

Mahatma Gandhi articles on Satyagraha

Compiled by Holger Terp

Based upon Satyagraha [non-violent resistance], 1951, 1958

Foreword

1 Satyagraha, civil disobedience, passive resistance, non-co-operation. *Young India*, March 23, 1921

It is often my lot to answer knotty questions on all sorts of topics arising out of this great movement of national purification. A company of collegiate non-co-operators asked me to define for them the terms which I have used as heading for this note. And even at this late day, I was seriously asked whether satyagraha did not at times warrant resistance by violence, as for instance in the case of a sister whose virtue might be in danger from a desperado. I ventured to suggest that it was the completest defence without irritation, without being ruffled, to interpose oneself between the victim and the victimizer, and to face death. I added that this (for the assailant) novel method of defence would, in all probability, exhaust his passion and he would no longer want to ravish an innocent woman, but would want to flee from her presence for very shame, and that, if he did not, the act of personal bravery on the part of her brother would steel her heart for putting up an equally brave defence and resisting the lust of a man turned brute for the while. And I thought I clinched my argument by saying that if, in spite of all the defence, the unexpected happened, and the physical force of the tyrant overpowered his victim, the disgrace would not be that of the woman but of her assailant and that both she and her brother, who died in the attempt to defend her virtue, would stand well before the Throne of Judgment. I do not warrant that my argument convinced my listener or that it would convince the reader. The world I know will go on as before. But it is well at this moment of self examination to understand and appreciate the implications of the powerful movement of non-violence. All religions have emphasized the highest ideal, but all have more or less permitted departures as so many concessions to human weaknesses.

I now proceed to summarize the explanations I gave of the various terms. It is beyond my capacity to give accurate and terse definitions.

Satyagraha, then, is literally holding on to Truth and it means, therefore, Truth-force. Truth is soul or spirit. It is, therefore, known as soul-force. It excludes the use of violence because man is not capable of knowing the absolute truth and, therefore, not competent to punish.

The word was coined in South Africa to distinguish the non-violent resistance of the Indians of South Africa from the contemporary 'passive resistance' of the suffragettes and others. It is not conceived as a weapon of the weak.

Passive resistance is used in the orthodox English sense and covers the suffragette movement as well as the resistance of the nonconformists. Passive resistance has been conceived and is regarded as a weapon of the weak. Whilst it avoids violence, being not open to the weak, it does not exclude its use if, in the opinion of a passive resister, the occasion demands it. However, it has always been distinguished from armed resistance and its application was at one time confined to Christian martyrs.

Civil disobedience is civil breach of unmoral statutory enactments. The expression was, so far as I am aware, coined by Thoreau to signify his own resistance to the laws of a slave state. He has left a masterly treatise² on the duty of civil disobedience. But Thoreau was not perhaps an out-and-out champion of non-violence. Probably, also, Thoreau limited his breach of statutory laws to the revenue law, i.e., payment of taxes, whereas the term "civil disobedience"

as practiced in 1919 covered a breach of any statutory and unmoral law. It signified the resister's outlawry in a civil, i.e., non-violent manner. He invoked the sanctions of the law and cheerfully suffered imprisonment. It is a branch of satyagraha.

Non-co-operation predominantly implies withdrawing of cooperation from the state that in the non-co-operator's view has become corrupt and excludes civil disobedience of the fierce type described above. By its very nature, non-co-operation is even open to children of understanding and can be safely practiced by the masses.

Civil disobedience presupposes the habit of willing obedience to laws without fear of their sanctions. It can therefore be practiced only as a last resort and by a select few in the first instance at any rate.

Non-co-operation, too, like civil disobedience is a branch of satyagraha which includes all non-violent resistance for the vindication of Truth.

Definition of satyagraha

2 Domestic satyagraha. *The Story of My Experiments With Truth*, part IV, chapter XXIX

3 Satyagraha. *Young India*, January 14, 1920

4 Means and ends. *Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule*, chapter XVI

5 Satyagraha or passive resistance. *Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule*, chapter XVII

6 Evidence before the Hunter committee¹. *Young India*, February, 4, 1920

7 The theory and practice of satyagraha. *Indian Opinion* 1914; *Young India*, February 4, 1920

Discipline for satyagraha

8 satyagraha ashram vows. *Indian Opinion* 1914; *Young India*, November 3, 1927

i Truth. *Yeravda Mandir*², chapter I.

ii Ahimsa or love. *Yeravda Mandir*, chapter II.

iii Brahmacharya or chastity. *Yeravda Mandir*, chapter III.

iv Non-possession. *Yeravda Mandir*, chapter IV.

9 Yajna or sacrifice. *Yeravda Mandir*, chapter XI-XV.

10 Protecting Hinduism. *Young India*, July 19, 1924

11 Moral requirements for satyagraha. *Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule*, chapter XVII

12 Conditions for successful satyagraha. *Young India*, April 27, 1921

13 Non-retallation. *Young India*, August 25, 1921

14 Courage and discipline necessary. *Young India*, October 20, 1921

15 The need for humility. *Young India*, January 12, 1921

16 Work in jails. *Young India*, December 15, 1921

17 A model prisoner. *Young India*, December 29, 1921

18 Satyagrahi prisoner's conduct. *Young India*, June 5, 1924

1 One of the primary sources to early satyagraha documents is *Punjab unrest before & after being a comprehensive account of the late agitation over the Rowlatt Acts and the riots which followed in the Punjab and elsewhere* by H N Mitra, with Mahatma Gandhi's Evidence pp. 140-146.

This volume includes Extracts from evidence before the Hunter Committee, The Amritsar debate in the House of Commons, The Dyer debate in the House of Lords, and other documents.

<http://www.archive.org/details/punjabunrestbefo029550mbp>

2 Gandhi, Mahatma: From Yeravda Mandir (Ashram Observances). 1932

<http://www.mkgandhi.org/yeravda/yeravda.htm>