

The Gandhian Principle of Satyagraha

Remarks given by Aparna Zambare at the Raising of the Peace Flag at Central Michigan University
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Mahatma Gandhi's major contribution to world peace might be his principle of Satyagraha. The term satyagraha is an expansion of two religious concepts, truth and non-violence, that Gandhi brought to the sphere of politics and public life. It soon became a significant force and movement in India's struggle for Independence from British imperial rule.

Conjoining two Sanskrit words, satya, which means truth, and aagraha, which means firmness, Gandhi coined this new term that signified the force of truth or power of truth. Gandhi himself writes in his Autobiography: "Satyagraha . . . implies love, and firmness . . . and serves as a synonym for force. I thus began to call the Indian movement 'Satyagraha', that is to say, the Force which is born of Truth and Love or Non-violence."ⁱ As he further elucidates, satyagraha excludes violence in any form, including thought, action, or speech. He describes satyagraha as a gentle force that is not born out of anger, hatred, or malice and that must not be used for an unjust cause. Satyagraha never forces anyone to submit out of embarrassment, fear, or threat. On the contrary, Gandhi suggests that satyagraha is an unending, relentless, dialectical quest for truthⁱⁱ; it is holding on to truth come what may. According to him, the purpose of satyagraha is conversion and never coercion. Satyagraha aims at winning over a person by the power of love, by gentle persuasion, and by appealing to their inner sense of justice. Clearly, Gandhi's idea of satyagraha has a strong moral foundation and it implies action.

In replacing the term 'passive resistance' that he used earlier with satyagraha, Gandhi demonstrated his opposition to employ an English phrase to denote his Indian movement. Additionally, by thus naming his movement, he set it apart from the European movement of suffragettesⁱⁱⁱ, which was also a movement of passive resistance, yet maintained a bond between the two movements.

Motivating factors behind the Satyagraha movement were Gandhi's metaphysical beliefs, colonial oppression under which he grew up, and injustice and cruelty he himself faced when he was in South Africa. His use of the concept of satyagraha as a strategy for resisting injustice and tyranny was very insightful.

Gandhi launched the Satyagraha movement in April 1917 in East Champaran,^{iv} a district in the State of Bihar where a British Government act compelled farmers to grow in their land. indigo. Since India is a dye used in textile mills, this act was designed to enrich the British Government at the cost of farmers. The farmers were heavily taxed and occasionally beaten, if they complained about growing indigo. To help the farmers, Gandhi decided to use education as a tool and opened three schools in the area. He educated the farmers, gathered testimonies from them, and successfully pleaded their case himself. As a result, in 1919, the Government abolished the indigo mandate letting the farmers grow whatever they wished.

The first major victory encouraged Gandhi and his cohorts, but the Government grew fearful and passed a new act called the Rowlatt act^v that allowed them to imprison any Indian who threatened the crown. In the same year, 1919, one hundred years ago, a peaceful rally of unarmed men, women, and children was held in Amritsar to protest the Rowlatt act when the police opened fire, viciously killing thousands. The massacre caused violent reactions all over the country, but Gandhi planned yet another peaceful move encouraging his fellow Indians to boycott British goods and resign from their

Government positions. Responding to his call, men and women from all social classes, religions, castes, languages, and rural and urban sites came together as a country, to wage a peaceful war against the tyrannical British Raj.

In 1930, Gandhi initiated another phase of the Satyagraha movement to retaliate substantial taxes levied on the salt trade. He along with thousands of supporters marched to the coast of Dandi in the State of Gujarat and grabbed a mound of salt-rich soil, which was an illegal act but a powerful symbolic gesture. While breaking the salt act, this frail, old, non-violent man declared, “With this, I am shaking the foundations of the British Empire”^{vi} and he indeed achieved it by means of non-violence and satyagraha!

ⁱ For a fuller explanation of the term, Gandhi, M. K. *The Selected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*. Ed. Shriram Narayan. Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1968, Vol. III, pp. 150-1.

ⁱⁱ For further discussion, see Richards, Glyn. *The philosophy of Gandhi: A Study of His Basic Ideas*. Humanities Press, 1991. P. 50.

ⁱⁱⁱ Gandhi, M. K. *An Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth*. Translated by Mahadev Desai. Beacon Press, 1957. Pp. 318-19.

^{iv} *Ibid.* P. 409-28.

^v *Ibid.* P. 456-63.

^{vi} *Gandhi: His Life, Lessons and Legacy Today*. The Official Collector’s Edition, 2017. P. 43.