

A NOTE ON THE CONCEPT OF SATYAGRAHA

NIRMALA SINGH

Satyagraha is an Indian word coined by Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi himself writes about the implications of the word. "The term 'Satyagraha' was coined by me in South Africa to express the force that the Indians there used for full eight years, and it was coined in order to distinguish it from the movement then going on in the United Kingdom and South Africa under the name of passive resistance".¹ John V. Bondurant has rightly observed; "Satyagrah, is a word coined to describe the technique Gandhi first used in South Africa and continued to develop in India readily understood to mean the Gandhian method of conducting conflict without violence".² According to R. R Diwakar the word 'Satyagraha' is completely a remarkable addition to the Indian vocabulary with a new connotation. He writes; "... the word Satyagraha does not seem to have been used anywhere in Sanskrit and other Indian literatures so far".³ Further he adds : "It (the word 'Satyagraha') is not merely a new word but it is also a new way of life as well as a unique technique of using the soul -- force in man".⁴

The word "Satyagraha" has an interesting history of its evolution. Gandhiji labelled this movement, in its early stages, under the customary phrase 'passive resistance'. But very soon he found, the English phrase 'passive resistance' an inadequate description of his movement 'which was generating a new force'.⁵ As the struggle advanced, the phrase 'passive resistance' gave rise to confusion and it appeared shameful to permit the great struggle to be known by an English name.⁶ He, therefore, endeavoured to find a new Indian name clearly connoting his movement. He invited suggestions through his article in '*Indian Opinion*' for the most appropriate name and also announced a reward

for the same. He was very much inclined to one Shree Maganlal's suggestion of the word 'Sadagrahi', meaning thereby firmness in a good cause. He found in it a clue to the evolution of the word 'Satyagraha' adequately connoting his movement. Gandhi himself speaks of his drift to the word 'Satyagraha' from the word 'Sadagraha' in his book 'Satyagraha' in South Africa' : 'I liked the word, but it did not fully represent the whole idea I wished to connote. I, therefore, corrected it to Satyagraha'.⁷ The word 'Satyagraha', thus evolved, fully represented the power of truth or moral force generated by non-violent resistance of the Indians in South Africa. Thus he gave up the use of the term 'passive resistance' and classed his movement by a new Indian name of 'Satyagraha'.

The word 'Satyagraha' is a compound of two Sanskrit nouns, Satya 'Truth' (from Sat, with a suffix-ya) and Agraha, 'firm grasping' (a noun made out of the verb 'Agraha' which has the root 'Grah', 'Seize', grasp 'with a verbal prefix as' to, to-wards''⁸). Thus according to Joan, V. Bonduarant, the Etymological meaning of the word 'Satyagraha' becomes firm grasping of truth. According to R. R. Diwakar, the Etymological meaning of the word 'Satyagraha' of Sanskrit origin is "firm adherence to truth come what may".⁹ K. M. Munshi's observation on the Sanskrit word 'Satya' in relation to English word 'Truth' is worth mentioning here." The word 'truth' in English does not connote all that Satya does, Satyavaak or Satya pratijñā does not mean one who speaks the truth or pledges himself to truth; it means speech or promise which, one uttered or given, will be fulfilled in action even at the cost of one's own life".¹⁰ According to Gandhi 'Satyagraha' means 'Truth force'. He mentions : "Its (Satyagraha's) root meaning is holding on truth; hence truthforce. I have also called it love-force or soul-force".¹¹ His exposition of the literal meaning of the compound word 'Satyagraha' runs as follows : "Truth (Satya) implies love, and firmness (Agraha) engenders power and therefore serves as a synonym for force that is to say, the force which is born of truth; hence truth force. I have also called it love-force or soul-force".¹²

The word 'Satyagraha' owes its ever growing meaning to its actual functioning during the eventful life-time of its author, Mahatma Gandhi.¹³

Satyagraha, is, thus, an evolving concept¹⁴, giving rise to three distinct meanings fully representing the life-mission of the Mahatma 'My Mission is to teach by example and precept, under severe restraint, the use or matchless weapon of Satyagraha, which is a direct corollary of non-violence and truth.'¹⁵ Thus the meanings, evolved are the following : (a) 'Satyagraha' is a new technique of soul change, (b) 'Satyagraha' is a way of life, (c) 'Satyagraha' is a philosophy of life and action.

According to Gandhi, 'Satyagraha', in its initial stage of evolution, means a moral weapon to fight untruth with truth and violence with non-violence 'a priceless and matchless weapon' standing in sharp contradiction to customary force of resistance. The characteristic beauty of this weapon is not to touch the body of the opponent but to transform him into a new man with a new vision of truth and justice. The new weapon of Satyagraha born of self-sufferings and sacrifices of non-violent resisters, thus, has changed the existing strategy and established pattern of fighting the evils and gives birth to a new technique. A Satyagrahi by creed treats the opponent his friend. Hate evil and not the evil-doer is his motto. He does not physically hurt his opponent nor does he damage his property. By undergoing voluntary sufferings upto the extent of death he tries his best to make the opponent realise his errors. He suffers and suffers till his sufferings melt the stony heart of the opponent to realise the truth of the situation. What a novel technique to blunt the edge of a tyrant's sword : and this novel technique Gandhi employed successfully in his fight with racial discrimination in South Africa and with British domination in India and brought about a radical social change.

The weapon and the technique, thus, evolved not only radically changed the existing modes of social action but also penetrated deep into the life-pattern of the wielders of the weapons in pursuit of truths of life. Who would wield the weapon, the weapon of the strongest, None but the non-violent brave, though he might be frail in body. 'A satyagrahi offers non-violent resistance out of strength and bravery and not because he is helpless and cannot use violence'.¹⁶

R. R. Diwakar has aptly remarked : "The word 'Satyagraha' is now loaded with so much meaning that it amounts to a philosophy, but it is a practical

philosophy of life, of action, of self and co-realisation.”¹⁷ Gandhi through his ceaseless non-violent struggle on different fronts of life against evils evolved a world-view of humanity and human affairs in the light of his spiritual experience of oneness of Being. To his mind, disparity and discord in human society emanating from exploitation, injustice and tyranny are antagonistic to non-violent way of life and as such for its eradication, root and branch, a battle is to be fought out on a massive scale in the name of human brotherhood, social justice and political and economic goodness to achieve the goal of human unity. With non-violence and love as the guiding principle of life human society is bound to restore its lost equilibrium and peace amidst its various situations of conflicts and tension. Satyagraha of Gandhi is not only an action programme of political liberation but it stands for a philosophical outlook of spiritual unity. Gandhi has clearly said : “I want to realise brotherhood or identity with all life, even with such things as crawl upon earth because we claim descent from the same God, and that being so, all life in whatever form it appears must be essentially one”.¹⁸ Satyagraha is not a table-talk but a practical philosophy of action in giving shapes to the idea of human unity. An individual can adopt the way of life of the future and non-violent way without having to wait for others to do so. And if an individual can do it, cannot whole groups of individuals? whole nations?¹⁹

Satyagraha is a moral war to be fought with a moral weapon by a moral soldier, be he an individual or a collective of individuals for a moral triumph. The moral war is a situation in which the evolutionary urge to be good, to be just and to be peaceful of an individual or a community or a nation rises against evils of exploitation, injustice, inequality, tyranny and violence. The moral weapon is a moral-force or soul-force born of non-violent resistance. The moral soldier is an individual who has undergone a moral transformation by disciplining himself under non-violence, love, service and sacrifice. And moral triumph is the triumph of truth over untruth, good over evil, love over hatred and spirit over body. This moral war of here and now, is, simply a means to the realisation of a higher ideal, i.e., ‘to see God face to face’, to realise absolute truth.

Thus we see that the concept of Satyagraha is the outcome of Gandhi’s

inherent and deep devotion to truth with non-violence amidst life's manifold situation. However, India's psyche of her people responded wonderfully to Gandhi's call of Satyagraha movement giving an idea that Satyagraha is a novel invention of the creative mind and moral genius of Gandhi and that it is India's original contribution to the world.

NOTES

1. Hingorani, A. T. (ed.) : *The Science of Satyagraha*, (Bombay, Bhartiya Vidya Bhavan, 1962), p. 26.
2. Bondurant, J. V. : 'Satyagraha Versus Duragraha : The limits of Symbolic Violence', *Gandhi, His Relevance for Our Times* (ed) Leaf.
3. G. Ramchandra and T. K. Mahadevan, (Bombay, Bhartiya Vidya Bhavan, 1964) pp. 21-22.
4. Diwakar, R. R. *Saga of Satyagraha*, (New Delhi, Gandhi Peace Foundation, 1969) p. 2.
5. Gandhi, M. K. : *Satyagraha in South Africa*, (Ahmedabad, Navajivan Publishing House, 1960), p. 109.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid*, (op. cit., p. 109).
8. Bondurant, J. V. : 'Satyagraha Versus Duragraha. The limits of symbolic violence', *Gandhi : His Relevance for Our Times*, C, Ramchandra and T. K. Mahadevan, op. cit., p. 81.
9. Diwakar, R. R. : *Saga of Satyagraha*, op. cit., p. 1.
10. Munshi, K. M. *Gandhi's Philosophy in Life and Action*, (Bombay, Bhartiya Vidya Bhavan, 1965), p. 23.
11. Hingorani, A. T. (ed.) : *The Science of Satyagraha*, op. cit. p. 26.
12. *Harijan*, November, 17, 1946.
13. Diwakar, R. R., 'Satyagraha : A New way of life and a New Technique for Social Change' in *Gandhi Theory and Practice Social Impact and Contemporary Relevance*, Vol, II, 1969, 482.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 925.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 925.
16. Diwakar, R. K. 'Satyagraha : A New May of Life and New Technique for Social Change, in *Gandhi Theory and Practice Social Impact and Contemporary Relevance*, Vol. II, *op. cit.*
17. Diwakar, R. R. "Satyangraha - A Philosophy of life", *Is not Gandhi The Answer*, (Bombay, Bhrtiya Vidya Bhavan, 1969), p. 42.
18. Prabha, R. K. and Rao, V. R. (ed.) : *The Mind of Mahatma Gandhi* : (Ahmedabad, Navajivan Publishing House, 1967), p. 28
19. *Ibid.*, pp. 458-59.