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THE RELEVANCE OF THE GANDHIAN CONCEPT OF SATYAGRAHA

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Abstract:

The relevance of Satyagraha invokes a mixed reaction amongst intellectuals. If some regard the Gandhian concept of Satyagraha as the most creative way to resolve conflicts and contradictions in a social system, others seriously doubt its efficacy as a means of obtaining redress for social and political wrongs. There are many who blame Gandhi and his theory of Satyagraha for all the contemporary problems of India and there are those who stress that many of the contemporary tensions in the Indian political system are not due to the Gandhian teachings but because of the failure of those who after the death of Gandhi have led the people in the name of Gandhi. Such debatable impressions are often produced when the study of Gandhian technique of Satyagraha at its operational level is cut off from its conceptual moorings¹.

KEY WORDS:

Relevance , Satyagraha , political wrongs , social.

INTRODUCTION

Before the advent of Gandhiji, India had tried three methods of getting political grievances redressed, (i) constitutional agitation of the liberals, (ii) passive resistance of the extremists, and (iii) terrorism adopted by (iv) revolutionaries. Gandhiji rejected all these and tried his own method of non-violent resistant, which he had devised and experimented upon in south Africa. Technically, it is known as Satyagraha. By his life long researches he made Satyagraha 'The moral equivalent of war' and the technique of solving group conflicts. In his own words, Satyagraha was a weapon of the strong and excluded the use of violence, in any shape or form².

Mahatma Gandhi has attracted the attention of many scholars, who have studied Gandhi from various angles. They deal with some aspects of Gandhi's thought and leave much to be supplemented by others. Gandhiji was not primarily a political thinker. He was a religious minded man, a humanist and a man of action and intuition. He was a curious amalgam of mystic and pragmatist³.

There are three essential requisites of Satyagraha. First, the Satyagraha should proceed from conscientious dissent inspired by moral of religious beliefs, it must be based upon well established canons of morality, must not be capricious, and above all must have no ill-will, grudge or hatred behind it.4 Satyagraha must always be dictated by the inner conscience (Atman) and, in no case, be actuated by personal gains and frivolous passions⁴.

Satyagrahai must adopt non-violent means in his infraction. In the words of Gandhi, "this ahinsa is the basis of the search for truth. I am realizing every day that the search is vain unless it is founded on ahinsa as the basis. It is quite proper to resist and attack a system, but to resist and attack its author is tantamount to resisting and attacking oneself. For we are all tarred with the same brush and are children of one and the

same creator and as such the divine powers within us are infinite. To slight a single human being is to slight those divine powers and thus to harm not only that being but with him the whole world. In Gandhi's own words, "a Satyagraha is to overcome evil by good, anger by love, untruth by truth, hinsa by ahinsa, "The cardinal feature of this proposition is that it is better to suffer violence than to inflict it"⁵.

Satyagrahi must submit willingly to the legal consequences of his act. Nothing is likely to awaken the conscience of the oppressor so much as the sight of a Satyagrahi cheerfully accepting sufferings for the sake of the-cause he deems right. The stupendous power generated through this innocent suffering would prove more revolutionary than an armed rebellion. The instance of Socrates drinking cup of Hemlock rather than resile amply vindicate it⁶.

Gandhi derived the idea of Satyagrahi from the writings of Thoreau and Tolstoy on "passive resistance". His originality lies in making their philosophy an instrument for correcting the wrongs in political field an absolutely new phenomenon in the world of action. Lenin and Ho-chi-Minh, the two leading political revolutionaries of the Twentieth century are reported to have been impressed very much by the methodology of the Gandhian Satyagraha and the success acquired through it in overthrowing the Britishers from India⁷.

Conditions, however, have changed now. The free India is quite different from the pre-independence India. The Satyagraha does not seem to work the way it was intended to work. The core objective of "the change of heart" has rather never been the ultimate concern of the movements launched in the name of Satyagraha. Conversely, violence and the spirit of intolerance and intimidation, in other words 'Duragraha' lies concealed at the bottom of such movements. Not even one Gandhian-genuine or otherwise has cared to resort to Satyagraha against the greed and possessive propensity of the Indian propertied classes who have held the country to ransom. Not even one has made use of Satyagraha for ameliorating the lot of the weaker sections of society-particularly the men and women of the depressed classes and the Harijans.⁸

Three important questions, therefore, naturally emerge through the study of Satyagraha in the present context. One, has not there been an erosion of the Gandhian values in the acts of satyagraha in free India? Two, has not the efficacy of Satyagraha doubted even by the Gandhians to some extent? and, lastly, has not Satyagraha lost its validity in contemporary reality⁹?

In the Gandhian terminology, violence (Hinsa) means inflicting injury by thought, word or deed. A Satyagraha is required to be non-violent not only in his action but also in his thought and intention. He is not expected to harbour any ill-will against his opponent. Further, the recourse to Satyagraha should be sought as a last resort only when all other methods of non-cooperation have failed. Satyagraha should never be undertaken to subvert the social structure to incite indiscipline or to serve petty interests¹⁰.

Most of the Satyagrahas launched in free India have not been Gandhian in their form, content and character. It is important that for applying a principle, one must apply not only the principle but also the structure of principles in which the particular principle is an element. The Satyagrahis have failed to articulate the values embodied in the Gandhian philosophy of Satyagraha, in independent India¹¹.

VALIDITY ASPECTS:

Problem of the validity of Satyagraha has two aspects-ideological and operational. There is no gain saying the fact that at the ideological level satyagraha would remain as valid as Kant's categorical imperatives or Thoreau's 'passive resistance'. At the operational level, however, its validity would depend upon time, place and people, for it requires a high degree of discipline and morality, including genuine love for the opponent and a desire to change heart. Satyagraha might fail temporarily in an amoral society or in community of brutes that have been used to violent methods down the ages. But there is some sort of understanding regarding fundamental norms and values Satyagraha could be successfully resorted to as a means of resolving conflicts and contradictions¹².

In our times, equality, freedom and social justice are the three norms to which every political system declares its allegiance. But the means adopted for their realization are generally not in conformity with the ideals. Equality is sought through preferences, freedom through force, prosperity through serfdom, justice through deception and legitimacy through fraud. Consequently, the world has become full of misery, discrimination, fear, frustration, injustice and exploitation. To worsen the matter, industrial civilization has further blurred our vision by making us slaves to our desires and passions. As much, we are lacking the moral fibre to resist oppression, injustice or authoritarianism. At such a critical juncture of history even full-scale violence cannot put the house to order. "A real social order", declared Gandhi, "cannot be forced, that would be a remedy worse than the disease".

Therefore, the only relevant cause left before us is the Gandhian way to Satyagraha. As already stated, Satyagraha is not merely a weapon for correcting the wrongs, it is also a philosophy of life and politics. It is a technique by which people could themselves cope with their social and political problems. "It is the kinetic force required to sew up the wasted energies and shake us out of our socio-political apathy.⁴ It alone can provide the moral fibre to resist authoritarianism, complacency and indifference to justice in political life and to lift society from the debris of moral decay. A few decades later, perhaps, the world will be compelled by sheer necessity to have recourse to the Gandhian Satyagraha, because the only alternative to it would be total peril or destruction.

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