

## Module 3 : Mahatma Gandhi

### Section 5 : *Satyagraha*

The concept of satyagraha and its practice in socio-political front constitute the essence of Gandhi's philosophy. Perhaps it is his unique contribution as it opens a new political culture of social activism. It is a new technique of opposing or resisting injustice. Whatever degrades human relationship or anything that is evil, unjust or untrue in social life need to be opposed but the method of resistance should be non-violent with adherence to truth and justice. This way of resisting injustice with a view to altering unjust social relationship without harming or ill-will towards anybody is called satyagraha. It is a technique of direct action against injustice with firm commitment to truth.

Satyagraha is a compound Sanskrit word consisting of two words "staya" plus "graha" meaning holding fast (graha) onto truth (satya). Thus literally saryagraha means clinging to truth or insistence of truth. Since truth in a sense connotes justice satyagraha also means firm commitment to justice.

Gandhi used the term for the first time in South Africa to oppose racial discrimination in a non-violent way. Indians in South Africa were victims of racial discrimination. He organized the Indians to start a movement against discrimination. His movement was called passive resistance as different from violent resistance or armed struggle. He wanted a suitable term to name his new technique of resistance and gave an advertisement in the magazine "Indian Opinion" for suggestion. Out of different suggestions the word sadagraha signifying firmness in a good cause appealed to him which after a little modification he named as Satyagraha. Satyagraha is a love-force or soul-force. A Satyagrahi opposes injustice through love. A satyagrahi will always try to vindicate truth and justice and must be prepared to undergo any suffering for it. He exhibits moral force upon the opponent by his own suffering. Thus satyagraha signifies a technique to resist any injustice in non-violent way. A saryagrahi never hurts nor does express any hatred towards the opponent. He uses his moral force to appeal to the conscience or moral sense of the opponent.

Gandhi's conviction on satyagraha got strengthened in various ways. He was very much impressed by some characters of Hindu mythology. Harischandra and Prahallad were his ideals as they suffered a lot to uphold truth without slightest ill-will towards others. He was equally influenced by the life of Jesus and Socrates who were, Gandhi holds, the apostles of satyagraha. Their suffering into death did not create in them any hatred towards their opponents. Gandhi was also influenced by Tolstoy, David Thoreau, Ruskin and Sermon of the mount in the Bible. The philosophical spirit behind Satyagraha was not Gandhi's exclusive innovation. But his merit lies in explaining the concept with some originality and widely applying it in various spheres to establish justice in society.

Gandhi distinguishes Satyagraha from passive resistance. While passive resistance does not carry love for the opponent, satyagraha is based on love and it abandons any form of hatred. Any individual whether weak or strong can resort to satyagraha when he feels injustice is being done to him. A satyagrahi never applies physical force or teaks the opponent under any situation. Passive resistance is more pragmatic whereas satyagraha is more idealistic in their prospects to oppose or resist injustice. Gandhi suggests some moral vows to be observed by every satyagrahi. These vows are Satya, Ahimsa, Brahmacharya, Asteya, and Aparigraha. A Satyagrahi must accept truth and non-violence as the highest ideals of life and never resort to any deed contrary to them. A Satyagrahi must practice brahmacharya (abstention from sexual passion) and must have control over his carnal desires. Asteya means non-stealing but in the Gandhian framework it means not possessing things disproportionate to one's material requirement. This is somewhat similar to aparigraha or non-possession. That is without giving up lust for possession one cannot renounce selfishness. As long as one remains selfish one cannot be a satyagrahi. These moral ideals have been propounded in Jainism and Yoga system of Indian philosophy. Gandhi accepted these ideals for a Satyagrahi. Besides, these moral ideals he also takes fearlessness as another prerequisite for a satyagrahi. Unless a person buries all his cowardice and overcome his fear he cannot be a satyagrahi. Since a satyagrahi wants to remove all injustice from the society he should turn into a moral power. He can be so by being fearless and by abiding the aforesaid moral ideals.

Here there may be some practical difficulty. The Satyagrahas that Gandhi organized in South Africa and India were broad social movements involving thousands of people. But to expect all those people to possess these moral qualities for participation in satyagraha will be impossible and impracticable. With the help of the common people he organized mass based satyagraha movements for India's independence. Was it the case that the mass of people had the requisite moral commitment? In this context there is difference between an absolute ideal and a workable ideal. The leader of a satyagraha

movement must accept the requisite ideals but the masses should try to follow the leader and make possible effort to inculcate these ideals. So what is required of a leader is not strictly required of a common man joining in a satyagraha movement. But the common man must adhere to the ideals of non-violent action. There is historical evidence that Gandhi called off Satyagraha movement when it deviated from the moral path even though it was in the peak. He incurred a lot of criticism for it but he never compromised with his ideals.

Besides the absolute moral laws Gandhi lays down some practical code of conduct for the Satyagrahi. A Satyagrahi would never ill treat or disrespect the opponent but would show him utmost respect. He will only oppose the practice, policy or the law that upholds injustice in social relationships. He will appeal the opponent to touch his heart so that he will feel the injustice of his action. He will express no anger rather suffer the anger of the opponent. He will be prepared to suffer even physical assault on him, but under no circumstance will retaliate. He may be arrested but would never surrender voluntarily. He will never submit to an order for fear of punishment. He must be fearless and must have moral strength to face any adverse situation.

The practical measures of organizing Satyagraha include negotiation or arbitration direct action including agitation, fasting or issue of ultimatum, defiance of violence through protest or suffering, non-cooperation including usurping the function of the government and civil disobedience. These steps may be overlapping but they are alternative forms of action. These are not consecutive steps but of alternative techniques. Broadly the steps of Satyagraha would be fasting, defiance of violence, non-cooperation and civil disobedience. Let us explain them little elaborately.

Fasting is considered as the most effective weapon of Satyagraha to bring a change in the opponent. In the Gandhian scheme of things it is the purest form of self-inflicted suffering. But great caution is to be maintained in resorting to it. Only on rare occasion one can resort to it. Without purity of mind, discipline and humility one should not undertake a fast. It is the last resort of the Satyagrahi. A person who has transcended anger, selfishness and impatience can go for it only under special circumstance. Fasting unto death is the self-imposed suffering to bring a moral change in the mindset of the wrong-doers. The Satyagrahi should never take a fast as coercion on the opponent. Satyagrahi must be a man of moral strength and the cause for which he is fighting must be a serious problem. The purpose of the Satyagrahi is to morally change the opponent but not putting coercion on the other. If all those conditions are not adhered to, it becomes duragraha but not Satyagraha.

A Satyagrahi will never submit to any violence or injustice. He will defy it but without any anger or hatred. To change the erring opponent the Satyagrahi can take any peaceful method of purificationary suffering. Gandhi firmly believed in the innate goodness of man. So he thinks that the suffering of the Satyagrahi can change the heart of the erring opponent. Violence or retaliation begets greater violence. Defiance of violence by nonviolence can usher in moral change.

Another significant feature of Satyagraha movement is non-cooperation. Non-cooperation mainly means the withdrawal of cooperation from the party. The purpose behind non-cooperation is not to extend any cooperation to an unjust authority. All social relations rest on the cooperation of the parties involved. If the party which is exploited or suppressed withdraws its support the relationship between the two will collapse. Gandhi's non-cooperation movement against the British government considered many practical measures like surrender of titles, refusal to attend government sponsored functions, withdrawal of students from government run educational institutions, boycott of government courts etc. It also includes refusal to join any government service, not to participate in elections, boycott of foreign goods, non-payment of taxes etc. Through the non-cooperation movement Gandhi tried to create courage and fearlessness among the people. It may appear that the non-cooperation movement is to challenge the legal system of administration. But Gandhi's purpose was to make people conscious of their moral responsibility to fight against injustice.

Civil disobedience is another practical method of satyagraha. It means the breach of the unjust law or the statutory enactment of the government. Gandhi took this idea of civil disobedience from David Thoreau, the American naturalist. Gandhi made extensive application of civil disobedience in course of India's freedom struggle. When there is a conflict between the legal duty and moral responsibility Gandhi prefers the primacy of the moral. In case of a revolution or rebellion there may be disobedience of the law, but that is not civil disobedience. The basic motive behind civil disobedience is a well-defined moral principle and its method is non-violent. It can be practiced with great caution to avoid any outbreak of violence or lawlessness. Further civil disobedience may be offensive or defensive. Offensive disobedience includes disregard for the statutory enactment of the state and so to say a non-violent revolt against the administration. But defensive civil resistance or disobedience includes peaceful demonstrations, public meetings, rallies, publishing views, ventilating the unjust policies of the government, mobilizing public opinion etc.

These alternative aspects of Satyagraha can have their application in different ways either separately or consecutively. It is necessary to distinguish different kinds of satyagraha from the stand point of the number of people participating in a particular act of satyagraha and its area of operation. Accordingly there can be individual Satyagraha, group satyagraha, mass satyagraha, national satyagraha and even satyagraha at the international level. In a particular form of satyagraha some, but not all, of the techniques may be applied. When an individual is involved in an act of satyagraha he may resort to fasting or defiance of violence or civil resistance. But when a group of people are involved they may defy violence, undertake self-imposed, suffering, resort the civil disobedient or non-cooperation. In mass satyagraha when large number of people from different social background are involved the strategies like non-cooperation, civil disobedience may be employed. Mass satyagraha is relatively risky as it may be guided by expediency than the strict moral requirements. For the mass to participate in a stayagraha, strict moral training is required. So the leader of the mass Satyagraha is to impose discipline and other moral restrictions on the people. Gandhi and some of his ardent followers had organized a number of mass satyagrahas to fight injustice and resolve conflicts for ushering in social change.

Gandhi believes that satyagraha can also be an effective technique to face external aggression. Though there is not a single instance so far, where it is practically applied by a nation in the face of an external attack, still Gandhi is confident of its efficacy to meet any such exigency. This can be called national satyagraha. He articulated his view of national defense through non-violence during the period of Second World War. He appealed to different countries to face foreign aggression by unarmed men, women and children. In this way there can be national satyagraha for national defense against foreign aggression.

Satyagraha can also be extended to international spheres. Conflict between two courtiers can be peacefully settled in some international forum. It is heartening that man's moral consciousness is increasingly widening and an international mind is fast developing. This is a positive indication in the direction of non-violent resolution of conflicts and a war-free world.

Gandhi is of firm conviction that any conflict or crisis, whatever may be its nature or dimension, can be resolved by the method of Satyagraha. Starting from the individual to the national sphere it can be an effective measure to solve any human problem. It is the infallible technique to get the society rid of any injustice. Gandhi believes satyagraha to be the most formidable means of social control.

An objective evaluation of satyagraha reveals its relative merits and some drawbacks. Satyagraha has some relative merits over that of violent resistance or of armed battle. In case of violent resistance the party having superior physical strength can have victory, but in case of non-violent resistance victory comes to the moral force. The satyagrahi through moral strength makes the opponent realize the injustice and bring a moral change in his attitude. Even the most helpless individual or marginalized group can apply satyagraha to gain its right or dignity which is unthinkable in case of violent struggle. Since by satyagraha a conflict is sorted out through peaceful negotiation, it increases the moral awareness in society. But in violent resistance each side expresses hatred, jealousy or bitterness to the other that results in moral decrease. In armed struggle the only objective is victory, but in Satyagraha the objective is the establishment of justice. A satyagraha can continue till goal is reached but in violent resistance even if injustice is being done to a party, it cannot raise its voice due to its weakness. Even if a Satyagraha does not achieve its full success, still it helps in raising moral awareness in society. Then the moral fabric by increasing the confidence of the people draws people's attention to the prevailing injustice and creates a congenial atmosphere for peaceful resolution of conflicts in society.

But Satyagraha is not that panacea to resolve all conflicts as Gandhi thinks it. Its success largely depends upon circumstantial conditions. The success of a satyagraha mostly depends on a relatively liberal socio-political system with sympathetic adversaries and also on many other factors. But in a regimented or dictatorial system its chance of success is not that easy. Even where it is successful, it cannot be claimed that the opponents have practically undergone a moral change or that justice has really been restored. In case of individual or group satyagraha unless some leader of eminence and public image is involved it may not draw the attention of the opponent. Further some social problems are so deep rooted and complex that they cannot be uprooted by simple act of satyagraha. Many satyagrahas were organized with Gandhi's support against caste discrimination, untouchability and communalism. A man of his charisma and image could not solve this problem nor could bring change in the attitude of orthodox diehards. Similarly the idea of national satyagraha in case of external aggression is not a practically feasible proposition. So the idea of national defense through satyagraha is very remote. Even it becomes a possibility still it will not serve any purpose since use of sophisticated ammunition has made present day warfare a long distance war-fare.

In social organization Gandhi gives utmost priority to satyagraha for establishing justice. Even the legal or constitutional process within a democratic polity turns insignificant in face of Satyagraha. In the Gandhian framework Satyagraha becomes the only means of social control. But the possibility of misuse of Satyagraha in a liberal democratic system cannot be overlooked. An opposition party may find fault everywhere to apply satyagraha against the government for political gain or any small cause when constitutional or legal procedure is there. Satyagraha may be one of the techniques along with other procedures to achieve the purported goal, but to think it to be the only means of self-control is an overestimation. The generalization that Satyagraha is the only means of social control is not founded on objective truth but an emotional belief.

Further Gandhi has not discussed the issue how state can apply Satyagraha against erring citizens.

In underdeveloped countries people do not have a high work culture and flouting of civic responsibility is a common phenomenon in social life. Is there any means how Satyagraha can be applied to raise the moral standard of the people? If an individual is involved in terrorist activity, a business man in adulteration to amass wealth, a bureaucrat in corruption, a politician misuses his power for personal gain etc., which are very common in our social life, there is no other way than the legal system to punish. Within satyagraha there is no way how to address such social problems. Therefore satyagraha may not be the most formidable means of social control.

Despite these limitations Gandhi's vision of Satyagraha is somewhat prophetic. As a novel technique it has opened many dimensions to find out non-violent and peaceful solutions to many human problems. For what cannot be solved non-violently cannot be solved in violent ways. Violence, human experience shows, does not solve problem but multiplies it. Satyagraha shows new hope for mankind in this unclear age of mass-destruction. The rationale behind Satyagraha is reasonableness and righteousness. Its very purpose is to elevate the quality of life in society.