

Philosophy of Non-Violent Resistance and the Birth of *Satyagraha* – A Human Rights Perspective¹

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“...all men are born equal. All have the same soul as any other”³.

— Mahatma Gandhi

I. Introduction:

Mahatma Gandhi believed that all Human Rights belong to every human being by virtue of their being born equal. These rights are inherent and inalienable. Human rights are essential for the better development of a human being. Therefore, there is a need to ensure that each individual is encouraged to prosper if we want to make this entire world a better place to live in. Mahatma Gandhi is a symbol of peace and human rights. He was one of those leaders who created eternal impressions on the memories of mankind. After arriving in Durban, South Africa, Gandhi found himself treated as a member of an inferior race⁴. He was horrified at the widespread denial of civil liberties and political rights to Indian immigrants to South Africa. Since his adulthood in South Africa he committed himself to the cause of human rights and civil liberties. Being an Indian, he could hardly find any difference between the situation in British India and British South Africa. After gaining popularity in South Africa, he returned to his native land, India to begin a new chapter of non-violent resistance *Satyagraha* (Sanskrit for “truth and firmness”) as a fight against British rule in India. He had a very simple soul and believed in truth and non-violence (*ahimsa*). He gave the world a reason to think about and follow the most effective mode of gaining liberty from foreign rule with his most effective weapon of *Satyagraha*. If one observes today’s India or the world for that matter, its people are indulged in incidents such as human right abuses, usurping of rights of minorities and religious intolerance and extremism, racial discrimination, etc. Therefore, in today’s world of hatred, inequality, discrimination, human degradation and erosion of human values, there

1 A Paper presented at The International Seminar on Making of Mahatma: M. K. Gandhi in South Africa, Organised by Centre of Gandhian Studies, Shivaji University, Kolhapur, Maharashtra, India, on 10th, 11th and 12th March, 2011.

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3 A reference may be made to the incidence in the railway at Durban in South Africa, when he was thrown out of the train by a officer since he was traveling in the first class compartment with the first Class ticket.

4 *The collected works of Mahatma Gandhi, Speech at Tanjore*, 16 Sept., 1927 (CD-ROM) Vol. 40; 2 Sept. 1927, p. 121.

is a need to recapitulate and apply the teachings of the Mahatma, who was the true believer of protection of human rights. He threw himself into the struggle for elementary rights for Indians. The present paper is an attempt to have a brief glance over Mahatma Gandhi's contribution towards implementation of human rights through his weapon called *Satyagraha*.

II. Gandhi in South Africa:

According to Gandhi there were two misconceptions among the South African Indian people, viz., (a) they believed that their tormenter (British) was very powerful whereas they themselves were helpless and (b) they also believed that they were incapable of any action against such atrocities. Gandhi decided to put off these set of beliefs because helplessness and incapacity for action were out of his definition of an individual. He was very well aware that toughest challenges could be met if one had sufficient faith in himself. This moral courage developed in Gandhi when he went through a series of humiliating experiences which left him feeling deprived of all human dignity. These incidents helped him strengthen himself as a person with determination to fight for the human right to be treated decently. To achieve this he took up a few causes in South Africa where he was able to secure basic rights including dignity for his people.

To Gandhi, one of the biggest crimes against humanity was to treat a person as a means to some selfish end, which was what the British Government in South Africa had done to Indians⁵. There was a total abuse of person's integrity and dignity. Some of the legislations⁶ passed by the British Government in South Africa were meant to humiliate the Indian population which denied some of the basic rights as that of liberty and equality to South African Indians. This was completely unacceptable to Gandhi. He believed that the rule of law and civil liberties, which reflected humanitarian concerns, should apply uniformly to all sections of people, rich or poor or high or low people, irrespective of creed, colour, racial or religious prejudices. Gandhi's main aim was to put an end to such discrimination and degradation of South African Indians. With this objective,

5 South African British Government used take Indian people to South Africa as labourers for a specific purpose for few days. Once the work is done, they used to force them to go back to India by imposing some heavy taxes incase if they try to stay and settle in South Africa.

6 Some of the laws passed by the South African British include such as Asia Law Amendment Ordinance under which a certificate was to be issued to every Indian by the Registrar of Asiatics in order to stay in South Africa. There was also a rule which wanted Indians to carry a certificate just like dogs carried their Collars called as "Dog's Collar". There was one hardest blow received by the South African Indians when the Cape Supreme Court gave the judgment that all marriages not held according to Christian rites were illegal. This implied illegitimate status of Hindu, Muslim and Paris married women as well as their children. This was utter disregard of cultural and traditional values of non-Christians.

Satyagraha was adopted by Gandhi. The movement commenced with a demand for the abolishment of the Transvaal Act 2 of 1907. This act was repealed. Similarly the Pound 3 tax had also been repealed and its attendant misery and insult was destroyed. The bulk of Indian marriages that had never previously received the sanction of South African law came to be legally recognized. But at the same time the most important development that took place in South Africa was the generation of a new fighting spirit that had resulted from the hardships and sufferings among the Indians⁷.

III. Birth of *Satyagraha*:

It is the birth of *Satyagraha* that completely changed the course of the history. The word *Satyagraha* owes its origin to the term "*Sadagraha*" coined by Maganlal Gandhi in response to a call by Gandhi through *Indian Opinion*. Later on Gandhi modified the said word to '*Satyagraha*'. '*Satya*' means Truth and '*Agraha*' means determination to reach truth. Literally speaking, *Satyagraha* means 'holding fast to truth' or 'insistence on truth'⁸. *Satyagraha* also means that the person on the other side is also entitled to the same kind of respect opportunity; trust and credibility that the first person would like to give to himself. This is impossible to do unless one has a broad mind and heart towards other's feelings which may include his foes too. To achieve this end, Gandhi's *Satyagraha* was the best option.

III. I. The Salient Features of *Satyagraha*:

Philosophically speaking *Satyagraha* encompasses most of the Gandhian concepts only. Gandhi considered that there could be three most important features of his concept of *Satyagraha*, viz., Truth, Non-violence and Self-suffering. The detailed discussion on each of these features would show how they are co-related to each other:

III. I. I. Truth: Gandhi considered truth to be the God. Both his doctrines of non-violence (*ahimsa*) and *Satyagraha* were based on his attachment to truth. He had an abiding faith in the unfailing power of non-violence and the ultimate victory of truth⁹. It is this faith which helped Gandhi to evolve his peaceful weapon of *Satyagraha*, which continues to maintain its relevance till today. With his approach to truth and non-violence Gandhi had equal regards for all human beings including the enemies and gave them dignity and right to be trusted. This has proved that he did recognize

7 Bakshi S.R., 1988, *Gandhi and Indians* in South Africa, New Delhi, Antique Publications, p.336.

8 Mehra Shweta, 2006, *Human Rights A Gandhian Perspective*, Sarup & Sons, New Delhi-110002, p.72.

9 Ibid, p.75.

and approve equal human rights for all the human beings.

III. I. II. Non-Violence: Gandhi believed that human rights demand that one person must respect the dignity of other person. He appeals to the human kind to invoke the spirit of non-violence (*ahimsa*) as a part of human right as to prevent us from infringing upon other's human dignity. If we do not care of other's respect along with our own, we wouldn't be a true human being. Since time immemorial, people are trying to establish a society free of violence, but till today it has not been so successful. Gandhi tried to put this idea of establishing a non-violent society into practice. People still misunderstand Gandhi's approach of non-violence as to be restricted to the context of action only. But that was absolutely not the intention of Gandhi's ideology of *ahimsa*. His principle of *ahimsa* is violated by hurt, by evil thought, by undue haste, by lying, by hatred, by wishing ill of somebody¹⁰. Therefore, it is wrong to consider that Gandhi was trying to legitimize some acts of violence by his approach of *ahimsa*. He always condemned violence as he believed that violence only brought hatred and destruction of human property and life.

III. I. III. Self-suffering: According to Gandhi, one of the highest respects paid to another person is to allow taking suffering unto one's own self rather than to inflict it on another. Therefore, with the help of these non-violent weapons of *Satyagraha* and *ahimsa*, Gandhi hoped to win his battle against his opponents¹¹. Gandhi himself endured physical and mental torture from his opponent with patience and calmness. For him, the efficiency of self-suffering was an instrument of social change. He evolved a method of struggle that would shun away violence and malice at once.

III. II. *Satyagraha* - A Spiritual Self-Discipline:

Gandhi believed in using the strength of the soul as a weapon against brutal force, in order to convert the enemy to one's cause. He had realized that it is only spiritual self-discipline that would lead to true independence. He had the ability to raise the consciousness of the people without raising his voice. This only force of soul through which a *Satyagrahi* wins his opponents' hearts is love¹². The three things which are necessary in order to make use of this force of love are self-discipline, self-control and self-purification. It is true that he always spoke about non-violence, but he never ignored occasional use of violence

10 The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi; *The Doctrine of the Sword*, (CD-ROM), Vol. 21, 1 July 1920-21 Nov. 1920, p. 134.

11 Mehra Shweta, op.cit. no.5, p.77.

12 Ibid., p.79.

totally. He once said, "I do believe that where there is only a choice between cowardice and violence, I would advise violence ... But I believe that non-violence is infinitely superior to violence, forgiveness is more manly than punishment"¹³.

III. III. Kinds of *Satyagraha*:

Gandhi always made use of the essential elements of *Satyagraha* such as *Hartal* (strike), peaceful protesting, boycott, civil disobedience, etc. These elements were carefully used by Gandhi with a sole purpose of recognition and establishment of human rights. There are two main types of *Satyagrahas* frequently used by Gandhi through which we can determine the recognition of human rights elements are:

III. III. I. Non-Cooperation Movement (1919 – 21):

Every political party survives only if its subjects co-operate with itself. If there is no public support the government can become powerless. This had been already realized by Gandhi and he started using it first against the British Government in South Africa and then he continued using it in India with a great success. Gandhi's non-cooperation movement included his following actions¹⁴:

- a) Surrender of all titles of honour and honorary offices.
- b) Non-participation in government loans.
- c) Boycott of law courts.
- d) Boycott of government schools and colleges.
- e) Boycott of legislative councils.
- f) Withdrawal from government services.
- g) Withdrawal of men from the army and police.

While dealing with these movements, Gandhi had also taken up certain human rights issues such as:

- a) He instilled in the people a feeling of self-dignity and convinced them to understand that the real power is with them and if they stop co-operating with the British rulers, they will lose the strength and hence it will automatically cease to be their ruler.
- b) He insisted on fighting the British rule with unity amongst all the religious communities so that there would be respect for all religious beliefs.
- c) He insisted that the movement to be continued without resorting to violence so that there was no infringement upon human rights of others.

One of the greatest achievements of this movement was that it had brought about Hindu-Muslim unity.

¹³ *The collected works of Mahatma Gandhi, op. cit.*, No. 2, p.134.

¹⁴ Mehra Shweta, *op.cit.* no.5, p.83.

III. III. II. Civil Disobedience (1930 – 31):

Civil disobedience means willful disobedience against unjust laws passed by a ruling state. Gandhi believed that if a state passes any unjust laws, it is the duty of every citizen to break such rules in order to protect their dignity. This act is called as civil disobedience. Gandhi's civil disobedience in South Africa included opposing laws like Pound 3 tax, Asia Law amendment Ordinance, the Transvaal Act, 1907, etc. and then he continued the same back in India after his return¹⁵. It was through this movement that Gandhi brought to the forefront certain human rights issues like-

1. He convinced people from different religions that they can differ with the government if it passes any unjust laws.
2. He also convinced the people that if any state law is against the spirit of their conscience, they had a right not to obey those laws.
3. Demanding laws which created discrimination and those which had hurt the religious and cultural sentiments of the South African Indians were opposed by Gandhi and at the same time when he returned to India also he opposed many unjust laws as well.

IV. Conclusion:

The importance of the values of truth and non-violence enshrined by Mahatma Gandhi decades ago stand true even today. Respect for various human rights can be brought about only if we respect and appreciate each other's human rights. A true democracy, according to Mahatma Gandhi, is one where concerns of every citizen especially, the poor, women, children and the disadvantaged groups are duly addressed by the nation. As India's economic growth is improving day-by-day, it is equally important that its citizens work together in unity to ensure that the progress made is truly inclusive and that even weaker and downtrodden community gets equal opportunity to share in development process. The philosophy of *Satyagraha* and non-violence is also been held in high esteem by the world community, which lead to the United Nations adopting Gandhi's birthday on the 2nd of October, as the 'International Day of Non-Violence'. This proves that the timeless message of the 'Father of the Nation' continues to prevail over many

15 A reference may be made to Salt *Satyagraha* on 12th March, 1930 as a part of civil disobedience. In which he along with a group of followers walked from Sabarmati Ashram to Dandi and with a handful of salt broke the Salt Law. The Salt *Satyagraha* had a tremendous impact on the Indian masses. It was successful in drawing the attention of the world towards the plight of India. The movement was so powerful that the British Government had to take severe repressive measures but was still unable to quell the nationalist sentiments. It was only the impending participation of Gandhi in the Round Table Conference that could suspend the movement. Ibid, p.85.

cultures that will last for a long time to come. Gandhi is revered for his extraordinary love for truth and non-violence. He believed in honesty and fair dealings in his profession. He never meant to achieve freedom or political rights in isolation of human rights. Rather his aim was to achieve human rights through political rights. He always dreamt of equal rights for all and without prejudice to caste, creed, religion, race, or sex. The modern world in general and Modern India in particular owes a lot to the ideas and concepts propounded by Mahatma Gandhi. His resolutions formed the fertile ground on which the seeds of civil liberties and rights were germinated.