



Relevance of Gandhian Satyagraha in Contemporary India

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Abstract

The philosophy of Gandhian Satyagraha has maintained its relevance across different periods and geographical boundaries, particularly in India. Mahatma Gandhi conceptualized Satyagraha not merely as a strategy for political agitation, but as a universal principle to combat injustice. Rooted in the power of truth and nonviolent resistance, it stands as a moral force against tyranny, inequality, exploitation, and oppression—regardless of whether such injustices arise under monarchies or democratic setups. In both cases, rulers devoid of ethical and spiritual grounding may become indifferent to justice and compassion. Satyagraha, with its foundation in soul-force, seeks to pierce through such hardened attitudes through active, peaceful resistance.

Gandhi's first application of Satyagraha was in South Africa in 1906, where he, along with the Indian Natal Congress, resisted racial discrimination against Indian immigrants. Later, he adopted the same methodology to challenge British colonial rule in India. For Gandhi, Satyagraha was not a means to destroy the opponent but a higher moral path to appeal to the oppressor's conscience. His unwavering commitment to ethical and spiritual values attracted mass support across India. Gandhi's approach inspired people to resist injustice without retaliation or submission, demonstrating immense inner strength and discipline.

Today, India stands as a democratic republic enriched by its pluralistic identity—encompassing diverse castes, creeds, languages, and religions. The Constitution of India safeguards the rights of citizens to live with dignity and express dissent. Satyagraha, as a moral right, continues to be a legitimate tool for civil resistance when governance strays from truth and justice. However, the exercise of this right demands patience, courage, and a willingness to endure suffering for the greater good. The relevance of Satyagraha in the present context is reflected in widespread peaceful protests, including those against recent legislations such as the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), National Register of Citizens (NRC), and National Population Register (NPR).

This research study is structured into five parts. The first explores the origin, meaning, and definition of Satyagraha. The second delves into the philosophical underpinnings of Gandhian Satyagraha, emphasizing morality, religion, and ethics. The third section investigates its role in the nation-building process. The fourth examines contemporary mass movements and their alignment with Gandhian methods. The concluding section synthesizes these findings and affirms the continued significance of Satyagraha in modern India.

1-Meaning and Definition of Satyagraha

During Indian movement in South Africa, Mahatma Gandhi invited all his colleagues to find a suitable name for the struggle. Out of more than one hundred suggested terms, his Cousin Maganlal Gandhi's won the prize by coming up with the most suitable Sanskrit compound word *Sadagraha* (*sada: good and agraha: adherence*) ⁽¹⁾, Gandhi changed it to *Satyagraha* (*satya means truth*) and (*agraha means polite insistence or holding firmly to*) the apotheosis of Gandhian philosophy, namely, holding on to truth based on nonviolent courage and self-suffering. Truth is real and powerful as it exists but *Asatya* or untruth does not exist. So the later is frail to conquer and must have to meet its doom at last against the former. Gandhi explains "Its root meaning is holding on to truth, hence truth-force. I have also called it love-force or soul-force. In the application of Satyagraha, I discovered in the earliest stages that pursuit of truth did not admit of violence being inflicted on one's opponent but that he must be weaned from error by patience and compassion. For what appears to be truth to the one may appear to be error to the other. And patience means self-suffering. So the doctrine came to mean vindication of truth, not by infliction of suffering on the opponent, but on oneself." ⁽²⁾

Gandhi's Satyagraha was a well known major tool in the Indian freedom struggle against British imperialism and since then it has been adopted by protest groups in many countries including contemporary India. According to this philosophy, Satyagrahis

achieve correct insight into the real nature of an evil situation by observing a nonviolence of the mind, by seeking truth in a spirit of peace and love, and by undergoing a rigorous process of self-scrutiny. In doing so, the Satyagrahi encounters truth in the absolute by declining to surrender to the wrong-doer or to cooperate with them. He must adhere to nonviolence while confronting with the evil force, since violence would be to lose correct insight. When someone wants to achieve human end, his means should co-relate to it in quality. How can we expect peace if we adopt violent means to gain it? Gandhi rejected the idea that injustice and oppression should, or even could, be retaliated at any cost. If one uses violent, coercive or unjust means, whatever ends one comes up will surely enroot that injustice and oppression. To those who advocated violence and called nonviolent activists cowards, he replied: "I do believe that, where there is only a choice between cowardice and violence, I would advise violence....I would rather have India resort to arms in order to defend her honor than that she should, in a cowardly manner, become or remain a helpless witness to her own dishonor....But I believe that nonviolence is infinitely superior to violence, forgiveness is more manly than punishment."^[3] Non-cooperation and Civil disobedience as practiced under Satyagraha were based on the "law of suffering", ^[4] a dogma that the persistence of pain is a means to an end. This end refers to a moral take up or progress of an individual or society.

2-Religion, Morality and Ethics in Gandhian Satyagraha

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was born in a Hindu family of Gujrat (2 October, 1869 – 30 January, 1948) and rose in the influence of Hindu and Jain religious atmosphere. But he had also gone through the literatures of Hindu Bhakti Saints, Advaita Vedanta, Islam Buddhism and Christianity. At age 57 he declared himself to be Advaitist Hindu in his religious persuasion, but added that he supported Dvaitist viewpoints and religious pluralism.^{(5), (6)} Gandhi grew fond of Hinduism, and referred to the Bhagavad Gita as his spiritual dictionary and greatest single influence on his life. But out of this religious concept, he believed truth, non-violence, morality and betterment of humanity superior to the worship God.

Gandhian doctrine of Satyagraha was based on the Vedantic ideal of self-realization, *ahimsa* (nonviolence), vegetarianism, and universal love. William Borman states that the key to his Satyagraha is rooted in the Hindu *Upanishadic* texts.^[7] Bruce Watson states that some of these ideas are found not only in traditions within Hinduism, but also in Jainism or Buddhism, particularly those about non-violence, vegetarianism and universal love, but Gandhi's synthesis was to politicize these ideas. Glyn Richards says, Gandhi's concept of *satya* as a civil movement, is best understood in the context of the Hindu terminology of Dharma and *Rta*.^[8] Gandhi said that the most important battle to fight was overcoming his own demons, fears, and insecurities. In short he said "God is Truth". He would later change this statement to "Truth is God". Thus, *satya* (truth) in Gandhi's philosophy is "God". Gandhi meant the unity of God and humans, that all beings have the same one soul and therefore equality, that *atman* (soul) exists and is same as everything in the universe, *ahimsa* (non-violence) is the very nature of this *atman*.^[9]

When Ghandhi started movement to defy salt law, His Satyagraha attracted a large number of Indian men and women volunteers. He says, "For realization of God, I am ready to sacrifice at any cost. And all my social, political morality and attitudes for the service of mankind have been directed towards this Nobel cause. And I realize God's presence among the oppressed and for all such, I have a great feeling of compassion for these in me, as it is not possible for me to do something for them without being an active politician, so I am in active politics. And by this way I would be able to free the oppressed India, and by doing so, will be striving hard for mankind on the wider scale." Gandhi's was optimistic for *Ramarajya*. "It is a dream that may never be realized. I find happiness in living in that dreamland, ever trying to realize it in the quickest way."^[10]

Gandhi was not like his contemporary leaders who were also using religion in their respective struggle for freedom. They had materialistic interests of religious communities—which embedded hate and envy, he introduced religious principles of various religions in politics with a vision that was broad enough to meet the ends of all communities. Religion, he said, in its broadest sense governs all departments of life, including politics.^[11] Gandhi was the apostle of strict ethical discipline, severe sense of control, almost an ascetic morality. He preached like great religious leaders - Gautama the Buddha and Jesus Christ who strove for truth, love, peace, universal brotherhood and finally the salvation of the whole humanity. He says, "My religious ambitions will not be satisfied until and unless mine affection does not become one with the humanity that too is possible only when I will find myself active in poly-morality". He specified the qualification of a Satyagrahi as follows:

A Satyagrahi:^[12]

1. must have a living faith in God

2. must believe in truth and non-violence, and have faith in the goodness of human nature
3. must be leading a chaste (moral) life, and be willing to die or lose all he owns
4. must be a *khadi* wearer and spinner
5. must stay away from alcohol
6. must follow all other rules of discipline he gave them.
7. if he is put in jail, he must obey the jail rules, unless they are specially made to hurt his self-respect

A Satyagrahi should inculcate silence, modesty, self-denial, self-sacrifice, self-discipline, non-violence in thought, word and deed, love, goodwill, and compassion for all, and antipathy to drinks and drugs. "If we had attained the full vision of truth, we could no longer be mere seekers, but would become one with God, for Truth is God". "I don't accept a politics without religion; polity is a servant of religion, a polity without religion leads to doom as it kills one's soul." Unfortunately, it is the misuse of religion which we observe in contemporary politics, and not the use of religious values morality and ethics found in religion as in Gandhian ideals.^[13]

3-Gandhian Satyagraha in Nation Building

Gandhi dreamt of a utopian nation *Ramrajya* in real sense which could accommodate every Indian citizen with equality and fraternity. He returned to India in January, 1915 from South Africa where he had successfully attempted a novel method of mass agitation called Satyagraha. In India, Satyagraha was led by Gandhi at a time when most of the sections were affected separately by the oppression of British government. In 1916 he went to Champaran in Bihar to inspire the peasants to struggle against the oppressive plantation system. In 1917, he motivated peasants, of Kheda District of Gujarat, to launch Satyagraha against the revenue increments

which could not be paid by the peasants affected by crop failure and plague epidemic. In 1918, he organized a Satyagraha movement amongst cotton mill workers in Ahmadabad. In 1919, Imperial legislative Council hurriedly passed Rowlett Act which gave the government enormous powers to suppress political activities and allowed detention of political prisoners without trial for two years. Emboldened with the previous success of different Satyagraha, he called for a broad non-violent civil disobedience against such arbitrary and unjust law on 6th April to support Indian against the atrocity of the then government but this movement was called off due to brutal suppression of infamous Jallianwalla Bagh massacre. Mahatma Gandhi and Shaukat Ali travelled incessantly to mobilize people throughout the country to start a nationwide movement in 1920^[14]. This Satyagraha worked well thousands of students left governments-controlled schools and colleges, teachers resigned, lawyers gave up their legal practices, council elections boycotted, barbers, washer men deprived landlords of the services and peasants struggled in Awadh and so on. Foreign goods were refused to use and liquor shops picketed. The import of foreign cloth halved its value from Rs. 102 crore to Rs. 57 crore between 1921 and 1922. So the father of our nation kept on Satyagraha movements till India was liberated from foreign rule.

Satyagraha movements emphasized to produce and utilize indigenous goods to revitalize the economic condition of Indians. Gandhi had the best platform to disseminate his doctrine of *wonderland* which was possible only by developing its citizens in all spheres of life as moral, mental, intellectual, social, economic and spiritual. He promoted *khadi* as a direct boycott of the Lancashire cotton industry, causing British imperialism to Indian poverty. Gandhi implored all Indians, the rich as well as the poor, to learn the ancestral handicraft spinning so that the people of the seven hundred thousand impoverished villages of India could regain self employment, self-

reliance, and self-respect. He asked all Indians to wear the rough white homespun cloth called Khadi, and boycott foreign cloth. It became the symbol of independence and glued upper and the middle classes of Indian society to the large masses of the poor. *Swaraj*, in Gandhi's view, hung on a thread, the cotton thread spun on a charkha. Susan Bean opined "Khadi is the fabric of independence". Tarlo argues "If dress was truly capable of communicating his message clearly; there would have been little need for such explicit verbal explanations." Gandhi organized the All India Village Industries Association which started weekly Gram Udyog Patrika carrying instructions for the revival of the old cottage industries and the establishment of new ones.

Gandhiji pleaded strongly for decentralization of economic and political power which was possible through the panchayat system or three tier system, firstly at the village level 'Panchayat Samitis' and at the third tier of administration is 'Zilla Parishad'. The main aim of three tier systems was to mobilize the public support and decentralize the decision making which helps to take the local work experience, requirements and aspirations to have their full role in the matter of planning and implementation of the development programs. Gandhi finds a perfect democracy based upon the individual freedom. ⁽¹⁵⁾

Gandhi knew the significance of education in nation- building. He thought that the nation could develop only after new generation was educated properly. He felt that education should not only enhance knowledge but also inculcate culture in heart and hand. He stated that the teachers, the future maker of a child, should impart quality education with ethical values. He wrote "I am a firm believer in the principle of free and compulsory primary education for Indian." The quality of a nation depends upon the quality of its citizens; the quality of citizens depends upon the quality of their education; the quality of education depends upon the quality of teachers and the

quality of teachers depends upon the quality of teacher education. We want value- oriented teacher education. ⁽¹⁶⁾ Mahatma Gandhi believed that India would become a great nation if its citizens had well developed in character and virtues. According to him, moral education is the prime most function of education. If succeeded in building the character of the individual, the society will take care of itself. He referred a sermon of Fredrick Lewis (20th March, 1925 in Westminster Abbey) that seven deadly sins would destroy us. They are: - Wealth without work, pleasure without conscience, knowledge without character, commerce without morality, science without humanity, religion without sacrifice and politics without principle. ⁽¹⁷⁾ Philosophical, religious, economic and social approach of Gandhi and a number of contemporary Gandhian perspectives are relevant applicable to human values and social change even now. Truth, nonviolence, peace and love are the best human traits which must inspire the whole world.

4-Contemporary Trend of People's Movements and Gandhian Satyagraha

Unfortunately, the father of our nation, pioneer of non-violence, truth and morality, became the victim of violence. *Duragrahi* overpowered Satyagrahi on 30th January, 1948 when the first terrorist of free India named Nathuram Vinayak Godse shot three bullets on Gandhi who fell on the ground saying 'Rama, Rama'. Godse had worked for RSS since 1930 and earned fame as its organizer and orator who was the member of Hindu Mahasabha at time of killing Gandhi. On 18th July, 1948, Sardar Ballabh Bhai Patel wrote a letter to Shyama Prasad Mukherji, a member of Hindu Mahasabha. It stated that the reports cleared the activities of the RSS and allied organizations had created such an atmosphere which committed the most disgusted crime^[18]. The whole country mourned the death of Mahatma Gandhi but in real sense, his school of thoughts had become immortal. Godse, the murderer of the saint also hanged till death by the court on 15th November,

1949. Both the characters are abundantly found throughout the world. Presently, we are passing through an extremely sensitive and controversial phase in Indian politics where the endeavor of Mahatma Gandhi has been demeaned even in Lok Sabha by a terrorism alleged M.P., Pragya Singh Thakur as she declared Godse, the murderer of Gandhi, a patriot and no strict action had been taken, by the authorities, against her whereas on the other hand peaceful protesters with chaste track record were detained under NSA. The secular, socialist and nationalist citizens who tread the path of Gandhian values are assaulted by the organized violence supported by the incumbent leaders for they need orthodox regime. People are divided not only on the economic basis but also on sex, caste, creed, culture, region and religion. Present day politics has also failed to reconstruct socio-economic life and has only multiplied to the distress, delusion, despair and disaster. The devaluation of human values and human relations of politicians and aristocrats has opened ways for political degenerations. Such a state of chaos and anarchy cites innumerable examples of contemporary India where Gandhians are incessantly combating at different fronts. We should observe some events to know the possibility of Gandhian Satyagraha in contemporary India:

Our central government in May, 2014, announced zero tolerance to violence against women and later raised the slogan *Beti Padhao*, *Beti Bachao* (Educate Daughters, Save Daughters) but how much this vision of government come true is not hidden from anyone vigilant. Even educated women are more vulnerable due to their exposure to different institutions. Ignoring their social status, from religious preachers and political leaders to all those with money and power, without moral values, turn Godse to women as per their available chances. Saint Ram Rahim, Saint Asha Ram and MLA, U.P., Kuldeep Singh Sengar are the samples who trespassed all the limits to suppress the voices of their victims⁽¹⁹⁾.

As well as, the case like that of Gargi College where "drunken men" -- said to be pro-CAA demonstrators entered the college campus allegedly shouting 'Jai Shri Ram' slogan, "Girls were groped, locked in washrooms, stalked to the nearby Green Park metro, cat-called, eve-teased and misbehaved with, during the 3rd day of annual festival," read the blog of one of the students⁽²⁰⁾.



Will Lord Rama be pleased with such so-called Hinduism-mongers? As the rape cases have multiplied in recent years, Women from many organizations are organizing Satyagraha raising slogans and demanding the government to enact capital punishment to rapists but in vain. Observe 2014 when Narendra Modi's administration pledges to revamp criminal laws surrounding rape and to build indoor toilets for every household. Since then, many prominent MLAs and MPs have been alleged for rape. It proves that the government has shown little efforts in showing its commitments towards women safety (The Free Press Journal 14th Dec. 2019). It's Satyagraha with Indian Constitution, the only hope of frailty, empowers women to fight against the immoral politicians for a healthy democracy.

The most popular event in India is the current protests against Citizenship Amendment Act passed on 9th December, 2019⁽²¹⁾. People in different states throughout the country have been protesting since the bill passed. But such events have experienced both violence and non-violence reported at different locations. The first and very infamous event belongs to Jamia Millia Islamia, the institution established with the support of Gandhi and Tagore⁽²²⁾. On 15 December 2019, police entered

the campus, used tear-gas shells inside its library and masjid and beat up innocent students brutally. This was occasioned by the burning of buses by unidentified miscreants a few kilometers away. The police also detained the student protestors. The police action was criticized and it sparked protests in several other universities in India and Abroad in solidarity with the Jamia students. (The Hindu 16 Dec.2019.) A dawn-to-dusk *hartal* (shutdown) was observed in Kerala by the Welfare Party of India, Bahujan Samaj Party, Social Democratic Party of India and 30 other organizations against the Citizenship Amendment Act and the police violence against students at various universities across the country, in relation to anti-CAA protests.⁽²⁵⁾ India Today report on 27 Dec., 2019 conveyed that 19 death tolls of people, 288 policemen injured, 1,113 people arrested, 327 FIR registered, 5558 preventive arrest made in U.P. alone. Dipanjal Das, Sam Stafford and Ishwar Naik were killed in police firing in Assam from 12 to 14 Dec., 2019.



The Shaheen Bagh protest has become the most vibrant one of the time in India where women are leading Satyagraha attracting all and sundry through the globe. Women, the symbol of peace, love, tolerance, patience and non-

violence, have firmly ignored all blames and constraints by the ruling leadership. This protest on Satyagraha model has been proceeding to create a history of the revival of Satyagraha in real sense. ⁽²⁶⁾ Notable social activists like Ram Chandra Guha, Yogendra Yadav, Dr. Kafeel and many more who protested peacefully, were detained by the police at various places just only to crush protests against CAA, NRC and NPR in India and terror provokers are left free to terrorize Delhi presently. All such notable events open the door of possibility to the survival of Satyagraha in the contemporary India. But it has become a tough task for protesters because most of them are being beaten, tortured and alleged falsely by the police instructed by the right wing. The action of the police is suspected many times while treating the protesters. "More than 10 woman students have been hit on their private parts. We have found blunt injuries on some of the protesters," the doctors said. (India Today, 10th Feb., 2020). The proverb 'Might is right' has come true in the country of Gandhi. The values of Mahatma Gandhi are on the stake. Media amalgamated a fatal poison in our society that even calling the name Pakistan suffices to allege the caller seditious as on 20th Feb. a girl of 19 Amulya Leona Naronha alleged of sedition case (under section 124A and 153A,B) and detained readily by the cops in a protest in Bagaluru where she wanted to express universal brotherhood by saying live long for all the countries. Her Facebook post reads ".....The Government should take care all those people of the country in a good way. Long live to all who serve the people. So will not be there as soon as, I say *zindabad* to a country.It is our duty to respect our country." What to say the event on 4th Nov, 1948 when Dr. Rajendra Prasad, the president of constituent assembly with assembly members paid tribute to Mahatma Gandhi together with Quaid-e-Azam Mohammed Ali Jinnah in the first meeting of Constituent Assembly? ⁽²³⁾ Justice Deepak Gupta of Supreme Court said "...majoritarianism is the antithesis of democracy... assuming they

represent more than 50% of the electorate, can it be said that the remaining 49% of the population has no voice in running the country? Can it be urged that the remaining 49% cannot speak for the next five years till next elections are held? Should these 49% be totally ignored if they oppose what is said by the Government? In my view, the answer has to be a big 'NO'," he said. "Protest also means expressing dissent which is part of the legacy left by the father of the country (Mahatma Gandhi) in the form of the Civil Disobedience Movement, following the path of Ahimsa," he observed.

His comments are significant because they come against the backdrop of a prevailing trend where anyone not agreeing with the government, or opposing a law is accused of being an anti-national -- sometimes by ministers, and at other times by members and supporters of the ruling party. (The Hindustan Times, 25th Feb. 2020)

Conclusion

Mahatma Gandhi was apt in this modern world to advocate non-violent methods for solving social, economic, political and religious conflicts. Non-violence as advocated by Gandhi is the most effective and the less expensive method. Satyagraha is most commonly used as a powerful method of direct action in contemporary world. Satyagraha as a device for fighting disastrous actions and violent conflicts avoids harm on any side. Terrorism, whether individual or state sponsored, recedes the progress of the nation. The addition of another wrong does not diminish but adds to the evil already in existence. To Gandhi, non-violent resistance is a force that counters the force that is violent. After Gandhi Indian people find Satyagraha to resolve their social, educational and economic issues if unnoticed by the authorities. But the incumbency forges to suppress the protests with the help of the police. Contemporary leaders, the police and media have played a vital role in worsening the affectionate relationships among

the citizens of diverse groups that all have started a race to prove one's own group patriotic and the other's perfidious and anti-national. Is *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* (the whole world is a family) not applicable for protests or the government pressed administration intends something else? The governments bear zero tolerance to protests against them as ministers have passed vulgar, immoral and provoking statements even to the women protesters at Shaheen Bagh, New Delhi and women protesters in various districts in Uttar Pradesh as they are pressed to recognize the power of Satyagraha which has shaken the stability of the British Government in India whereas we are now the citizens of a democratic republic. Article 11 is closely linked to freedom of expression as it applies to protests, marches and demonstrations, counter-demonstrations, press conferences, public and private meetings and more – but it does not protect intentionally violent protest ⁽²⁴⁾. So it is ensured that the countrymen must ever follow Satyagraha making Gandhi immortal whether the rulers interpret a peaceful protest dangerous to the integrity of the country for the integrity of their own atrocity. Representatives of the public are elected by the people for their welfare and progress not to make them suffer chaos, anarchy and absence of law. Whenever people's representatives do not flaunt just application of power and resources for the common good, they must experience Gandhian Satyagraha to claim it the largest democracy in the world.

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