

## Satyagraha and Human Nature: Gandhi's concept and its relevance in the present day world

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**Abstract:** *The present world has been enmeshed with the so many ideologies and beliefs and people are showing or expressing their loyalties in many a varied forms. Satyagraha is not an utopian talk but has proved a practical proposition in life and the world. It is an attempt of awaken and develop soul-force or love-force in man and to organize the spiritual energy in the direction of the trial of peace, security and happiness which mankind has been seeking for so long. Satyagraha is 'holding on to truth' or 'insistence on truth'. Satyagraha also means the way of life of one who holds steadfastly to God and dedicates oneself to Him. There are three basic components of the concept of Satyagraha as understood by Gandhi viz. truth, non-violence and self suffering. He understood Satyagraha as the weapon of the strongest and not of the weak. The Satyagrahi should be ready to give up his life rather than take the opponent's life.*

*Gandhi came to understand that man is by nature, unlike other creations, rational. He has a part of God in him. For Gandhi, the ultimate purpose of human existence is his moral development and this would not be possible without the truth. There can be no moral development in the absence of the truth. Therefore, man came to be irrevocably concerned with Satyagraha. These considerations show co-relation between Gandhi's understanding of human nature and his insistence on the practice of Satyagraha. Gandhi's weapon of satyagraha is a boon. It can be used even by a single individual who has developed sufficient moral power by his own purity of thought and conduct. Satyagraha can be used by all people at all times against all evils and exploitation without any harm and evil effects.*

**Keywords:** *Truth; Soul-force; God; Spiritian and Society.*

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### I. INTRODUCTION

M.K. Gandhi had gone to England to study law and become a barrister. After nearly four years he completed his course in London and returned to India. He started practice in Rajkot, but did not get much success. Later he was invited to go to South Africa by a rich Muslim merchant to plead for his case. On the day after his arrival in South Africa, Gandhi attended the magistrate's court of Durban wearing a turban. When he was told to remove his turban by the magistrate, rather than doing so, he left the court room. A few days later he took a train to Pretoria. Although he had a first class ticket he was kicked out from the first class compartment. But he refused to go to the other compartment and the train moved away.

This humiliating incident fully showed him the social position of his fellow Indians in South Africa. On 11 September, 1906, a mass meeting of the Indians was held at Johannesburg. About three thousand Indians attended the meeting and they took an oath to resist the draft of Asiatic Law Amendment ordinance, 1906, which was dubbed as the 'Black Act'. According to this ordinance the Transvaal Government imposed each and every Indian of the Transvaal including man, woman and child of eight years or above to be registered freshly with the Registrar of the Asiatics and take out a certificate. (Ashe, 196897) This marked the occasion when the Indians forged passive resistance weapons for the first time. This also marked the beginning of a peaceful movement which Gandhi was later to give the name Satyagraha.

#### Objectives of the work:

The present paper is an attempt

- (i) to find out the meaning of the concept of satyagraha.
- (ii) to find out the correlation between satyagraha and human nature.
- (iii) to find out the relevance of satyagraha in the present day world.

#### Methodology of the present work:

The present research paper is a descriptive and an analytical one for satyagraha and human nature and its relevance in the present world.

### **Meaning and concept of satyagraha:**

The literal meaning of Satyagraha is 'holding on to truth' or 'insistence on truth'. And as Gandhi understood spiritual unity of men as the highest truth, it also implies acceptance of it, loving all and suffering for all. That is why Gandhi identified it with 'love-force' or 'soul-force'. (Dhawan 1951:126) As Gandhi understood truth as God, Satyagraha also means the way of life of one who holds steadfastly to God and dedicates oneself to Him. He also accepted non-violence or love as the only way to attain truth. As such, for him, Satyagraha also means relentless pursuit of truthful ends by non-violent means. It is the vindication not by infliction of suffering on the opponent but one's own self. (Jayabala 1999:461) In other words, there are three basic components of the concept of Satyagraha as understood by Gandhi viz. truth, non-violence and self suffering.

Ram Rattan and Ruchi Tyagi wrote: "Satyagraha, means acting according to Truth. It means fighting untruth. Satyagraha is a war and in a war nobody can be passive. Both the parties are to be active and vigilant. The only difference between traditional warfare and Gandhi's mode of fighting is that the former is based on violence while the latter is devoid of violence." (Rattan and Tyagi:260) They defined Satyagraha "as an attitude of mind and a way of life based on the firm (Agrah) desire of vindicating just causes (truth), correcting wrongs and converting wrong-doers (criminals), by voluntary self-suffering and by patient and active use of the means which are not only non-violent, but also intrinsically just." (Rattan and Tyagi 1999:261-62) Prof. Verma has also observed that Satyagraha "signifies a genuine, intense and sincere quest for truth, which is God. It means an assertion of the power of the human soul against political and economic domination. Satyagraha is the vindication of the glory of the human conscience. Conscience does not stand for abstract inwardness or withdrawal from other world. Conscience reinforces the battle for victory of the social good. Satyagraha is based on the invincible belief in the ultimate triumph of divine and right." (Varma1959:185-186)

Gandhi, therefore, encouraged the Satyagrahis not to be dejected when they received failure in the beginning of their endeavors, but to have faith in God. He wrote: "Satyagrahis must not be dejected. They dare not give way to despair... God will never fail them, if they have faith in Him ... And victory will surely come out of their sufferings provided they are pure. God tries his votaries through and through, but never beyond endurance. He gives them strength enough to go through the ordeal. He prescribes for them." (CWMG Vol.30:266) This also implies the fact that many obstacles may block the path of a Satyagrahi but he is to be prepared for that, and he must have the faith that if his means are pure then ultimately victory will be his.

Gandhi did not conceive Satyagraha "as a weapon merely of the weak. It is the strongest force that one can possibly imagine or wish for and is a complete substitution for the brute force." (CWMG Vol.42:39) He understood Satyagraha as the weapon of the strongest and not of the weak. This is due to the fact that a Satyagrahi has to have the capacity to 'combine the greatest love with the greatest opposition to wrong'. For him it also implies vindication of Truth not by infliction of suffering on the opponent, but on one's self. Therefore, Satyagraha can only be the weapon of the strongest and not of the weak. It may also be noted that for Gandhi Satyagraha is his last weapon against injustice, and to be used after having exhausted all other possibilities of persuasion and conciliation. (Narayan 1995:12) Therefore, the three basic concepts of Satyagraha to Gandhi are truth, non-violence and self-suffering.

### **Objectives of satyagraha:**

Satyagraha aims at giving a moral basis to politics, fighting injustice and tyranny, settling social, political and economic disputes, establishing effective democracy, laying the foundations of new social order based on justice and equality, paving the way for world peace, etc. The Satyagrahi fights with a view to bilateral and not unilateral victory and aims at the integration and not suppression of legitimate differences. (Rai 2000: 48-49)

A Satyagrahi will always try to overcome evil by good, anger by love, untruth by truth and violence by non-violence. (Gandhi 1929:263-64) The Satyagrahi, a man conscious of the working of his soul force should treat his opponent as a member of his family. He should adopt domestic method which makes the resolution of the conflict easy by removing differences. (Rai 2000: 49)

The idea underlying in the Satyagraha is to convert the wrongdoer, to awaken the sense of justice and to show also that without the co-operation, direct or indirect of the wronged, the wrongdoer cannot do the wrong intended by him. If the people in either case are not ready to suffer for their causes, no outside help in the shape of Satyagraha can possibly bring true deliverance. (Gandhi 1926:269)

In Satyagraha, the opponent is not an enemy to be destroyed or defeated. He is a person who has the right to co-exist with the Satyagrahi. He is, therefore, to be helped to become a better man for himself and his society. A Satyagrahi is, therefore, required to enter into reasoning and discussion with his opponent in order to awaken the sense of justice in him. In case the Satyagrahi fails to persuade him through reason and discussion, he is to undertake self-suffering instead of inflicting suffering on his opponent. The Satyagrahi should be ready to give up his life rather than take the opponent's life. (Rai 2000: 49)

In the practical field, the purpose of Satyagraha is to substitute willing obedience for forced obedience and voluntary co-operation for involuntary co-operation. This is made possible by trying to understand each other's view point and to accept or reject it willingly and voluntarily. (Rattan and Tyagi 1999:264-65)

### **Satyagraha and human nature:**

Gandhi's advocacy of Satyagraha and his understanding of human nature are closely related. The concept of Satyagraha is born in the mind of Gandhi out of his understanding of human nature and how it could be trained and molded. According to Gandhi, man is a mixture of good and evil. The difference is only of a degree. He also believed in the animal ancestry of man. He said: "We were, perhaps, all originally brutes. I am prepared to believe that we have become men by a slow process of evolution from the brute." (Gandhi 1938:65)

Gandhi came to understand that man is by nature, unlike other creations, rational. He has a part of God in him which he talked of as "God who dwells in us." (Gandhi 1938:65) Again, he said: "I believe in human nature. Everyone has a soul and can exercise soul-force as much as I. You can see the soul-force in me because I have ever kept my soul wide-awake by humbly entreating it, or beating a drum or dancing before it. Yours may not be equally awake, but we are all equal in our innate capacities." (CWMG Vol.30:280) This spiritual presence of God in man makes him possible to know about good or evil and also possible to be transformed from evil to good by means of love or non-violence. In other words, man is by nature, responsive to the advances of love. He has an unflinching positive responsiveness to the approach of love. As such the evil in him can be converted to good through gentle persuasion, the very tenet of Satyagraha. There is no exception to this nature of man; even the tyrants do not lack their feeling of humanity as proved by their affection towards their family members.

Man as understood by Gandhi is concerned with Truth. Because for him God is within all men in the form of the soul. But Gandhi has also understood God as truth. And, just as man is irrevocably concerned with the soul or God within him, so also he is irrevocably concerned with truth.

Besides, for Gandhi, the ultimate purpose of human existence is his moral development. However, this will not be possible if we shun the truth. There can be no moral development, that of the individual as well as that of the society, in the absence of the truth. Therefore, man came to be irrevocably concerned with Satyagraha. These considerations further show that co-relation between Gandhi's understanding of human nature and his insistence on the practice of Satyagraha. In fact, Gandhi once told Vallabhai Patel in a discussion on 6 September 1932: "The root of Satyagraha lies in faith in human nature, in the faith that it will be possible to melt the cruelest of men." (CWMG Vol.57:438) He believed human nature as capable of believing "in truth and non-violence as his creed and therefore have faith in the inherent goodness of human nature which he expects to evoke by his truth and love expressed through his suffering." (CWMG Vol.57:438)

### **Relevance of satyagraha in the present day world:**

Gandhi's ideas and philosophy in the present world have imperative importance in the violence prone societies. As far as contemporary world is concerned it is as cumbersome as the life of anyone becomes. The reason being the contemporary world has become a very difficult place to live because of conflicts borne out of religious, ethnic and sectarian strife and terrorism of different tendencies. The present world has been enmeshed with the so many ideologies and beliefs and people are showing or expressing their loyalties in many a varied forms. In this scenario the relevance of ideas of Gandhi in the present world is presented here.

Social reconstruction requires removal of exploitation in all its form through justice, equality and goodness. For this social reconstruction the philosophy of satyagraha, as propounded by Gandhi, is of eternal relevance. Any compromise with exploitation is against human dignity and resistance of evils of exploitation in the duty of the good souls of the society.

Gandhi's satyagraha in theory and practice stands for the truth of human unity and ceaseless fights against the social malady of division, discord and disparity. Its truth of human unity is simply a relative truth and is the manifestation of the absolute Unity or "spiritual oneness" which is God. So, with truth as God always begins the satyagrahaic fight against the social malaise of any description. Truth-God invigorator tones up and sustains the fighters to the end.

Satyagraha build social containing individuals with its imperatives of simple living, bread-labour, non-possession and constructive programme. These imperatives of satyagraha are of utmost relevance in the existing set up of things for the emergence of a non-exploitative society. Satyagraha guides individuals to follow a simple life with fewer wants because multiplication of wants in life means unnecessary involvement in complications and exploitative business.

Satyagraha is not an utopian talk but has proved a practical proposition in life and the world. It is an attempt of awaken and develop soul-force or love-force in man and to organize the spiritual energy in the direction of the trial of peace, security and happiness which mankind has been seeking for so long. In the scheme of Gandhi's satyagraha in India one can see what a tremendous force had been released by the

constructive activities concerning the problems of the untouchables, the women, the Adivasis, the Kisans and the factory workers etc. (Singh 1998:87)

The philosophy of satyagraha has been wedded to science, for Gandhi has very explicitly declared his satyagraha a science "Satyagraha as conceived by me is a science in the making," (Gandhi 1927:4) His satyagraha was simply an experimentation on the truths of his own perception in the laboratory of his life till his last breath in the spirit of a scientist. In the introduction to his Autobiography or My Experiment with Truth Gandhi writes: "I claim for them(experiments) nothing more than does a scientist who though conducts his experiments with the utmost accuracy, for thought and minuteness, never claims any finality about his conclusions but keeps an open mind regarding them." (Gandhi 1927:4)

Gandhi has asked his followers to develop the scientific spirit in the pursuit of truth. He says, "Every Satyagrahi should, therefore, develop a truly scientific spirit, watching the results at every step, devising new experiments modifying his opinion as well as steps with growing experience." (Gandhi 1937:n.d.) The scientific temperament of the age is best served by the scientific expressions of the pivotal concepts of the philosophy of satyagraha.

Gandhi's weapon of satyagraha is a boon. It can be used even by a single individual who has developed sufficient moral power by his own purity of thought and conduct. The relevance of satyagraha, both as a way of life and as a weapon for evolutionary social change, need not now be in doubt when it has been used successfully by the Negroes in the U.S.A. under the able guidance of the late Dr. Martin Luther King. Though its use in an international conflict has yet to be tried, one can hazard the statement that non-alignment, moral pressure by non-aligned powers, and the economic and other sanctions which the U.N.O. often thinks of are along the line of non-violent resistance to evil and injustice. (Diwakar 1968:49-50)

Satyagraha will be also an important means by which individuals and groups can have an immediate effect on government policy and programmes. Individuals and groups can organize the people and draw the attention of the Government and masses of issues of borrowings, exploitations, deteriorating law and order, pollution, poverty, malnutrition etc. to save society. At a personal level also lot of people can work. To operationalize the 'Satyagraha for better future', it would be desirable to bring likeminded people under one umbrella to fight against injustice and wrong governmental policy which is creating social tensions and alienation. (Mishra 2006:328)

If satyagraha is adopted as a means to fight against exploitation, the class-war becomes redemptive. Non-violent satyagraha is used not to destroy the capitalists but to convert them into the trustees for the benefit of the society. In the modern period, the people cannot afford to have violent weapons to fight against many social, economic and political evils and exploitation. Non-violent weapon, satyagraha, can be used by all people at all times against all evils and exploitation without any harm and evil effects. The world has to adopt non-violent weapon to solve sectional, national and international problems. Satyagraha will prepare the people for non-violent life in a disarmed world. (Patil 1983:164)

## II. CONCLUSION

It is clear that Gandhi's life, thought, teaching and action are ever relevant for all aspirants of the ethical and spiritual life. His principles and technique of satyagraha are highly efficacious instruments of peaceful economic, social and political change whenever and wherever it is required. Its gospel of peaceful means for resolving all conflicts is the only way to escape the disaster of a nuclear war. Gandhi's teaching of satyagraha is a highly inspiring one and serves as a signpost to humanity marching towards a better, happier and more harmonious world. He preached the world about satyagraha and peace and he is resolving of all issues concerned with human civilization amicably. So his philosophy of satyagraha is very much relevant to the present day world.

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