

Original Paper

An Examination of Satyagraha as a Principle of Peace

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Abstract

In a world that desperately needs peace more than ever, the principle of Satyagraha becomes not only important, but essential to achieve true and lasting peace. True peace, which is perfect, according to Thomas Aquinas, “cannot be achieved except where the appetite is directed to what is truly good”. This is the goal of humanity; however, this goal is elusive when justice is separated from peace. It is harmful when truth is sidelined in the pursuit of peace and even worse, when love is not made central in this goal. One philosophy of peacebuilding that reverses this anomaly is found embedded in Satyagraha. This paper aims to appraise and analyze this practical philosophy as the unfailing principle of peacemaking and peacebuilding.

Keywords

Satyagraha, peace, non-violence, peacemaking, peacebuilding

1. Introduction

The verity of Seneca’s statement: *veritas numquam perit* (truth never perishes), which is reinforced in the assertion *veritas vincit* (truth conquers), is confirmed in Gandhi’s innovative action word: *Satyagraha*. From the knowledge of Satyagraha, it is clear that one cannot successfully achieve a separation between truth and life. Peace is also an essential human condition and desire, therefore one cannot consequently sever the relationship between peace and truth. To put it in simpler terms, we cannot talk of peace at any level of human life without truth. This explains why Fagothey (1963, p. 264), in his proof of the wrongness of lie via the argument from the social nature of man, points that without truth, “there would be an end to human communication and thus to human society”. When there is no communication, there will be suspicion. When there is suspicion, fear breeds. When fear breeds, love quivers and peace quakes. Gandhi saw this fact when he invented Satyagraha, which has its foundation and origin in truth that makes one non-violent in one’s pursuit of peace.

2. The Meaning and Origin of Satyagraha

The term Satyagraha came from two words in the Sanskrit language: *satya* translated as “truth” and *agraha* translated as “to hold or to grasp”. Literally, the term means “holding or grasping the truth” or “holding onto truth”. This word was thought to have been introduced in South Africa in the early 20th century by Mahatma Gandhi to designate a determined, but nonviolent resistance to evil. Gandhi lived in South Africa between 1893 and 1914. His stay there was meant to be temporary for a legal assignment as a lawyer, but at the dinner where his people were to bid him farewell, he disclosed to them the intention of the Natal Legislative Assembly to disenfranchise the Indians. Mobilizing his people to prohibit this situation from occurring prolonged his stay in South Africa. The Indians in South Africa were not only racially discriminated against, but also culturally annihilated. It was due to their strong will and struggles to free themselves from this entanglement by the British colonial masters in South Africa that the word Satyagraha was born. The New World Encyclopedia provides an appropriate summary of the origin and historical background of the term in this analysis:

None of us knew what name to give to our movement. I then used the term “passive resistance” in describing it. ... As the struggle advanced, the phrase “passive resistance” gave rise to confusion and it appeared shameful to permit this great struggle to be known only by an English name. Again, that foreign phrase could hardly pass as current coin among the community. A small prize was therefore announced in *Indian opinion* to be awarded to the reader who invented the best designation for our struggle. We thus received a number of suggestions. ... Shri Maganlal Gandhi was one of the competitors and he suggested the word *sadagraha*, meaning “firmness in a good cause”. I liked the word, but it did not fully represent the whole idea I wished to connote. I therefore corrected it to “satyagraha”. Truth (*satya*) implies love, and firmness (*agraha*) engenders and therefore 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...

Due to its derivation and what it represents, Satyagraha is commonly called “truth force” because in the view of Gandhi, it is “the force that is generated through adherence to truth”. This is why it is Gandhi’s version or interpretation of non-violence.

We should remember that prior to Gandhi creating this concept, the philosophy of using non-violence in the face of conflict was already in other cultures. For instance, the ethics of Jainism, which is older than Buddhism, teaches that non-violence is the highest ideal of life, and the means of attaining *Moksa* or liberation (Sharma 1965 cited in Holmes, 1990, p. 10). Again, we had the teachings of Jesus Christ which Christian religion expounded and spread as culminating in love and a peaceful approach to all displeasing situations. We also had the creed of civil disobedience proposed by Henry David Thoreau. Many have argued that this concept has an underlying philosophy of non-violence beneath it, as does

the nonresistance of Leo Tolstoy which occurred almost simultaneously with Gandhi's movement. Apart from the teachings and life of Jesus, which provided direct inspiration to Gandhi, one could also reason that other non-violent approaches and philosophies also influenced Gandhi's notion of non-violence, but they were not very satisfactory to him. The reasons for this are rooted in the flaws he discovered in these methods and ideas, which he strived to amend in Satyagraha.

3. Satyagraha as a Principle of Peace; Its Lessons in Peacemaking and Peace Building Today

Gandhi saw the need to improve the non-violent philosophies of his predecessors because in his examination, none of them could explain his essentialist approach to peacemaking and peacebuilding which was well-defined in the principles guiding the mission and action of Satyagraha. He had strongly upheld that "there is no way to peace; rather, peace is the way". Again, "there is no such thing as out-daring or out-fighting non-violence. Non-violence is invincible" (Holmes, p. 55). He titivated the non-violent viewpoints of his precursors, enhancing these philosophies to create a more authentic and much stronger approach to peacemaking and peacebuilding in his time. For instance, he found in the civil disobedience of Thoreau, a subtle implication that one obeys the law for the fear of the accruing penalty involved in its breach and not because one sees and chooses it as a duty. On the contrary, a Satyagrahi (a believer in Satyagraha) says Gandhi, "obeys the laws of society intelligently and of his own free will, because he considers it to be his sacred duty to do so". He found the non-resistance prototype unsatisfactory because of its high tendency to promote pacifism. This will assuredly contradict the idea of active non-violent resistance embedded in the philosophy of Satyagraha. Even the choice of passive resistance as Satyagraha denotes was rejected by Gandhi because, as Holmes shows in the words of Gandhi,

It is said of "passive resistance" that it is the weapon of the weak. But the power which is the subject of this article can be used only by the strong. This power is not "passive" resistance: indeed it calls for intense activity. The movement in South Africa was not passive but active. The Indians of South Africa believed that Truth was their object, that truth ever triumphs, and with this definiteness of purpose they persistently held on to Truth. They put up with all the suffering that this persistence implied ... In the cause of truth, the prison was a palace to them and its doors the gateway to freedom (p. 52).

The uniqueness of Satyagraha lies in the fact that while it is a philosophy and action of non-violence, it allows no room for cowardice or self-security at the expense of truth. A peace that results from cowardice and self-security is a false peace. It is the type of peace that Bernard Haring describes as "a wrong irenicism" whose characteristics and features are demonstrated as he explains:

A wrong irenicism will deny the testimony to the truth—be it “peace” with those in power in one’s own Church or peace with the currents of the day—while infuriated fanatics would force a victory for truth with the help of the stake. The one pays for his peace with indifferentism to the search for truth, the other with indifferentism to truth and love. The one becomes a pacifist because of apathy and timidity in the cause of justice, the other is willing to defend the just cause, as he sees it, with every possible means, even to the point where none of those who were in need of justice will survive in the end” (pp. 168-169).

This is why Gandhi always refers to the action of Jesus Christ when he both condemned the hypocritical leaders of his time while at the same time prayed for their forgiveness when they crucified him. For Gandhi, Jesus Christ was a Satyagrahi, as was Harishchandra, Prahlad, Mirabai, Daniel (the Jewish believer who was thrown into the den of lions), Socrates, and the Arabs who hurled themselves on the fire of the French artillery. To him, they were all Satyagrahis (cf. Holmes, p. 53). There could not be a better clarification on why Gandhi praises Jesus’ attitude than Haring’s when he expressed the compatibility between Christ’s promise of peace and the division that could result when he is accepted. He says:

The peace message of Christ must not be belittled. It must be envisioned with all its heights, depths and tensions. Jesus tells His disciples, “Peace I bequeath you, my own peace I give you, a peace the world cannot give, this is my gift to you” (John, 2014, p. 27). However, he who desires the peace of Christ must follow Him in the decisive “no” to any form of unsound peace. This is expressed with utmost urgency in the word: “Do you suppose that I am here to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division” (Luke, 2012, p. 51, pp. 167-168).

Peter Kreeft succinctly reinforced this view by adding that “the explanation of the paradox is that the sword he brings is not the world’s sword (most of us understand that) and the peace he brings is not the world’s peace (many of us do *not* understand that)” (p. 149).

These individuals: Jesus Christ, Harishchandra, Prahlad, and so on, were described as Satyagrahis because they never applied physical force through the use of arms or weapons, which they showed when they neither inflicted pain on their rivals, nor sought their ruin or intended evil for them. In their dogged pursuit of peace, they showed persistent and consistent anchoring to truth against all odds. The force they applied was that of truth is soul-force. It is this force that Gandhi called Satyagraha. This soul-force insists on truth, but it is truth expressed in love. The Satyagrahis discovered the secret that love is the force that moves the world and not antagonisms and hatred. According to Gandhi, “if ill-will were the chief motive-force, the world would have been destroyed long ago. ... We are alive solely because of love” (ibid., p. 52). It is this characteristic of Satyagraha that made it a distinguished non-violent attitude to peace, but its type of non-violence has no room for cowardice. Hence, Gandhi accentuated:

I ask you, is our non-violence the non-violence of the coward, the weak, the helpless, the timid? In that case, it is of no value. A weakling is a born saint. A weak person is obliged to become a saint. But we are soldiers of non-violence, who if the occasion demands, will lay down their lives for it. Our non-violence is not a mere policy of the coward (ibid., p. 54).

Gandhi understands very well that although peace is connected with justice, the bond between love and peace is much stronger. *Gaudium et Spes*, one of the documents of the Second Vatican Council, confirmed this when, after acknowledging that “peace is not merely the absence of war;” but “an enterprise of justice” (n. 78), added that:

Peace on earth cannot be obtained unless personal well-being is safeguarded and men freely and trustingly share with one another the riches of their inner spirits and their talents. A firm determination to respect other men and peoples and their dignity, as well as the studied practice of brotherhood are absolutely necessary for the establishment of peace. Hence peace is likewise the fruit of love, which goes beyond what justice can provide (n. 78).

Thomas Aquinas reaffirms this in a more lucid way stating that “peace is the work of justice indirectly, in so far as justice removes the obstacles to peace: but it is the work of charity directly, since charity, according to its very nature, causes peace” (ST.III, Q.29, Art. 3).

What is very thought-provoking in Gandhi’s statement is that a soldier now makes non-violence its approach to peace. A soldier who is trained for war and battle is now applying a method that does not resonate with the object of his drill. A Satyagrahi must be a soldier trained to fight the battle against injustice and hatred, but his instrument is truth, which is rooted in love and has no room for violence. With this approach, he prepares to die rather than kill. He has no fear in the schedule of his mind because the non-violence of Satyagraha entertains no fear. Gandhi explained it thus:

Just as one must learn the art of killing in the training of violence, so one must learn the art of dying in the training for non-violence. Violence does not mean emancipation from fear, but discovering the means of combating the cause of fear. Non-violence, on the other hand, has no cause for fear. The votary of non-violence has to cultivate the capacity for sacrifice of the highest type in order to be free from fear.

Is this not a reiteration of the prophecy of Isaiah in the Hebrew Bible? Isaiah the prophet was attributed with prophesying about the future world where human beings and nations “shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks”. The time when “one nation shall not raise the sword against another, nor shall they train for war again” (Isaiah). Expounding and interpreting this, Rabbi Joseph Telushkin said:

Isaiah's words remain a goad, a reminder that the goal to which mankind must aspire is universal peace. But such peace cannot come at once with a unilateral declaration of disarmament by good people; it must also be preceded by transformations in evil people as well. Otherwise, as Charles Pellegrino has written: "History teaches us that he who beats his sword into plowshares usually ends up plowing for those who kept their swords" (p. 287).

A non-violent Satyagrahi does not run away in the face of trouble and conflict. In his pursuit of peace in violent situations, he dares to face danger and death with courage and is ready to endure hardships when they arise. One sees the reason why Gandhi gives the illustration that "he who trembles or takes to his heels the moment he sees two people fighting is not non-violent, but a coward". According to him, "a non-violent person will lay down his life in preventing such quarrels" (ibid., p. 55).

Finally, Thomas Aquinas, one of the greatest Scholastic philosophers, avers that knowledge which for him is embedded in philosophy, "can be concerned only with being, for nothing can be known, save what is true; and all that is, is true". It means that the goal and subject matter of every philosopher is the search for truth and the study of being respectively. As a philosopher studies Being which is reality, he makes a soul-search for truth since Being which is whatever is, is, because it is true and has being; and whatever has being is reality; therefore reality is truth. Gandhi proved that he was a philosopher when he explained Satyagraha and the notion of peace from this fundamental approach. Peace is a reality and peace is truth. Hence, the following logical analysis of Gandhi:

The way of peace is the way of truth. Truthfulness is even more important than peacefulness. Indeed, lying is the mother of violence. A truthful man cannot long remain violent. He will perceive in the course of his search that he has no need to be violent and he will further discover that so long as there is the slightest trace of violence in him, he will fail to find the truth he is searching.

A clear deduction that could be made from this logic, which no good author on peace has ever failed to mention, is that every pursuit of peace starts with oneself. Gandhi reiterated this fact and advised all disciples of Satyagraha in this realistic way:

We may never be strong enough to be entirely non-violent in thought, word and deed. But we must keep non-violence as our goal and make steady progress towards it. The attainment of freedom whether for a man, a nation or the world, must be in exact proportion to the attainment of non-violence by each.

The summary of the lessons of Satyagraha in peacemaking and peacebuilding today is that every sincere pursuit of peace involves risks. Peace is the goal of war and not vice versa. This is why Thomas Aquinas was right when he viewed peace as an end and defended the position that "all things desire peace. According to him, even those who seek war and dissension desire nothing but peace, which they deem themselves not to have" (ST. III, Q. 29, Art. 2). Therefore, even a Satyagrahi who wants peace must prepare for "war"—not the war of firearms and nuclear weapons—but the "non-violent war" of

self-sacrifice and love. The war of self-offering that inflicts pain on oneself instead of on the enemy and also swallows the pride of one's ego and seeks dialogue. Meekness is not weakness! It is the war that works for reconciliation and is ready to give up the precious natural longing for self-preservation and self-defense. It is the war meant by Gandhi when he said: "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 sympathy". The self-sacrifice that is rooted in Satyagraha is the true antidote and real combatant to the falsehood of Fascism and that of Marxism where "Dialectical materialism breaks up the synthesis of the desired peace into a thesis and antithesis of hatred and struggle" (Haring, p. 169)—in other words, using blood to wash blood. Rather than this, Haring wisely suggests a "courageous sacrifice for truth and justice and a love that overcomes every obstacle" (p. 170).

4. Conclusion

We have seen that the teachings of Satyagraha are rooted in truth, love, self-sacrifice, compassion, reconciliation, forgiveness, and peace as the end result. Satyagraha is therefore that credo of love which holds that when either the pursuit of the way of truth or its expression is done in love, peace is guaranteed. This is because anything done in love gives room for peace, thus Virgil rightly said, *amor vincit omnia* (love conquers all). If "truth is said in love", and truthful ways are pursued in love, peace is assured. This explains why the message of Satyagraha is summarized in the various teachings of many great religious leaders. It is that which Buddha meant when he said that "those who have failed to work toward the truth have missed the purpose of life". He is credited with this indicative statement of the relationship between love-action and peace: "in separateness lies the world's greatest misery; in compassion lies the world's true strength". Satyagraha is also the principle underlying Ury's *The Third Side*, his book that suggests the phrase "the third side" as the best approach to peace building and conflict resolution. According to Winslow Myers, "Ury's term 'the third side' refers to the idea that although conflict is usually viewed as two-sided ('you're either with us or against us'), conflict resolution requires a 'third side' that is not advocating for either combatant, but instead advocates for resolution" (p. 106). All those who resolve conflict this way, instead of the violent ways, are Satyagrahi in Gandhi's perspective.

In Jewish scripture, the prophet was speaking of Satyagraha when he exclaimed that "the wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid, and the calf and the lion... together" (Isaiah 11:4). It was that which Jesus the Christ, preached when he taught that we ought to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us (cf. Matthew 5:4). It was also that which Prophet Mohammed (Qu'ran 42:40) meant when he stated: "And the retribution for an evil act is an evil one like it, but whoever pardons and makes reconciliation—his reward is due from Allah. Indeed, He does not like wrongdoers". The message of the prophet is centered more on the second clause which is more godly than the first. The reason is because he who pardons and makes reconciliation worth more before

the Creator, because he follows the way of the supernatural above the natural. This truth is reaffirmed in the sermon of Jesus Christ, the Son of God: “Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the children of God” (Matthew 5:9). Finally, it is the message of Satyagraha that is contained in every part of the Hindu *Bhagavad Gita* which influenced Gandhi, the innovator and champion of this concept.

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