

SATYĀGRAHA AND ITS PRACTICAL RELEVANCE

BHUPENDRA CHANDRA DAS

The concept of *Satyāgraha* has been stated in the Upaniṣads, the Mahābhārata, the Gitā etc. Even before Gandhi, it was also practiced by Indians and Western thinkers. Some Western thinkers believe that the word *Satyāgraha* is derived from New Testament. According to some others, Gandhi took this concept from the writings of Tolstoy. But actually Gandhi got this idea of *Satyāgraha* neither from Christ nor from Tolstoy, but from the Vaiṣṇavism.

The word '*Satyāgraha*' is originally derived from Sanskrit word. It is a compound word. It is formed of *satya* which means truth and *āgraha* which means clinging, insistence and adherence. That is to say, *Satyāgraha* means clinging to truth, adherence to truth. Gandhi defines the term '*Satyāgraha*' in the following way: "Truth implies love and firmness (*āgraha*) engenders therefore serves as a synonym for force. I thus began to call the Indian movement of *Satyāgraha*, i.e., the force which is born of truth and love or non-violence and gave up the phrase passive resistance in connection with it."¹

According to Gandhi, *Satyāgraha* is 'firmness in a good cause'.² He asserted in *Young India* that *Satyāgraha* was a new name for "the law of self-suffering"³. *Satyāgraha* implies a ceaseless and relentless pursuit of truth in which there is no place of hatred, ill-will. It does not mean passivity, weakness, helplessness. It is a way of life or an attitude of mind which depends on the firm desire for maintaining right causes, correcting wrongs. *Satyāgraha* indicates the power of human soul and it is the maintenance of the glory of the human conscience. This conscience ensures the non-violent battle for the victory of truth.⁴

Satyāgraha is the way for the practice of *ahimsā*. It is the technique of *ahimsa* to which he gives the name of *Satyāgraha*, which is translated in English as Truth-force sometimes as Soul-force or Love-force. According to Gandhi, truth is God, and *Satyāgraha* is 'Āgraha' of 'Satya' and thus it means holding fast to truth. It, therefore, demands a deep sincerity and a vigorous love for truth. Therefore it is God's way or it is the way of Truth. It follows that *Satyāgraha* is essentially based on love. *Satyāgraha* seems to have religious pursuit, according to Gandhi. There is one God behind everything and being, and so the same God resides in every one of us. This is

the fundamental thing of love and if one has no basic love for human being, it is not possible for him to practice the technique of *Satyāgraha* or the technique of *ahimsā*.

According to Gandhi, a belief in rebirth is another religious presupposition of *Satyāgraha*. *Satyāgraha* claims selfless and sincere pursuit of truth without having any consideration of any gain or fruit. But one will be able to suffer the technique of *Satyāgraha* if he somehow believes that he will get the results of his good work, if not in this life, in subsequent life. In '*Speeches and Writings*' he says, "With the knowledge that the soul survives the body, he (*Satyāgrahi*) is not impatient to see the triumph of truth in the present body".⁵ Gandhi points out that if we start resisting evil with evil, violence with violence, anger with anger, then we are only adding fuel to fire. The most effective force against these evils can be the one which would force them to evaporate and *Satyāgraha* can be the only way.

Satyāgraha creates conditions for the anger of the opponent to spend itself out. So it is very much effective for evaporating evils. It provides the opponent a chance to see and realize his mistake and to correct his ways accordingly. It depends on the firm belief that there is an element of essential goodness in every man because man contains divinity within himself. We find evils because this element is pushed to the background or it is clouded by passion, hatred and anger. Therefore we have to awaken this aspect of man. When this element of goodness is aroused, the individual himself will realize the wrong that he had been performing. *Satyāgraha* has been described as a method of conversion rather than a method of coercion. Coercion implies violence. The aim of *Satyāgraha* is not to embarrass the wrong-doer. *Satyāgraha* does not appeal to fear or threats. It appeals to the heart and to the good sense of the wrong-doer. Its intention is to bring about a change of heart. Another presupposition of *Satyāgraha* is that there are no 'enemies' or 'opponents', but there are only wrong-doers. A wrong-doer will also develop some kind of a resistance if he is physically forced to be otherwise, but if he is made to see and realize the wrong, he will himself repent and change.

So the essence of *Satyāgraha* is love. We must have love for the opponent also. The success of *Satyāgraha* is not possible if there is hatred or distrust of any kind. We should have a trust in the goodness of the opponent. We should love him thinking really that he is also one of us. We must also respect the opponent. According to the doctrine of *Satyāgraha* we should persuade the wrong-doer to give

up his wrong and this can be done very effectively when we approach him with respect and love. A wrong-doer cannot find his wrong at once; he will take time to win over his anger and hatred. The *Satyāgrahi* must wait patiently for the good sense of the wrong-doer to be aroused or realization of his fault.

According to some, *Satyāgraha* means passive resistance, but actually it does not mean this because there are difference between *Satyāgraha* and Passive Resistance. These are as follows: (1) *Satyāgraha* is not a passive state, but it is more active than violence. (2) There is an element of force or violence in case of passive resistance. In it, there remains the scope for the use of arms on particular occasions. In *Satyāgraha*, violence is completely not allowed even in the case of very adverse situation. (3) In Passive Resistance, there is always present an idea of harassing the other party. But in *Satyāgraha*, there is no idea of injuring the opponent.⁶ (4) In Passive Resistance laws are disobeyed and this implies that passive resistance does not have respect for law. But in *Satyāgraha*, there is a very great respect for the higher law, i.e. the law of Truth and God. Any process of *Satyāgraha* is governed by this type of respect. (5) There is no scope for love in passive resistance. In *Satyāgraha*, there is no scope for hatred. A feeling of love is the basis of *Satyāgraha*. (6) There is an element of coercion in passive resistance because it tends to compel the other party to do a thing. The *Satyāgrahi* prays to the mind and heart of men with the only aim of bringing about a transformation. To liquidate antagonism, not the antagonist is the fundamental thing of *Satyāgraha*. In this way, *Satyāgraha* depends on the conviction that through love, *ahimsā* and conscious suffering, the forces of evil can be neutralized, for this is the Divine way, the way of Truth, the way of God. So it is universal.

According to Gandhi, a *Satyāgrahi* must have some qualities, which are as follows: A *Satyāgrahi* must be honest, sincere, open-minded, loving, firm, fearless, selfless, simple, truthful, non-violent and punctual. Humanity is one of the chief virtues of a *Satyāgrahi*. A *Satyāgrahi* should do the practice of fasting. He should follow some of the essential virtues of life, such as, *asteya* (non-stealing), *aparigraha* (contentment), *brahmacarya* (celibacy) etc. He must also have a living faith in God and it is a most fundamental requirement of *Satyāgrahi*. There are different kinds of *Satyāgraha*. Some of the main kinds of *Satyāgraha* which have been followed by Gandhi or his followers (even sometimes by the Marxists) have been mentioned

below: (i) Negotiation (ii) Arbitration (iii) Agitation (iv) Economic Boycott (v) Non-cooperation (vi) Civil Disobedience (vii) Direct Action (viii) Fasting. Some other popular measures have been added to this list in due course: (ix) Strike (x) Picketing (xi) *Dharnā* (xii) Non-payment of Taxes etc.

All these methods would fail if the intention is not pure and if these are not applied with a spirit of love. The example of non-payment of taxes may produce quickest possible result or the possibility of a ready response which is a fatal temptation. This non-payment will not be non-violence but it will be criminal and fraught with the most possibility of violence. In like manner, the present form of *Dharnā* is condemned and rejected by him. In the cases like non-payment of taxes and '*Dharnā*', *Satyāgraha*, according to Gandhi, becomes *Durāgraha*. The ethical and religious requirements of *Satyāgraha* are very strict and rigorous and any deviation would distort the whole process. It should be based on sincerity of purpose and on an essential love for the opponent.

Gandhi's favorite forms of *Satyāgraha* are perhaps Disobedience, Non-cooperation, Direct Action and Fasting. Disobedience is regarded as a protest against unjust laws. Non-cooperation is actually a cleansing process. It affects the *Satyāgrahi* more than the opponent and is able to give the *Satyāgrahi* a power to face evil and to endure suffering. Non-cooperation is a kind of refusal on the part of the exploited to be exploited. The exploited is also to be blamed for being exploited because he has allowed himself to be exploited. It is refusal of the exploited to lie down under the forces of exploitation. The example of this kind of *Satyāgraha* is '*Swadeshi*'. Direct Action is an open and mass rebellion, but essentially non-violent. The example of this type of *Satyāgraha* was the Quit India call given in 1942. To Gandhi, fasting is the most effective form of *Satyāgraha* because its objective is self-purification and it can mend even the excessively firmness of the opponent with the help of honestly choosing the path of death. But this should be considered as last weapon of the *Satyāgrahi*. This weapon should be used at the last moment, only when other means have failed to pursue the other party. Fasting forces the opponent to see reason and concentrates the energy of the soul of the *Satyāgrahi*. In this context, Gandhi, in his *Young India*, says, "It is my firm belief that the strength of the soul grows in proportion as you subdue the flesh."⁷ and "My religion teaches me that whenever there is distress which one cannot remove, one must fast and pray."⁸

According to Gandhi, *Satyāgraha* is a non-violent method of action and consists in being non-violent towards other people and in undergoing suffering oneself, for the purpose of opposing or remedying injustice. Here the question is, is *Satyāgraha* as so understood, actually a non-violent method of action? In response to this question, it can be stated that when, as a part of *Satyāgraha*, I undergo suffering myself, then I injure myself. I injure me by myself, as when I go on fast, or I injure myself by allowing others to injure me, by allowing others as if to act in my place or on my behalf to injure me; in this latter case I injure myself by proxy, so to say. I injure myself by proxy when, for example, let my adversary assault or even kill me. As a result, I would like to maintain that when, as a part of *Satyāgraha*, I undergo suffering myself, and then I perform a violent action in relation to myself. So Gandhi's definition of non-violence should be as follows: Non-violence, in the negative sense, consists in non-injury to others as well as to one's own self. Non-violence, in the positive sense consists in love or charity towards others and towards one's own self.⁹

In fact, so far Gandhian theory is concerned, *Satyāgraha* is a scientific method. The capability and utility of *Satyāgraha* are found not only in getting political freedom but against social injustice, exploitation, social evils and oppression. It should be noted that *Satyāgraha* is not a weapon of the weak but it is a weapon of the strong and it claims for a disciplined civilized society and culture for the human being all over the world. Social, economic, political and religious problems can be solved with the help of *Satyāgraha* which is the most powerful and permanent weapon. It is applicable even today against any perpetrated evil in the society.

Notes and References:

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5. M. K. Gandhi, *Speeches and Writings*, Madras, 1934, p. 504.
6. N. K. Bose, *Selections from Gandhi*, p. 221.
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