

Satyagraha : Mahatma Gandhi

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Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi affectionately called as 'Mahatma' and father of Indian nation was not academic philosopher but he has stressed some fundamental ideas for the regeneration of man and the reconstruction of society and politics. His philosophy is based on the concept of the unity and existence.

In 1919, the British government came up with Rowlatt act which took away the right to free speech and expression of Indian revolutionaries and nationalists. The act empowered the British Executives such as Police to arrest or detain anyone with a warrant. Thus, judicial procedure was almost suspended, again which took away the right to justice.

Gandhi decided to start a movement on pan India basis against Rowlatt act. His demand was from the government to withdraw this act.

Gandhi established a Satyagraha Sabha with Indian National Congress for this purpose. Satyagraha was not originally coined by Gandhiji. Before him, the idea of Satyagraha was found in religious books like the Upanisads, the Ramayana, the Mahabharata and many others. It was also practised by Indians as well as westerners like Prahlad. Raja Harishchandra, Socrates, Plato, Ashoka and others. Harishchandra and Prahlad were his ideals as they suffered a lot to uphold truth without slightest ill will towards others. He was equally influenced by the life of Jesus Christ and Socrates who were Gandhi holds, the pestles on Satyagraha. Gandhi was also influenced by Tolstoy, Ruskin. The philosophical spirit behind Satyagraha was not Gandhi's exclusive innovation. But his merit lies in explaining the concept with some originality and widely applying it in various spheres to establish justice in society. Satyagraha theory influenced Nelson Mandela's struggle in South Africa under Martin Luther King, Juniors and James Baul's campaigns during the civil right movement in the United States and many other social justice and similar movements. Gandhi for

the first time applied the Satyagraha in South Africa to stop the discrimination of the white class against the black. In India he applied it to solve the local problems of Champaran.

Satyagraha is a compound of the Sanskrit words Satya and Agraha. Satya means truth and Agraha means clinging or holding fast. In other words Satyagraha means clinging or holding fast to truth. Satyagraha means persistence in truth. Satyagraha is the force of truth which never yields to untruth. Truth express itself, governs and conquers the untruth in all its forms. It is the cardinal virtue for mankind to adhere to it firmly for the removal of evil or untruth.

The world rests upon the bedrock of Satya or truth. Asatya means untruth, also means non-existent and satya or truth also means that which is.

For Gandhiji, Satyagraha went far beyond mere passive resistance and became strength in practising non-violent methods. In his words,

“Truth implies love and firmness engenders and therefore serves as a synonym for force.

Gandhi distinguishes Satyagraha from passive resistance, while passive resistance does not carry law for the opponent, Satyagraha is based on love and it abandons any form of hatred. A satyagrahi never applied physical forces under any situation. Passive resistance is more pragmatic whereas satyagraha is more idealistic in their prospects to oppose or resist injustice.

Gandhi suggests some moral vows to be observed by every satyagrahi. These vows are - Ahimsa, satya, Asteya, Brahmacharya and Aparigraha. A satyagrahi must accept truth and non-violence is the highest ideals of life and never resort to any deed contrary to them. A satyagrahi must practice Brahmacharya that is abstention from sexual passion and must have control over his desires. Asteya means non-stealing but in the Gandhian framework it means not possessing things disproportionate to one's material requirement. This is somewhat similar to Aparigraha or non-possession. That is without giving up lust for possession one cannot renounce selfishness. As long as one remains selfish one cannot be a satyagrahi. These moral ideals have been propounded in Jainism and Yoga system of Indian philosophy. Gandhi accepted these ideals for a satyagrahi.

Besides these moral ideals he also takes fearlessness as another prerequisite for a satyagrahi.

Discipline for Satyagraha

Besides these vows, Gandhi also proposed many measure of discipline for making Satyagraha a powerful method.

(i) Humility - stressing the need for humility, Gandhi himself wrote-

“Truth without humility would be an arrogant caricature. He who wants to practise truth knows how hard it is. The world may applaud his so-called triumphs, little does the world know his falls. A truthful man is a chastened being. He has need to be humble. A man who wants to be the whole world including one who calls himself his enemy knows how impossible it is to do so in his own strength. He must be as mere dust before he can understand the elements of Ahimsa.”

Gandhi was of the opinion that one who cultivates truth, non-violences, celibacy and other vows must be humble. An humility one is able to perceive truth been in the midst of dangers. It helps to avoid any indifference to the source of all life.

The life of a satyagrahi must be one of unbroken cycle of sacrifice. For this the person must live not for the satisfaction of the senses but only for the service of God. His life then becomes a symbol of sacrifice.

A satyagrahi must be a person of prayer. Prayer means “an earnest desire to be filled with the spirit of truth. This desire should be prevent all the twenty four hours. But our souls are too dull to have this awareness day and night. Therefore we offer prayer for a short time in the hope that a time, will come when all our conduct will be one continuously sustained prayer. Meditation is a form of personal prayer which every religion subscribes to. For Gandhi meditation consisted in closing the eyes and ears of the mind to all else except the object of one’s devotion.”

Fasting is another means for sustaining the morale of the satyagrahi. Fasts can be undertaken only in obedience to the inner will. Gandhi said that it requires complete self purification.

Satyagraha does not depend upon physical or brute force. It is based on moral force, the forces of truth and justice, the force of self-purification and self-suffering, love and service, courage and discipline.

Gandhi says, purity of means is based upon the recognition of the supremacy of moral law. He believed that evil must be resisted and eliminated but resisted through means that are inconsonance with morality, not with hate, violence.

Gandhi emphasises that a satyagrahi must be a believer in God. A satyagrahi has no other stay but God and one who has any other stay or depends on any other help cannot offer satyagraha, because he may be a passive resister a non co-operator but he cannot be a true satyagrahi.

FORMS OF SATYAGRAHA :

Satyagraha does not mean simply non co-operation or civil disobedience for the resistance of injustice. Gandhi’s contribution to Satyagraha lies in the fact that he has brought it on a social plane. Throughout his life Gandhi tried it on the mass scale in different forms. There are –Negotiation, Arbitration, Agitation and demonstration, Economic boycott, non co-operation, Civil disobedience, Direct action, fasting.

Gandhi’s philosophy of means and ends : Gandhi states that it is means rather than ends that provide the standard of morality. Although we can choose our ends, we donot have much control over it. The only thing that is completely with our control is the means with which we approach our various ends. It is not the end that we can work with but only means. The progress towards the goal will be in exact proportion to the purity of the means, Gandhi gave satya the highest importance and said that Ahimsa is the means to reach the satya which is the end. The pursuit of satya leads to the recognition oft he needs for Ahimsa to a point where we hold to Ahimsa as the immediate, tangible part of the ultimate truth. Gandhi sometimes also equated satya with Ahimsa. They are like two sides of a coin. It is impossible to disentangle and separate them. But at other times, Gandhi clearly distinguished between the two.

Gandhi emphasized mostly on Ahimsa for it is without our reach but he constantly maintained that satya is superior to Ahimsa, if a comparison must be instituted between inseparable concepts. He infact distinguished between positive and negative meanings of Ahimsa and satya,

but regarded Ahimsa negative in relation to satya. This because of his identification of satya with reality—the derivation of satya from sat.

Thus, Satyagraha became the great movement in the pursuit of truth in the midst of oppression and structural violence. It helped in the removal of segregation laws in South Africa and was independence for India in a unique way unknown to the world. Satyagraha is a movement based on truth, soul forces and aimed at changing the opponents heart through self-suffering. It was based on love and was completely free from any desire to defeat or degrade the opponent. There was no room for untruth in it. Satyagraha is the most powerful and permanent weapon to solve social, political, economic as well as religious problems.

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