
UNIT 1 AHIMSA AND SATYAGRAHA

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1.0 OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this unit is to introduce the students to socio-political significance of Gandhian concept of *ahimsa* and *satyagraha*. It would also enable one to know how to apply these principles in one's social and political interventions. Along with these, it is intended to evaluate and compare adequately the present day political system with Gandhian vision.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Ahimsa and *satyagraha* imply great significance in the life and philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi. They were two socio-political weapons he used in achieving his various goals. *Ahimsa* and *satyagraha* were not new ideals but they are the eternal principles of life preached for thousands of years. However, these ideals lacked universality and fullness of meaning. They were regarded as cloistered virtues. It was the great adventure of Gandhi that he reinterpreted and restated these fundamental principles of human behaviour in new ways and showed their universality. He made several experiments with them and with great zeal applied them in an original way practically in every aspect of human life especially in the social and political fields. In Gandhian philosophy all his main concepts like truth, *ahimsa*, *satyagraha*, *sarvodaya*, etc., are not individual and independent concepts but they are interrelated. *Satyagraha* is nothing but the implementation of truth and *ahimsa* in the different walks of life. *Satyagraha* is a logical development of the doctrine of *ahimsa*. The history of Indian culture is the history of the evolution of the concept of *ahimsa*, and *satyagraha* is a practical application of *ahimsa* to politics. *Ahimsa* is the foundation of *satyagraha*, the "irreducible minimum" to which *satyagraha* adheres to. The idea and practice of *satyagraha* constitute the heart and soul of Gandhi's belief in non-violence.

1.2 THE MEANING OF AHIMSA AND SATYAGRAHA

The literal meaning of the Sanskrit word *Ahimsa* is non-injury' or 'non-killing'. But Gandhi adopted the word 'non-violence' which means refraining from the use of physical force capable of causing injury or death to the opponent. Even though Gandhi admits that he could not succeed in defining *ahimsa* fully the meaning of this word developed further in the hands of Gandhi. *Ahimsa* means and includes non-violence in thoughts, words and deeds towards all sentient beings. It has been used interchangeably with simple inaction and with direct action. The idea of *satyagraha* was not originally conceived by Gandhi. The idea was found in religious anthologies like the Upanishads, the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, the Gita, the Quran and many others. It was also practiced by eminent personalities like Socrates, Plato, Jesus, Ashoka and others.

The term *satyagraha* is derived from a compound word in Sanskrit, *satya* and *agraha*. *Satya* itself is derived from *sat*, which means being, that which exists. *Satya* means that which is in accordance with *sat* or being, that is, truth. *Agraha* means holding fast, adherence or insistence. Thus the compound word *satyagraha* means clinging to truth, holding fast to truth, insistence on truth or firm adherence to truth. In the socio-political field *satyagraha* was a kind of resistant movement against the unjust laws. Gandhi started this movement in South Africa in 1906 with the Indians who were suffering from the unjust laws. In the early stages Gandhi himself called this movement 'Passive Resistance,' but later he felt ashamed of using an English word which could not be easily understood and used by the Indians. Thus, he adopted the term *satyagraha* which would give almost the same meaning of 'Passive Resistance.'

1.3 THE DYNAMIC MEANING OF AHIMSA AND SATYAGRAHA

Even though the word *ahimsa* is equated with the English word 'non-violence' it connotes a negative meaning, almost a passive condition. However, the term *ahimsa* suggests a dynamic state of mind in which power is released. *Ahimsa* is negative in its meaning but positive in its approach to life i.e. doing good to others. According to Gandhi, strength does not come from physical capacity but it comes from an indomitable will. So *Ahimsa* is not just non-violence but strength of will. Violence checks this energy within, and is ultimately disruptive in its consequences, *ahimsa*, properly understood is invincible.

Ahimsa is not mere pacifism. It is dynamic positive force. It is active condemnation of untruth, without violence, anger or malice – an attitude both towards the human and the sub-human creation. *Ahimsa* is the principle of the sacredness of life and not merely a negative virtue; it involves the positive doing of good quite as much as the negative refusal to do harm. The idea of *ahimsa* is purity and truth rather than mere compassion or pity. It does not mean helping the evil-doer to continue their wrong or tolerating it by passive acquiescence. On the contrary, love requires resisting the wrong-doer by dissociating oneself from him even though it may offend him or injure him physically.

Truth and Love is central to the whole concept of *ahimsa*. Gandhi often stressed that a seeker after truth must imbibe the faith of *ahimsa*. Gandhi stressed that the

kingdom of God could be achieved by resorting to the twin principles of *ahimsa* and truth. In the ordinary sense, love means loving an object which is good but to Gandhi, love is absolute where the person, out of love, imposes suffering on himself, irrespective of whether the object on the other party is good or bad. Non-violence implies love of other human beings and love is directly related to God and truth.

As the Gandhian *ahimsa* is much more profound than the ordinary understanding of *ahimsa*, his notion of *satyagraha* also is more comprehensive than the ordinary meaning. The meaning of *satyagraha* is beyond the meaning of 'Passive Resistance.' Passive resistance, as commonly understood in the West in its historical setting, is a weapon of the weak, of the unarmed and helpless. It does not eschew violence as a matter of principle but only because of lack of the means of violence, or out of sheer expedience. It would use arms if and when they are available. Love has no place in it. There is no place for service of the people or constructive activity in it. In contra-distinction to passive resistance, *satyagraha* is the law of love or the way of love for all. It eschews violence absolutely as a matter of principle, at all stages and in all forms. It can never go hand in hand with any kind of violent activity involving injury to person or property. The idea behind it is not to destroy or harass the opponent, but to convert or win him over any sympathy, patience and self-suffering.

In ordinary *satyagraha*, we try to get the truth by hook or by crook. Either we will keep on fasting, or we will go on strike, and in that way we try to get things done. But true *satyagraha*, from the spiritual point of view, is not so. There we want to see the truth through surrender to the Will of God. The seeker wants to pursue the truth, but while pursuing the truth he feels the necessity of surrendering to the Will of God. So in the spiritual life, *satyagraha* means total devoted surrender to the Will of Truth, and this Truth is God.

Check Your Progress I

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

1) Give an explanation on the etymology of the term *satyagraha*.

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2) How is *ahimsa* different from pacifism?

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3) “The real meaning of *satyagraha* is more profound than the meaning of Passive Resistance.” Illustrate the notion.

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1.4 THE GOAL OF AHIMSA AND SATYAGRAHA

For Gandhi *ahimsa* and *satyagraha* were tools to social change. A *satyagrahi* has immense faith in the inherent goodness of human nature and he believes that it responds to love, to service, to suffering and to sacrifice. *Satyagraha* is never launched for personal gain but is always used for the good of others. A *satyagrahi* who is actively non-violent refuses to obey repugnant laws and cheerfully suffers the consequences. If there is a government that does not concede the reasonable and just demands of people, a *satyagrahi* would say that they would no longer be their petitioners, or be governed by them, or have any dealing with them. They would suffer the brutal might of the tyrant cheerfully but unbendingly.

The goal of *satyagraha* includes the solution of human problems. *Satyagraha* aims at moralization of politics, fighting injustice and tyranny, settling social, political and economical disputes, establishing effective democracy, laying foundations of a new social order based on justice and equality and paying the way for world peace. The *satyagrahi* peruses his path with the single-mindedness. When he encounters evil he resists it with all his might. The word ‘defeat’ does not find a place in his vocabulary. While fighting obstinately for his cause, he is ever willing to compromise with his opponents, provided that it does not involve humiliation and surrender of essentials.

Gandhi used *satyagraha* as a process of conversion. He, throughout his life, worked for the conversion or the correction of the evil-doers. He believed that suffering was a more potent and effective method of conversion than reasoning and discussion. Voluntary suffering will dominate the animal aspect of the opponent and will arouse the good aspect of his nature and will help him to become a better human being. As a moral weapon, *satyagraha* is a peaceful protest against the laws, customs and practices which one finds contrary to the dictates of one’s conscience. It aims at cleansing of the whole atmosphere and voluntary change of the heart and mind of all parties to a conflict.

The goal of individual and group *satyagraha* is not to crush, defeat or punish the tyrant. It is not even to harm or embarrass him, though the resistance and suffering may, as a matter of fact, cause the wrong-doer embarrassment. Positively a *satyagrahi* will always try to overcome evil by good, anger by love, untruth by truth and *himsa* by *ahimsa*. The way to treat the opponent as a member of the family is to give him the same credit for honesty of purpose which the *satyagrahi* claims for himself.

1.5 THE SOCIO-POLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF AHIMSA AND SATYAGRAHA

Even though *ahimsa* and *stayagaraha* were not new doctrines of Gandhian philosophy, never before it was used for political purposes. They enter into the very fibre of one's being and revolutionize all sides of one's life such as individual, domestic, social, political and economic. Non-violence resulted in good will for the British and transformed their hearts. *Ahimsa* in the hands of Gandhi became an efficacious social and political technique of action. According to Gandhi in violence there is nothing invisible, but non-violence on the other hand is three-fourths invisible, and hence the effect is in the inverse ratio to its invisibility.

Gandhi himself admits that *ahimsa* is a creed, the breath of his life, but he has never placed it before the country or the Congress as a creed, but as a political method for the solution of political problems. Gandhi was of the view that the social order should be established on truth and non-violence. Gandhi's non-violent society would be a perfect democracy where each unit of a village even was to be self-sufficient, independent and free. If there is a necessity of the state at all, it should be non-violent in its nature. Initially in his non-violent society there would be no necessity of military or police. Great emphasis in this society was laid on rural life and decentralization. The non-violent strategy demands a more rigorous training than the violent one. Conflict is inherent in social, economic or political situations. The non-violent technique claims creative and constructive results, after creating a 'crisis-packed' situation. Negotiation became imperative. The forces of understanding and cordiality are released.

Satyagraha is employed not only to solve the national problems but also to solve the international problems. In South Africa, this weapon was employed against the cruel and unjust policy of the government. Indians in South Africa were harassed, humiliated and debarred from all rights and privileges. According to Gandhi war is a product of envy, ill-will and misunderstanding between nations. The factors that lead the nations to war are the same as those that lead individuals to moral and spiritual degradation. Gandhi holds that war can be abolished forever and peace and harmony can be established between nations by an extension of the principle of truth and non-violence.

Check Your Progress II

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

- 1) The goal of *satyagraha* includes the solution of human problems. Explain.

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2) How does <i>satyagraha</i> function as a means of conversion?
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3) How did Gandhi give a new socio-political outlook to <i>ahimsa</i> and <i>satyagraha</i> ?
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1.6 THE PRINCIPLES OF SATYAGRAHA TECHNIQUE

The basic assumption of *satyagraha* is the essential goodness of human nature. It holds that temporary aberrations of brother-humans would pass away if the right attitude, namely, of love and self-suffering, is adopted. The origin of this relationship based on love is to be sought in the intuitive and mystic realization of the oneness of all life. The *satyagrahi* does not feel that his blood-relations alone are his family. It is no rhetoric when Gandhi said that the whole world was his family. Thus, *satyagrahi* looks upon no one as his enemy. Everyone is a friend, a fellow being and a brother or sister for him.

The *satyagrahi*, instead of physically resisting wrong, suffers it bravely and cheerfully as something done by his or her own brother or sister and thus attempts to reach the heart of the wrong-doer. He separates the evil from the evil-doer and while trying to eradicate evil, tries to save the evil-doer by making him or her cognizant of the evil. The *satyagrahi* makes the opponent feel that he or she is loved and respected and that he or she must divest himself or herself of the evil that harbours or clings to. By suffering himself or herself and by assuring his or her opponent of his or her physical safety, he or she sets him or her thinking about the wrong he or she has committed. According to Gandhi one must non-co-operate with his actions and at the same time one must show loving tendency towards him or her as a fellow being.

Whenever there is a conflict or grievance or a wrong which can be redressed by the application of mass or group *satyagraha*, a *satyagrahi* must first convince himself or herself of the truthfulness of the cause. If after a full, careful and disinterested investigation he finds that grievance is real the next thing he or she has to see is whether those who are suffering from it are keenly feeling the necessity to get rid of it. As soon as a *satyagrahi* realizes the enormity of the grievance, he or she should bring it to the notice of the perpetrators of the wrong

in the gentlest language possible and try to convince them of their responsibility for it. Then he or she should give due and truthful publicity to the facts of the situation without any exaggeration. In the meanwhile, the *satyagrahi* must make himself or herself sure whether he or she is ready to suffer and follow the path of *satyagraha*. If a substantial majority of the people agree to offer *satyagraha* they should be strengthened in their resolve. If a majority is not willing, it is no bar to launch individual *satyagraha* to rouse the consciousness of the sufferers and set an example.

The people concerned must, first of all, take a pledge and begin with a programme of self-purification. The solemnity of the pledge and the arduous task ahead need not in any way frighten the people. They should rather stiffen them in their resolve. It should be emphasized that the weapon they are using is morally superior to the struggle unflinchingly. It is necessary that *satyagraha* campaigns should not be dependent for finance upon outsiders as far as possible. Whatever finance is required should be locally raised and very economically spent. Correct account must be kept of every pie collected and spent. If there are arrests, the people should willingly submit and while in prison obey the jail rules not repugnant to their religion or self-respect. One should conform to the jail regulations unless one launches a campaign for prison reform there should be no heart-burning over the arrest of people. In disobeying any order or law that prohibits a certain person from carrying on his or her legitimate duty, one need not have knowledge of the finer points of *satyagraha* technique. He is to declare his or her intention to disobey the order, and invite the penalty cheerfully. But it is absolutely essential that he or she should be civil throughout.

1.7 THE APPLICATION OF SATYAGRAHA TECHNIQUE

Gandhi took recourse to the various methods of *satyagraha* during his life-time for the success of *satyagraha* movement. These techniques were employed and experimented by Gandhi and his co-workers for the correction of social, political, economic and religious wrongs and for the conversion of wrong doers. Among the many techniques let us see some important techniques.

Fasting

Fasting is the most potent and effective method of conversion and correction. Gandhi described it to be the last resort to be used when all other techniques fail. Fasts were undertaken to check the act of violence, to remove the bitterness or even to purify socio-political atmosphere. Fasting as a technique of *satyagraha*, was first employed by him in South Africa for the purpose of self-purification, then in India for various social and political causes. Self-purification though a goal of fasting is also in some sense, a condition for fasting. Without self-purification on the part of a *satyagrahi*, a fast cannot be successful. Fasting according to him is a spiritual weapon addressed to God. A *satyagrahi* who undertakes fast must be free from anger and malice and should obey the call one's conscience. Gandhi undertook fasting seventeen times during his lifetime for a total period of one hundred and thirty eight days. He undertook fast unto death for various genuine grievances. According to him, fasting unto death is an integral part of *satyagraha* programme.

Non-Cooperation

Non-cooperation, as a technique of settling domestic and social disputes and correcting the unjust and immoral government, was existent even before Gandhi. However, he approved this as a method of *satyagraha* in September, 1920 in the special session of the Indian National Congress at Calcutta to secure redress of Punjab and Khilafat wrongs. Non-cooperation should be employed mainly in four stages, viz, giving up of titles and resignation of honorary posts, calling off of government servants, the withdrawal of the police, and the military and the suspension of taxes. Non-cooperation should not be along with violent lines, but along with non-violent lines. Non-cooperation was meant to resist all domestic, social and political injustices. Non-cooperation, according to him, is not only a domestic weapon, but also a political weapon. In political sphere, he employed this method not only against the unjust and improper governmental order, but also against all unjust and unfair authorities and institutions.

Civil Disobedience

In the view of Gandhi, civil disobedience should be undertaken as a last resort when all methods of *satyagraha* are employed and they fail. Civil disobedience is the inherent birthright of the citizens. It is to resist the unjust and immoral laws of the state by disobeying them. It becomes a sacred duty of the citizens when the state becomes lawless or corrupt. It can be offered by those who are not attracted by criminal disobedience or violence. Criminal disobedience leads to social and political disintegration. Disobedience combined with civility is strictly nonviolent. For Gandhi, in order that disobedience may be civil, it must be sincere, respectful, restrained, and never defiant; it must be based upon some well understood principle, must not be capricious and above all, must have no ill-will or hatred behind it. In India, he and his followers employed this method while distilling salt from seawater and violating unjust orders of the government.

Peaceful Picketing

The aim of peaceful picketing was to put social, economic and political pressure on the government and to create political consciousness and Swadeshi spirit amongst the masses. This technique was employed by Gandhi for the first time in 1907 during his South African *satyagraha* struggle. According to Gandhi, picketing is different from *dharna*. *Dharna* is a form of passive resistance. Picketing is non-violent in spirit, whereas *dharna* is violent in spirit. By *dharna*, he meant, sitting down or lying flat at the oppressors' door to block the way and inviting them to go for their work by treading on the bodies of those sitting or lying.

Constructive Programme

Gandhi's aim of *satyagraha* was not only to replace the existing socio-political order, but also to construct a new one in its place. The positive side of Gandhi's *satyagraha* programme is called 'constructive programme,' which he presented to India, through the Congress, in 1920; but it got a definite shape in 1941. He always attached more importance to constructive works than to civil disobedience due to three main reasons. They are;

- 1) Civil disobedience without constructive works becomes criminal and ineffective. Performance of constructive activity supplies civility to disobedience.

- 2) The greater the cultivation of the habit of performing constructive works, the less the need of offering civil disobedience.
- 3) Gandhi believed that every reform comes from within, not from without. Constructive programme offers an opportunity of building oneself from within.

Other than these, the *satyagraha* techniques include persuasion and propaganda, self-suffering and moral force, strikes, *hartal*, books, weeklies and pamphlets, imprisonment, boycott, no-tax campaign, etc.

1.8 CRITICISM ON GANDHIAN CONCEPT OF AHIMSA AND SATYAGRAHA

Even though Gandhian *ahimsa* and *satyagraha* were rich in its content and application, there are a few who make criticism on them. Let us see some of them in brief.

- 1) Gandhian thought has many inconsistencies and ambiguities. Sometimes he stood for absolute and sometimes for relative non-violence. At times he permitted violence. All life is accompanied by some violence and it is an inherent necessity of life in the body. Strictly speaking, no activity and no industry is possible without a certain amount of violence.
- 2) Gandhi’s views on war and defence are ambiguous and seriously conflicting. As an apostle of non-violence, he condemned war, and yet he gave moral support to three imperial wars. In the Boer War and the First World War he extended active co-operation to the British. In Second World War, Gandhi was of the opinion that the allies could keep their armed forces in India and make it the base of operations against the potential Japanese attack.
- 3) Like militaries who usually overestimate their strength, Gandhi, generally over-rated the strength of his weapon of non-violence and was disillusioned towards the close of his life.
- 4) *Satyagraha* is a non-violent weapon, but it may lead to violence if it is introduced prematurely. *Satyagraha* can be considered as a useless weapon by those who expect too much from it. He was considered an extremist in pressing his views. He was a saintly figure and he ignored the frailties of human nature.

Check Your Progress III

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

- 1) How did Gandhi use civil disobedience as a means of *satyagraha*?

- Passive Resistance** : ‘Passive Resistance’ is almost a subsequent English word for *satyagraha*. This term was used at the early phase of Gandhi’s *satyagraha* movement.
- Civil Disobedience** : The Civil Disobedience Movement led by M K Gandhi, in the year 1930 was an important milestone in the history of Indian Nationalism. The essence of The Civil Disobedience Movement was defying of the British laws.
- Peaceful Picketing** : Picketing or protesting is a way to express the dissatisfaction publicly and forcefully, attempting to influence the public opinion or government policy. Peaceful protest is defined as a way to demonstrate without any loss of life, negative effect to public and country, and positively, non-violent.

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