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## Gandhi in theory and practice: An analysis of Satyagraha philosophy

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### Abstract

Satyagraha can be seen as a non-violent weapon against the arbitrary administration. A commitment to lead one's life only on the path followed by 'Truth.' Satyagraha believes in the philosophy of firmness; due to this, it compares violence with the synonym of fear. Gandhi strongly believes that by combining Satya (Truth) with Ahinsa (Non-Violence), you can bring the world to its feet.

**Keywords:** Satyagraha, civil disobedience, swadeshi, Swaraj, non-violence

### Introduction

The concept of Satyagraha is comprehensive. Linking it with a mere nationalist movement in India can be seen as a parochial perspective of this intense philosophy. It is an ethical and moral philosophy to live life truthfully. Satyagraha can be seen as a non-violent weapon against the arbitrary administration. A commitment to lead one's life only on the path followed by 'Truth.' Satyagraha believes in the philosophy of firmness; due to this, it compares violence with the synonym of fear. In other words, arbitrary administration uses violence to subdue the voices of the masses because it always fears losing its power and control. The credit for introducing this non-violent weapon among the Indian masses goes to Mahatma Gandhi. He was a beacon of light for the Indian freedom struggle. Ravinder Kumar described the nationalist movement before Gandhi as "a movement of representing the classes" that excluded the role of the masses. There were numerous writings about Gandhi, but we are still not able to get the real essence of his thought process. If we analyze this writing, we can find appreciation as well as criticism. The arguing point should be that there is no glorification of any personality, but while reading any thought process, we must maintain a balance between text and context. Gandhi always emphasized more on actions rather than words. Similarly, when analyzing Gandhi's writings, we must strike a balance between the context. Gandhi also mentioned in his writings that, "What you do not get from my conduct, you will never get from my words" (1958, Vol 73, pp.145) <sup>[14]</sup>. In that sense, we can observe that he was a man of actions rather than words. His simplicity makes him uncommon among the common masses. Gandhi is also considered a postmodern thinker by critiquing and rejecting modern civilization and presenting a civilizational alternative to it. (Rudolph and Rudolph, 2006) <sup>[10]</sup> In his essay, *Hind Swaraj* elaborated on the negative impact of modern civilization on humanity.

The concept of satyagraha given by Gandhi was a unique experiment, as it gave hope to the Indian masses against the British atrocities. Some scholars explained it as a utopian or idealistic experiment, but the practices of Gandhi on Indian soil also present the authenticity of this philosophy. Gandhi practiced satyagraha not only for the Britishers but also for the upliftment of Indian society. Whether it was an issue of temple entry or untouchability, from communal animosity to social unity, Gandhi presented satyagraha as a panacea for all types of evils. The philosophy of satyagraha is based on the commitment and conviction of the common people towards any type of atrocities. It believes in the transformation of the thought process of others with your firmness towards truth. Some people take satyagraha as a mere peaceful demonstration or passive resistance towards arbitrary administration, but if we analyze its core, then we can realize it is more than passive resistance. In other words, the essence of satyagraha can be observed when one becomes a true satyagrahi in his/her life.

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## Theory of Satyagraha

The word Satyagraha is a combination of two Sanskrit words: 'Satya' and 'Agraha.' The literal meaning of 'Satyagraha' denotes 'Following the Path of Truth' and in a philosophical sense it could be explained as 'believing in the philosophy of Non-Violence.' It is appreciated by different streams because it offers a solution to conflict without the use of physical force or violence. Gandhi used this concept in the personal and public domains. In other words, one should lead his/her personal life by following the path of truth, and in the public domain, it could be seen as a tool for social and political transformation in society. He used this theory in South Africa in 1906 against the racial discrimination faced by fellow Indians. Gandhi stated in his writings that this concept of satyagraha was originally established as a self-purification practice. Initially, it was taken as 'passive resistance', and later, Gandhi realized that denoting this self-purification practice as passive resistance would constrain its ability to work with the masses. According to Gandhi, the term 'Sadagraha' was given by Maganlal Gandhi, and to make this practice clearer, Gandhi changed this term to 'Satyagraha'. (Gandhi Sevagram Ashram) Gandhi compared 'God with Truth and Truth with God' which paved the path for self-self-introspection.

Gandhi strongly believes that by combining Satya (Truth) with Ahinsa (Non-Violence), you can bring the world to its feet. In his words, Truth implies love, and firmness engenders and therefore serves as a synonym for force. "I thus began to call the Indian movement satyagraha the force which is born of truth and love or non-violence and gave up the use of the phrase 'passive resistance,' in connection with it, so much so that even in English writing we often avoided it and used instead the word 'satyagraha' itself or some other equivalent English phrase.

The method of Satyagraha can be classified into four categories (Rao, 2018) <sup>[1]</sup>.

- a) Purificatory
- b) Forms on Non-Cooperation
- c) Methods of Civil Disobedience
- d) The Constructive program

R.R. Diwakar believes that the word satyagraha is now loaded with so much meaning that it amounts to a philosophy, but it is a practical philosophy of life, of action, of self and co-realization. (R.K Diwarkar, 1969).

Gandhi's notion of Satyagraha can be understood by its threefold characteristics;

- **Perseverance:** Perseverance could be explained as continued efforts to do or achieve something despite difficulties and opposition. Similarly, the conception of Satyagraha is a synonym of courage. A courageous man can follow the path of truth despite the utmost hurdles. This courage or firmness cannot be expected while practicing passive resistance. Gandhi, in his book *Hindu Swaraj*, explained that 'passive resistance cannot proceed a step without fearlessness.' (Gandhi, 1938, pp.74)
- **Endurance:** Endurance can be seen as self-suffering or the ability to continue doing something painful or difficult for a long period without complaining. Gandhi believed that patience could be seen as a measuring stick for a satyagrahi. It shows the level of commitment to the truth. In other words, Gandhi sees self-suffering and sacrifice as the path of service to others.

- **Reverence:** There should be a feeling of great respect for the opponent. This does not mean cowardice, but before presenting the alternative perspective to the opponent, there is a need to understand their views.

In other words, the practice of satyagraha can be observed in three stages: 1) The first stage is known as persuasion through reason, 2) The second stage is known as persuasion through suffering 3) The last stage is known as non-cooperation or civil disobedience. (Thomas Varkey, 2014) <sup>[15]</sup>. The last stage of non-cooperation or civil disobedience is used by satyagrahi as a non-violent tool when neither persuasion through reason nor suffering succeeds in winning over the opponent. Gandhi's whole philosophy of satyagraha evolved during his lifetime. He was a karma yogi par excellence. He preached noble ideas while practicing them, and that is how he taught the application of the great principles of truth, love, and non-violence to politics, economic questions, and other social fields. (R.R Diwakar 1969) <sup>[4]</sup>.

## Satyagraha in Action

In the theory of satyagraha, means and ends were seen as inseparable. According to Gandhi, it means deciding the fate of the end. If we use violence to achieve our end, then it never gives us a non-violent and sustainable outcome. He rejected the view that non-violence can be seen as cowardly. In this regard, he stated, "I do believe that, where there is only a choice between cowardice and violence, I would advise violence.... I would rather have India resort to arms to defend her honor than that she should, in a cowardly manner, become or remain a helpless witness to her dishonor.... But I believe that nonviolence is infinitely superior to violence, forgiveness is more manly than punishment." (Prabhu, 1945) <sup>[13]</sup>.

**a) Peasant Satyagraha:** Gandhi's philosophy of satyagraha in action could be seen with the peasant class. After South Africa, he used satyagraha in practice at Champaran and Kheda.

- **Champaran Satyagraha:** Champaran Satyagraha was started in 1917 by Gandhi with peasants against the arbitrary behavior of European land tenure-holders. The European tenure-holders got hold of sizable cultivatable land from landholders. In this whole process, the position of the tenants becomes vulnerable. The prevailing 'Tinkathia' system compelled the tenants to grow indigo at three Kathia per bigha of land. Peasants were also forced to grow indigo on cultivable land, which impacted other forms of production. The negative aspect of this system was that the land price was fixed, but not the price of crop production. Besides these, cultivators also faced other types of social and economic exploitation. Although the situation of Champaran's peasants was like other peasants of India, it was Gandhi who made this place remarkable in Indian history. On the invitation from the local congress leader Raj Kumar Shukla, Gandhi went to Champaran to apply first time his philosophy of satyagraha in practice in Indian land. It was his effort that made the British government introduce the Champaran Agrarian Act in 1917 and abolish the Tinkathia system in Champaran. Without using any type of violence, with the courage of truth, Gandhi was able to ignite the spirit

of satyagraha among the Indian masses, particularly the peasants. Judith Brown analyzed the leadership of Gandhi by stating that 'Gandhi was able to leave aside the stalwart politicians of that time, and with his local appearance, he was able to connect with the masses.'

- **Kheda Satyagraha:** Kheda Satyagraha was started after the success of the satyagraha in Champaran, Bihar. The peasants of Gujarat in Kheda demanded relief from revenue from the administration. Natural calamities caused the crop of peasants, along with they were suffering from high revenue. The arrival of the plague at that time increased the hardship of tenants in Gujarat. Movement in Kheda was initially ignited by the intervention of two local leaders, Mohanlal Kamaeshwar Pandya and Shankarlal Parikh, who started pleading with the administration for the peasants. They invited Gandhi to Kheda during his visit to the Champaran Satyagraha. Finally, in 1918, Gandhi was able to join them in Kheda. Gandhi started the civil disobedience movement by taking a pledge with the peasants that they would not pay the revenue to the administration in the interest of their self-respect. Due to the need for Indians in the First World War, the Central Authorities ordered local administration not to confiscate lands. According to Judith Brown, 'Gandhi was not happy with the triumph of Kheda due to the eruption of violence in some places.' Despite the backdrop of the Kheda satyagraha, Gandhi was able to shine as the mass leader among the locals.

#### b) Temple Entry and Critique of Caste

Removal of untouchability was the utmost aim of Satyagraha through Gandhi. The practice of untouchability was based on inhuman violence that can be rectified by the practice of satyagraha. The practice of untouchability was a stain on Indian society. Many reformers tried to remove this stain, but the conservative mindset of society made this stain a strident practice. The untouchables were the subaltern voices of the society that were always muted in the noise of religious dignity. Although these untouchables were Hindu by religion, they were still excluded from entering Hindu Temples. Gandhi believed that before demanding rights for themselves, upper-caste Hindus should try to protect the rights of the lower-caste Hindus. The stigma of being untouchable was so intense that it made the excluded class situation more vulnerable. Gandhi approached upper-class Hindus to come forward and make them realize themselves as equal parts of the society. The right of entry into the temple was the main step towards equality for the lower strata of society. Gandhi's involvement with the temple-entry movement also presents his belief in the Hindu religious-cultural fold, which excludes any outside inference<sup>[1]</sup>. For Example, during the temple-entry movement by Gandhi, one of his close associates, Abdur Rahim from Calcutta, suggested including Muslim and Christian participation. Gandhi refuted this suggestion by stating that 'I would draw the line sharply at the natural religious boundary... for me this is a purely religious and moral question.

Gandhi was against the issue of untouchability from his young age, and this could be observed from his writings as

well as his daily practices. In one of the stories, Gandhi himself explained that he felt in an uncomfortable position when his parents used to force him to follow this notion of purity and pollution. However, Gandhi believed in the Caste system, but the acceptability of this system would be based on the social stratification of work. Even Gandhi presented his argument that every work has its significance in society.

#### • Vaikom Satyagraha

This satyagraha was started for the entrance of untouchables in the Vaikom Mahadev Temple in the Travancore region. This satyagraha was started on March 30, 1924, by Govinda Panikkar, Bahuleyan, and Kunjappu with khadi dress and Gandhian practices. Soon they were arrested by the police. Gandhi arrived at Vaikom in March 1925. The Vaikom Satyagraha was withdrawn on November 30, 1925, with the release of prisoners. In 1936, the Maharaja of Travancore removed the age ban on the entry of temples by signing the Temple Entry Proclamation. With this satyagraha, the Indian National Congress also started participating in social reform activities led by Gandhi.

#### c) Social Harmony and Communal Unity

Gandhi was in distress due to the communal tension between Hindus and Muslims. Gandhi organized many constructive programs that can enhance social harmony in society. He believes in giving equal reverence to all religions. His philosophy of satyagraha is also comprised of the characteristics of reverence. He emphasizes giving equal respect to all. We can observe the influence of the Bhagwat Gita, the Quran, and the New Testament on Gandhi.

"We could not save cows by killing Muslims. We should act only through love. Thus, alone shall we succeed. So long as we do not have unshakable faith in Truth, Love, and Non-Violence, we can make no progress."

"When we both are inspired by the spirit of sacrifice, when both try to do their duty towards one another instead of pressing their rights, then and then only would the long-standing differences between the two communities cease. Each must respect the other's religion and must refrain from even secretly thinking ill of the other. We must politely dissuade members of other communities from indulging in bad language against one another. Only a serious endeavor in this direction can remove the estrangement between us." (Bharati Mazumdar, 2003)<sup>[11]</sup>.

Gandhi tried to maintain social harmony between Hindus and Muslims on many occasions. During the Khilafat movement, Gandhi tried to bring the two communities together. In one of his speeches, he mentioned 'When it is said that the Hindus should join the Muslims regarding the khilafat questions, some people express surprise, but I say that if Hindus and Muslims are brothers, they must share one another's sorrow. There can be but only one question, and it is whether Muslims are in the right and their cause is just. If it is legitimate, then every child of this soil must sympathize with them as a matter of duty. We must not say that the question of Khilafat is exclusively for the Muslims to grieve over. No, it belongs to all Indians.' (Bharati Mazumdar, 2003)<sup>[11]</sup>.

#### The Limits of Satyagraha

- Gandhi's concept of Satyagraha is more idealistic than rational. For example, we cannot resolve all types of conflict by touching the opponent's Heart.

<sup>1</sup> Ravi K Mishra (2019). 'Gandhi and Hinduism' in Indian Journal of Public Administration.

- Gandhi's perspective on Satyagraha represents his excessive optimism towards the philosophy. He thought that Satyagraha never failed and was effective in all situations.
- The essence of this philosophy's 'Truth' is a relative concept that can be seen as ambiguous.
- The practice of satyagraha was not common in every place; it was an evolving concept that evolved during a course of time.

The philosophy of satyagraha involves truth, non-violence, and self-suffering. Truth is the essence of this philosophy of satyagraha; Gandhi compares truth with God. Gandhi believes that if we follow the path of truth, then we can see God 'face to face.' The truth is known for its pious nature, which can be realized only by non-violence and self-suffering. Gandhi believed that love and compassion should be the essence of society. Evil cannot be cured by evil; hatred cannot be conquered by hatred. He admired the idea of 'Ahimsa' through which you can bring the world to its feet. In other words, Satyagraha could be seen as a moral weapon against violence. According to some scholars, the word 'satyagraha' is an evolving concept, which was developed during the experiments done by Gandhi in South Africa and India.

### Summary

- The concept of Satyagraha cannot be summarized by linking it to the nationalist movement in India. It is an ethical and moral philosophy to live life truthfully. Satyagraha can be seen as a non-violent weapon against the arbitrary administration.
- Perseverance could be explained as continued efforts to do or achieve something despite difficulties and opposition. Similarly, the conception of Satyagraha is a synonym of courage. A courageous man can follow the path of truth despite the utmost hurdles.
- Endurance can be seen as self-suffering or the ability to continue doing something painful or difficult for a long period without complaining. Gandhi believed that patience could be seen as a measuring stick for a satyagrahi.
- There should be a feeling of great respect for the opponent. This does not mean cowardice, but before presenting the alternative perspective to the opponent, there is a need to understand their views.
- Without using any violence with the courage of truth, Gandhi ignited the spirit of satyagraha among the Indian masses, particularly the peasants.
- Gandhi was not happy with the triumph of Kheda due to the eruption of violence in some places.' Despite the backdrop of the Kheda satyagraha, Gandhi was able to shine as the mass leader among the locals.
- The stigma of being untouchable was so intense that it made the excluded class situation more vulnerable. Gandhi approached upper-class Hindus to come forward and make them realize themselves as equal parts of the society. The right of entry into the temple was the main step towards equality for the lower strata of society.
- His philosophy of satyagraha is also comprised of the characteristics of reverence. He emphasizes giving equal respect to all. We can observe the influence of the

Bhagwat Gita, the Quran, and the New Testament on Gandhi.

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