is an unavoidable part of Satyagraha. For Gandhi truth and god are exchangeable terms.<sup>4</sup> That is why he terms it “truth is god.” (quoted in Bondurant 17) Recall the qualifications of Satyagrahi prescribed by Gandhi. One of them is; a Satyagrahi must have a living faith in god. Here, for Gandhi, truth is god itself i.e. god is the another name of truth that means when he says Satyagrahi must have living faith in god, he means Satyagrahi must have living faith in truth itself. This makes a sense to the complexity that what about those who at the same time are atheist and Satyagrahi (follower of truth) or should we consider/include atheist as a member of Satyagraha. The phrase “truth is god” simplifies this complexity by stating that a person who is atheist can be a part of Satyagraha because though he is denying the existence of *the god of temple*, he is at the same moment a follower of truth. He may have disagreement with the term ‘god’ but his living faith in truth makes him Satyagrahi as truth is the other name of god. But the question still arises that who decides what the Absolute Truth is as there are various relative truths, he writes “what appears to be truth to the one may appear to be error to the other.” (17) Gandhi made a clean breast of not knowing the Absolute Truth but he claimed that relative truth is an initial step to reach at the Absolute Truth, he writes “as long as I have not realized this Absolute Truth so long must I hold my relative truth as I have conceived it. That relative truth must meanwhile be my beacon, my shield and buckler.” (19) But it should be taken into consideration that one should not apply Satyagraha on the basis of individual opinion and personal faith because there are possibilities in changing opinions and faith in due course of time. For instance, if you consider something as a wrong than that must be accepted by society. If society does not consider or find it as wrong and you consider it as wrong and apply Satyagraha against it than it would be called coercion. In order to understand this complexity, one should get familiarity with the concept of non-violence prescribed by Gandhi.

Generally people think that the term ‘non-violence’ suggests the notion of negation. Of course it means not to harm anybody but it is not the full expression of the term. For Gandhi non-violence means not only not to apply physical force against anyone but not to harm anyone by evil thoughts, by lying, by wishing ill to other and not to harbor any hatred also. It is the state of love, returning good to evil doer and helping him to be a good man, self-suffering for evil deeds of opponent. But, by this Gandhi does not mean to help the evil doer in his activity or to keep one’s self passive but rather by refusing him without doing any harm to him. Thus, it is more than mere the notion of negation. By the term, Gandhi does not mean to keep one’s self in vacuum; it is not at all the state of inactiveness instead it is “action based on the refusal to do harm.” (23) Thus, it is more active than anything because follower of non-violence has to be very conscious about not to harm anyone and at the same time not to keep oneself passive where there is injustice. In order to conceive the complexity of relative truth, which we described earlier, one needs to grasp Gandhi’s notion of the relationship between *means and ends* which passes through the way of non-violence.<sup>5</sup> As we have seen love is the other name of non-violence and the road to the truth goes through love; as Gandhi writes “to me Truth is God and there is no way to find Truth except the way of non-violence,” truth and non-violence are inseparable parts of Satyagraha. (18) Thus, in order to reach to *end* result i.e. Absolute Truth, one should use non-violence i.e. love as means.

We need to be very careful what does Gandhi mean by non-violence. Is it a sort of cowardice? Or does it mean not to do anything even if the tyrant is making harm to our honour? Or does it mean not to apply body-force even in extreme cases even if one is going into danger; for instance a child into fire? The answer is obviously ‘No’. It depends upon your *intension*. If there is no selfishness or personal greed behind applying body-force than that cannot be come under the category of violence. Again, there is a vast difference between cowardice and violence. Gandhi writes “I do believe that where there is only a choice between cowardice and violence, I would advise violence.” (28) For instance, if you surrender yourself on the name of non-violence just because you know that the tyrant is mightier than you and is capable to kill you then that would be called cowardice which can never be a characteristic of satyagraha. On the other hand Gandhi says that if you are in the battle field and is well aware that your opponent is mightier than you and will destroy you and still you fight bravely; that is far better than cowardice and it would not be called violence. This act would not be called violence because you knew that you would be killed and still fought bravely for your self-respect as Gandhi writes says “Passive resistance cannot proceed a step without fearlessness” (108).<sup>6</sup> But

Gandhi goes far beyond this, he says that if you are capable enough to destroy or kill the opponent but instead of doing this you forgive him and do not do any harm to him that is the real meaning of non-violence. This is possible only when you love your opponent and do not wish any ill to him.

As we have seen, love is the other name of non-violence, love never claims anything but gives, it always suffers instead of doing harm to tyrant and it has fellow-feeling for others rather than revenge. Thus, without self-suffering non-violence cannot be performed. No matter how deep the opponent hurts a Satyagrahi but he never offers counter violence. He will suffer for the wrong deeds of others because he loves the opponent. As non-violence carries the element of love, self-suffering also needs courage. A Satyagrahi must be free from any sort of fear. Gandhi asserts that it is through the self-suffering one can melt the stoutest heart of other. Self-suffering or sacrifice not a least meaning submission to wrong doer.

After getting familiarity with the basic elements of Satyagraha, a question is still lurking inside that why should we not achieve our aim by using violence. After all we apply Satyagraha to damn wrong deeds then why should we get it in certain ways, not using brute force. It is crucial here to draw an outline between the outcome or result achieved from violent and non-violent act. Gandhi offers a very solid reason why one should not use body-force to eradicate evils. His is a futuristic vision. According to Gandhi, the result which we achieve through violence lasts as long as threat is there as he writes in *Hind Swaraj* “what is granted under fear can be retained only so long as the fear lasts.” (91) What he means is that when you get anything by using body-force from somebody, the opponent will remain silent as far as he is afraid of you or as far as he is weak. Whenever he will get an opportunity, he would apply counter violence against you. Thus, there is no end result and that is why Gandhi denies the way of violence because he knows that violence begets violence. According to Gandhi, anything which is gained through violence cannot last permanently. Gandhi writes:

To use brute-force, to use gunpowder, is contrary to passive resistance, for it means that we want our opponent to do by force that which we desire but he does not. And if such a use of force is justifiable, surely he is entitled to do likewise by us. And so we should never come to an agreement. (104)

Thus, if we are to achieve everlasting result, violence is not the right means.

Then what is the right means to deal with such things? Gandhi offers the means of Satyagraha to reach the end result, the everlasting result. He says that Satyagraha never intent to conquer other but of changing heart of people. The result which we achieve through

Satyagraha, lasts forever because Satyagraha never aims to take anything using physical force instead it converts the heart of opponent through love-force or soul-force which is the strength of Satyagraha as Gandhi writes “it is in an insistence on truth which dynamically expressed means love; and by the law of love we are required not to return hatred for hatred, violence for violence but to return good for evil.” (139) There is broad range of sympathy in soul force. Again, it is significant to note that Satyagraha can only be applied against our nearest and dearest. So there is not a least possibility of counter-violence if the result is achieved by Satyagraha. Gandhi writes:

Passive resistance is an all-sided sword, it can be used anyhow; it blesses him who uses it and him against whom it is used. Without drawing a drop of blood it produces far-reaching results. It never rusts and cannot be stolen. (105)

There is no place for resentment for opponent but self-suffering and the worthiest way of achieving this is by “not to bear the slightest ill will against them, but to conquer them by their sweetness, gentleness and spirit of love.” (155)

We have seen the three elements of Satyagraha and outcome on the basis of violent and non-violent action. Now it is time to discuss through which techniques we can pursue these elements while performing Satyagraha. Civil disobedience, noncooperation, and fasting are three of the most important techniques of Satyagraha. In simple terms, civil disobedience is a peaceful refusal to governmental unjust and unfair commands, laws, demands etc without committing any sort of violence. While refusing such acts people peacefully show their dissatisfaction and let the government know that they will not obey unjust laws and for that if they are imprisoned, they will do it without any sort of violent act. According to Gandhi, “disobedience to be civil must be sincere, respectful, restrained, never defiant, must be based upon some well-understood principle, must not be capricious and, above all, must have no ill-will or hatred behind.” (165) Non cooperation means not to support or to participate government to run its administration. It is a protest against unwilling evil acts imposed by government. There should not be a least place for either violence or hatred in it. It should be based on love and its objective should not be to punish or to hurt opponent but instead Satyagrahi should make the opponent feel that they are not his enemy but friends and they are doing it for the good-will of all. It should not also produce any evil result. It is important to understand that while ongoing process of non-cooperation, people will not cooperate the government to pay taxes, providing agricultural products etc but it does not mean they will starve the opponent. They will provide only that amount of products through which their

livelihood can run. Fasting is ultimate technique of Satyagraha. According to Gandhi it cannot be performed by everybody. One should not imitate other to perform it. If one is lacking enough living faith in God than one should not apply it. Again, there should not be place for self greed, revenge, personal bias behind fasting. The most important of all is that there must be legitimate and all-beneficiary reason behind fasting.

### Conclusion

Thus, Gandhi's perception of non-violence carries more other virtues with it. He minutely observes actions and reactions of warlike attitudes and prescribes ways to eradicate such circumstances. His theory of satyagraha is totally based on permanent solution of enmity and quarrels. He does not believe in situational solution which can be achieved by using brute force but everlasting one which can only be gained through soul-force. Still there are many critics of Gandhi who refused his theory of soul-force and stated that violence is not separable element from human nature. Again, one cannot have endurance of injustice and violence applied by opponents. Many feminists criticised Gandhi by stating that if passive resistance can convert the opponent than they have been doing the same for centuries but still patriarchal violence did not reduce a bit. There are so many other theories which reject Gandhi's theory of satyagraha as a weapon to overpower ills and evils.

### Cite Your Article as

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<sup>1</sup> When Gandhi initiated movement against inequality, social injustice and others, he had a basic framework of its principles but the idea was not there what this movement was to be called. That is why, in *Indian Opinion* a small prize was announced for one who would designate a name to this struggle which can carry the essence of it. Shri Maganlal Gandhi suggested the word “*sadagraha*” meaning “firmness in good cause”. Gandhi felt the word did not represent the whole idea hence he renamed it as “*Satyagraha*” in which ‘truth’ (*satya*) implies love, and ‘firmness’ (*agraha*) as a synonym for force.

<sup>2</sup> For detailed understanding of the difference between “*Satyagraha*” and “passive resistance” read Gandhi's *Satyagraha in South Africa* (Chapter XIII).

<sup>3</sup> To see the qualifications of Satyagrahi, read *The Mind of Mahatma Gandhi* (Chapter VI: Satyagraha).

<sup>4</sup> “The word ‘Satya’ (Truth) is derived from ‘Sat’ which means ‘being’. And nothing is or exists in reality except truth.” (quoted in Bondurant 17).

<sup>5</sup> For more explanation of the connection between *means and ends*, read Gandhi’s *Hind Swaraj* (Chapter 16: Brute Force) and Bondurant’s *Conquest of Violence* (II Satyagraha: Its Basic Precepts).

<sup>6</sup> Here the term ‘passive resistance’ stands for the equivalence of Gujarati term ‘Satyagraha’.

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