

# Ahimsa and Satyagraha

*the interaction of Hindu and Christian religious ideas,  
and their contribution to a political campaign*

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## **Gandhiji and Satyagraha**

Mahatma Gandhi occupies an unusual, perhaps unique, place in the twentieth century as the principal leader of a successful campaign for independence and at the same time a religious leader who combined evident sincerity, flair, and massive appeal to his fellow-countrymen because of his spirituality.

His campaigns of non-violent resistance, or Satyagraha as he preferred to call them, were effective weapons in his hands, and have been emulated elsewhere. In order to assess the usefulness and limitations of Satyagraha it will be helpful to examine the degree of acceptance which Satyagraha received among Gandhiji's supporters; the way in which the concept of Satyagraha developed; and the theoretical and practical basis of Satyagraha. This will indicate the significant connections between Western and Christian sources and Satyagraha, and the interaction of Hindu and Christian ideas which was involved in the technique.

First, a clarification of terms.

In his writings Mahatma Gandhi often used the words 'Satyagraha' and 'ahimsa' interchangeably, presumably because it appeared to him that Satyagraha was simply the application of the ancient idea of non-violence which is ahimsa. In what follows the Gandhian way of using these two terms is continued. Strictly, however, ahimsa should be used to refer to the Jaina, Hindu, and Buddhist concepts of non-violence; whilst Satyagraha, a word coined by Gandhiji, should be used of the technique of non-violent action applied to social and political situations.

The technique of Satyagraha was moulded by Gandhiji in South Africa, where he went as a remarkably raw and untried barrister to represent the interests of an Indian business concern in 1893.<sup>1</sup> It came as a shock to Gandhi to realize how disadvantaged Indians were in the South Africa of that time. When the initial case for which he had gone to Africa was over, Gandhi stayed<sup>2</sup> to organise Indians in opposi-

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<sup>1</sup> M. K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography*, SWMG, Vol. 1, pp. 149-161.

<sup>2</sup> See *An Autobiography*, SWMG, Vol. 1, p. 190.

tion first to the Bill which sought to deprive Indians of the right to elect members to the Natal Legislative Assembly, and later to other disabilities under which they laboured.<sup>3</sup> This work kept Gandhiji in South Africa for most of the intervening period until 1914, and it was during this time that the word Satyagraha was invented and the technique it described began to evolve. Satyagraha campaigns can be dated from 1906, when Gandhi and his fellow Satyagrahis began a campaign against an Ordinance of the Transvaal Legislative Council.

On returning to India after his long exile Gandhi quickly became involved in Indian Congress politics and in campaigns—not always directly associated with Congress—to secure better conditions for peasant-farmers, mill-workers, and others.<sup>4</sup> Through these activities his national reputation grew. His concept of Satyagraha continued to develop, and his ideas on this and other subjects became increasingly well-known. He quickly became an acknowledged leader of the independence movement in India, even when he held no official office.

His Satyagraha campaigns included that against the Salt Tax in 1930, which was perhaps the most trenchant example of the combination of Satyagraha and civil disobedience on an issue carefully selected to achieve maximum publicity, embarrassment to the Government, and national interest and support for the movement as a whole.<sup>5</sup>

As a result of his political activities, his speeches and writing, and his thoroughgoing, and largely successful, attempt to be seen as a leader who identified closely with the poor of India, Gandhiji attained a unique place in the history of twentieth century India. He is now commonly regarded as a saint, and one consequence of this is that much of what has been written about him belongs to the field of hagiography, containing more inspirational writing than cool analysis.

## The Development of Satyagraha

Neither by training nor inclination was Gandhiji a philosopher or theologian. His knowledge of his own religious tradition was at first confined to what he learned in his own home; only much later, after absorbing religious ideas from outside Hinduism, did he turn to a serious study of his own religion.<sup>6</sup>

During his stay in England as a young man reading for the Bar, Gandhi was affected by a number of religious influences. Theosophist friends encouraged him to read the Bhagavad Gita with them, and Gandhiji commented: 'The book struck me as one of priceless worth.'<sup>7</sup> He was introduced to the Bible by a Christian friend who, however, appears to have omitted any guidance as to how to read it. Gandhi

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 205.

<sup>4</sup> E.g. the early campaigns at Champaran, Kheda, and Ahmedabad. *An Autobiography*, SWMG, Vol. 2, pp. 612-657.

<sup>5</sup> See Judith M. Brown, *Gandhi and Civil Disobedience* (CUP, 1977), pp. 94-95.

<sup>6</sup> See M. K. Gandhi, *op. cit.*, SWMG, Vol. 1, pp. 45-50.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 1, p. 99.

began at the beginning, found the early books of the Old Testament unrewarding reading, and solemnly confessed a lack of enthusiasm for the Book of Numbers. The New Testament evoked a more enthusiastic response:

But the New Testament produced a different impression, especially the Sermon on the Mount which went straight to my heart. I compared it with the Gita. The verses, 'But I say unto you, that ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if any man take away thy coat let him have thy cloak too' delighted me beyond measure... My young mind tried to unify the teaching of the Gita, The Light of Asia, and the Sermon on the Mount. That renunciation was the highest form of religion appealed to me greatly.<sup>8</sup>

Gandhi's method with religious material is apparent here. His reading on the whole was random; he selected passages that appealed to him personally; and he then gave an interpretation which was not conditioned by dreary questions of background, context, language, or any other of the considerations which must be weighed by the scholar.

That the Sermon on the Mount is concerned primarily with renunciation is far from likely. A more acceptable interpretation of Matthew chapters 5 to 7 would regard this section as a collection of sayings which provide vivid illustrations of the nature of the love exhibited by a God of grace and, therefore, to be emulated by those who worship Him.<sup>9</sup>

On his return to India Gandhi was influenced in his religious thinking by Raychandbhai, a Jain merchant and poet whose sincerity made a great impression upon the young lawyer.<sup>10</sup>

After a brief stay in India Gandhi went to South Africa. There his religious quest continued in the midst of other more pressing concerns.<sup>11</sup> He discussed Islam with a pious Muslim member of the firm of merchants for whom he had gone to South Africa. 'Contact with him,' he said, 'gave me a fair amount of practical knowledge of Islam.'<sup>12</sup>

He also had close contacts with a number of evangelical Christians who stressed the doctrine of atonement which, not surprisingly, remained an enigma to Gandhi.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 1, p. 101.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Matthew 5:44-45.

<sup>10</sup> Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, Vol. 1, pp. 90-91.

<sup>11</sup> Gandhi's reading in South Africa included Dr Parker's *Commentary*, J. R. Pearson's *Remarkable Providence and Proofs of Divine Revelation*, and Butler's *Analogy*. See Chandran Devanesen, *The Making of the Mahatma*, (Orient Longmans, 1969), p. 257.

<sup>12</sup> M. K. Gandhi, *op. cit.*, SWMG, Vol. 1, p. 157.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 178-185, 200-204. See also CWMG, Vol. 1, pp. 139-141. In Natal, Gandhi acted as the agent of 'The Esoteric Christian Union' and the London Vegetarian Society.

But a Christian whose writings did make a great impression upon Gandhi was Leo Tolstoy!<sup>14</sup> His somewhat unorthodox approach—vigorous criticism of the Church as it then was in Russia, a touch of political anarchy, and a strong emphasis upon the absolute demands of Christian love—strongly appealed to Gandhi.

Tolstoy's 'The Kingdom of God is Within You' overwhelmed me. It left an abiding impression on me. Before the independent thinking, profound morality, and the truthfulness of the book, all the books given me by Mr Coates seemed to pale into insignificance.<sup>15</sup>

Later he made what he described as an 'intensive study' of Tolstoy's books, and as a result said that, 'I began to realize more and more the infinite possibilities of universal love.'<sup>16</sup>

During the same period he also read more about Hinduism, studying an English translation of the Upanishads and Max Müller's *India—What Can It Teach Us?* This enhanced his regard for Hinduism. He wrote:

Thus I gained more knowledge of the different religions. The study stimulated my self-introspection and fostered in me the habit of putting into practice whatever appealed to me in my studies.<sup>17</sup>

So to the end of his first period in South Africa, up to 1896, Gandhi had been influenced in his religious thinking by several different sources—his own Vaishnavite background in Gujarat, his reading of some Hindu texts, the Bible and especially the Sermon on the Mount, and the writings of Tolstoy. Of these, Tolstoy appears to have been the strongest single influence during Gandhiji's first stay in South Africa.

Gandhi tells us that he undertook a deeper study of Hinduism in South Africa in 1903.<sup>18</sup> He read Vivekananda's *Raja Yoga*, which interprets Hinduism according to Advaita but also strongly argues the superiority of Hinduism over other, and especially Christian, religious systems; he read Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras*, a basic and ancient text which sets out the eight 'limbs' of Yoga, the first two of which are concerned with restrained and moral conduct, including the practices of ahimsa and brahmacharya; and again he read the Gita. This time he set himself to learn the Gita by heart, and managed to commit the first thirteen chapters to memory.

<sup>14</sup> Chandran Devanesen suggests that the great attraction Gandhi felt for Tolstoy was based upon Gandhi's need for a religion that could be applied in social situations; he had been attracted by some of the ethical teaching of Christianity, but was surprised and offended by the failure of Christians to apply this teaching. *Op. cit.*, pp. 261-262.

<sup>15</sup> M. K. Gandhi, *op. cit.*, SWMG, Vol. 1, p. 204.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 237. For correspondence between Gandhi and Tolstoy, see CWMG, Vol. 9, p. 593 and Vol. 10, p. 210.

<sup>17</sup> M. K. Gandhi, *op. cit.*, SWMG, Vol. 1, p. 236.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, SWMG, Vol. 2, p. 392.

... to me the Gita became an infallible guide of conduct. It became my dictionary of daily reference. Just as I turned to the English dictionary for the meanings of English words that I did not understand, I turned to this dictionary of conduct for a ready solution of all my troubles and trials.<sup>19</sup>

In later years it was the Gita to which he referred as his main guide and comfort.<sup>20</sup> How strange this was for a Satyagrahi we shall see below.

Mention should also be made of one other book which had a decisive effect upon Gandhi. A Christian friend, Mr Polak, gave Gandhi a copy of Ruskin's *Unto This Last* as reading material for a train journey between Johannesburg and Durban. Gandhi said of it:

The book was impossible to lay aside once I had begun it... I determined to change my life in accordance with the ideals of the book.<sup>21</sup>

These ideals he understood to be:

1. That the good of the individual is contained in the good of all.
2. That a lawyer's work has the same value as the barber's, inasmuch as all have the same right of earning their livelihood from their work.
3. That a life of labour, i.e., the life of a tiller of the soil and the handicraftsman, is the life worth living.

The first of these I knew. The second I had dimly realized. The third had never occurred to me.

He later translated Ruskin's book into Gujarati, under the title of Sarvodaya (the welfare, or uplift, of all). It had a great influence upon Gandhi's social thought, and upon his attempts to identify with the poor and to abolish untouchability.

### Satyagraha and Ahimsa

Gandhiji's Satyagraha, then, was based upon a compound of many influences.<sup>22</sup> The word was coined for use in the South Africa camp-

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, SWMG, Vol. 2, p. 393.

<sup>20</sup> See M. K. Gandhi, *Gita—My Mother* (Pearl Pubs. Private Ltd., Bombay, 1965).

<sup>21</sup> M. K. Gandhi, *op. cit.*, SWMG, Vol. 2, pp. 445-446.

<sup>22</sup> In a letter to American friends, Gandhi wrote:

'... you have given me a teacher in Thoreau who furnished through his essay on the "Duty of Civil Disobedience" scientific confirmation of what I was doing in South Africa. Great Britain gave me Ruskin, whose "Unto This Last" transformed me overnight from a lawyer and city-dweller into a rustic living away from Durban on a farm, three miles from the nearest railway station; and Russia gave me in Tolstoy a teacher who furnished a reasoned basis for my non-violence. He blessed my movement when it was still in its infancy and of whose wonderful possibilities I had yet to learn.' *Harijan*, 9/8/1942 (p. 264, Vol. 9, NMML).

ain in 1908, and is made up of Satya (truth) and graha (firmness, or force).<sup>23</sup> Gandhi did not like the term passive resistance, which seemed to him to connote a cowardly refusal to oppose injustice. And he had long believed that truth was the basis of religion and morality. His autobiography was entitled *My Experiments with Truth*. Truth, he said, is God. By this he appears to have meant that integrity and truthfulness will lead an individual to the realization of God, and also that truth must in the end prevail in human situations. So his campaigns of non-violent resistance were regarded as an active struggle against injustice in which ultimately truth was bound to be triumphant.

Gandhi regarded his Satyagraha campaigns as practical ways of demonstrating the ancient idea of ahimsa. Ahimsa (literally, non-force, or non-violence) is a doctrine common to three Indian religions, Jainism, Hinduism, and Buddhism. Gandhi's home area of Porbander in Gujarat is a part of India where Jain religion has been strong, and it can be assumed that the background of the life of the Gandhi family included knowledge of the Jaina traditions.

Of all Indian religions, Jainism has taken ahimsa to the greatest extreme. The Jaina religion is primarily ascetic, and the truly religious is therefore the life of the monk.<sup>24</sup> The householder is regarded as an apprentice, for whom piety and obedience to the Jaina ethic may eventually bring a rebirth in which the life of the monk is possible.

Ahimsa is one of the basic five vows which are regarded as binding for all—although interpretation of the vows is stricter for monks than for laymen. Ahimsa includes the prohibition not only of violent action (*dravyahimsa*) but also of violence in thought (*bhavahimsa*) and condemns the restraining of freedom of thought and speech as well as physical violence.<sup>25</sup>

The monks have taken ahimsa very seriously, in some cases going to the lengths of sweeping the pavement before them as they walked and wearing a gauze over their mouths in order to avoid the unwitting destruction of living creatures. For the householder, however, certain practical limitations of non-violence are permitted. It is recognized that he has to earn a living in order to support a family, and that this may inhibit an absolutist approach to ahimsa, and that as a citizen he may have to safeguard himself and his country against enemies.<sup>26</sup> But he is advised to adopt the profession which involves the least violence, and in war always to take a defensive rather than an offensive posture. Those who wish to avoid violence are advised to refrain from taking wine, meat, and honey, on the assumption that there is a connection between diet and a violent disposition.

Extreme interpretations of ahimsa are a reflection of the strong sense in the Jaina religion that normal life in the world is to be avoided, and that salvation lies along the route of renunciation of worldly things.

<sup>23</sup> CWMG, Vol. 8, pp. 22-23.

<sup>24</sup> D. Bhargava, *Jaina Ethics* (Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1968), p. 100.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 102-103.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 110.

In Gandhi's background, then, is this school of thought which stresses renunciation and a turning away from the world, and carries the doctrine of ahimsa to exaggerated lengths.

Ahimsa was also to be found in Hindu religious thought, although in less extreme forms. For example, Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras* outline the eight stages considered necessary to full spiritual development, beginning with ethical attitudes in Yama and concluding with Samadhi. Yama incorporates four practices or restraints: not telling lies (*asteya*); not stealing or coveting what belongs to another (*aparigraha*); celibacy (*brahmacarya*); and non-injury to living creatures (*ahimsa*).<sup>27</sup> It is interesting to note that all four were echoed in Gandhi's teaching. But the programme of Raja Yoga is set against the background of a more comprehensive Hindu philosophy, in which rejection of the material world (including the claims of personal relationships) is regarded as a necessity for obtaining liberation. Ahimsa as it has been practised in Hindu India has reflected this background. Not harming living creatures has been regarded as an end in itself, and this attitude persists to the present day. The current cry in northern India for a wider enforcement of cow protection may appear to the dispassionate observer to be the application of a dogma which prevents one actually killing a cow but does little to mitigate the miseries of the creatures' prolonged existence. Perhaps this, too, reflects a Jaina attitude, for Bhargava seriously suggests that 'the animal which is suffering is a victim of his own past karmans, and his suffering cannot be cut short by killing him.'<sup>28</sup>

Buddhism has also stressed the doctrine of ahimsa, and has been more successful than either Jaina or Hindu religion in promoting a positive virtue of peace and non-violence. The classic case of Ashoka stands as a reminder of a great ruler who won his kingdom by violence, converted to the gentle faith of Lord Buddha, and at his death left behind a thriving Buddhism and a weakened empire. But Buddhism has preserved its tradition of non-violence, and in recent years has drawn the attention of the world to its credentials as a religion of peace.

However, Buddhist influence was slight in the India in which Gandhiji worked. A combination of Hindu opposition and absorption, followed by the onslaught of Islam, drove Buddhism from the land of its birth to flourish elsewhere. Some of its ideas, of course, were absorbed into Hinduism, and influenced the further development of that religion.

Gandhiji's main Hindu text for his policy of non-violence was the Bhagavad Gita. In the light of modern scholarship on the Gita (or, indeed, of a straightforward reading of the text) this appears to be a curious doctrine to have culled from this source. The story of the Gita is of Arjuna the warrior being told by Lord Krishna to overcome his aversion to slaughtering his kinsmen in battle and to perform the duty of his caste. As a Kshatriya, Arjuna's duty was to fight. Better

<sup>27</sup> Patanjali, *Yoga Sutras*, II, 30-31 (The Yoga System of Patanjali, trs. J. H. Woods, Harvard Oriental Series, Vol. 17, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 3rd Ed., 1966, pp. 178-181.)

<sup>28</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 114.

to do the duty of one's caste badly than to commit the cardinal sin of adopting the role of another caste or ignoring caste altogether.<sup>29</sup> The supposition of a number of modern scholars that the Gita was in part a text against the Buddhists, who broke caste, would appear to be plausible.<sup>30</sup>

Comfort is offered to Arjuna, of course, by setting the stern command to do his duty against a background of Samkhya philosophy. The soul cannot be killed: only the body, transient and therefore in some sense illusory, is destroyed.<sup>31</sup> What harm, then, is done? Reinforcing this argument is the doctrine of *nishkama karma*, which stresses the virtue of doing one's own duty without fear of the consequences. The only pure action is that which is performed without regard for praise or blame, status or reward, loss or suffering.<sup>32</sup>

How can the Bhagavad Gita be an authority for the man or woman of non-violence?

Gandhiji solved the problem by allegorizing the Gita.<sup>33</sup> The battlefield of the story, he suggested, is really the human soul, on which is fought the continuing battle between good and evil. It was a device which satisfied Gandhiji who, after all, tended to draw from scriptures and other inspirational writing whatever appealed to him. But it is doubtful whether in this way he successfully grounded Satyagraha in the mainstream of Hindu tradition, and this he himself seems to have understood.

I have admitted in my introduction to the Gita known as *Anasakti Yoga* that it is not a treatise on non-violence nor was it written to condemn war. Hinduism as it is practised today, or has ever been known to have ever been practised, has certainly not condemned war as I do. What, however, I have done is to put a new but natural and logical interpretation upon the whole teaching of the Gita and the spirit of Hinduism. Hinduism, not to speak of other religions, is ever evolving... I have endeavoured, in the light of a prayerful study of the other faiths of the world and, what is more, in the light of my own experiences in trying to live Hinduism as interpreted in the Gita, to give an extended but in no way strained meaning to Hinduism.<sup>34</sup>

It is also interesting to note that, although Gandhiji allegorized the Gita, he applied a literal interpretation to the Sermon on the Mount.

### The Pragmatic Nature of Gandhi's Non-Violence

For Gandhiji, truth and ahimsa were inseparable, and each expressed the other. Perhaps because of the illusive nature of truth, and the

<sup>29</sup> The Bhagavad Gita, 3:35.

<sup>30</sup> W. R. Vijayakumar, in *Ambedkar and the Neo-Buddhist Movement*, ed. Wilkinson and Thomas (CLS, Madras, 1972), p. 12.

<sup>31</sup> The Bhagavad Gita, 2:11-37.

<sup>32</sup> The Bhagavad Gita, 3:35.

<sup>33</sup> M. K. Gandhi, *Gita—My Mother* (Pearl Pubs. Private Ltd., Bombay, 1965), pp. 52-54.

<sup>34</sup> *Harijan*, 3/10/1936 (pp. 265-6, Vol. 4, NMML).



fact that it cannot be fully known, a consequence of this marriage of truth and ahimsa in Gandhi was that he did not regard non-violence as a dogma to be applied literally in the same fashion in every situation. He was far from being a doctrinaire pacifist.

In 1920 he wrote:

I do believe that when there is only a choice between cowardice and violence, I would advise violence . . . Hence it was that I took part in the Boer War, the so called Zulu Rebellion and the late war. Hence also do I advocate training in arms for those who believe in the method of violence. I would rather have India resort to arms in order to defend her honour than that she would, in a cowardly manner, become and remain a helpless witness to her own dishonour.<sup>35</sup>

He recognized that whilst for him non-violence was essential it was most unlikely that such a policy could be adopted by a government. Answering the question of whether India after Independence would rely on Satyagraha for her defence, he wrote:

I fear that the chances of non-violence being accepted as a principle of state policy are very slight, so far as I can see at present.<sup>36</sup>

And on the subject of practising ahimsa in relation to animals, he had a flexible attitude:

I have no feeling in me to save the life of these animals who devour or cause hurt to man . . . I have come to the conclusion that to do away with monkeys where they have become a menace to the well-being of man is pardonable. Such killing becomes a duty.<sup>37</sup>

### Non-Violence as a Technique

Gandhiji, then, was not an absolutist with regard to ahimsa, as he was in his attitudes to other areas of behaviour.<sup>38</sup> He had very doctrinaire attitudes towards vegetarianism, celibacy, birth control, and nature cures, but the central doctrine of ahimsa, which infused Satyagraha, he acknowledged as an ethic whose method of application would vary with each situation.

Satyagraha was for him a technique, involving a ruthless regard for honesty, a fearless desire to right wrong, and an attempt to understand an opponent's point of view.<sup>39</sup> He frequently contrasted 'the non-violence of the weak' with 'the non-violence of the strong', believing Satyagraha to be a weapon which could be employed effectively only by

<sup>35</sup> *Young India*, 11/8/1920 (*Young India 1919-1922*, S. Ganesan, Madras, 1924, p. 260).

<sup>36</sup> *Harijan*, 13/4/1940 (p. 90, Vol. 8, NMML).

<sup>37</sup> *Harijan*, 5/5/1946 (p. 123, Vol. 10, NMML).

<sup>38</sup> See, e.g., Stuart Nelson, *Gandhian Concept of Non-Violence—Seminar on Non-Violence and Social Change*, Univ. of Allahabad, Jan./Feb. 1971 (GMML).

<sup>39</sup> See H. J. N. Horsburgh, *Non-Violence and Aggression—A Study of Gandhi's Moral Equivalent of War* (OUP, 1968), pp. 55 and 63.

those who were trained and courageous. This he constantly stressed, and when, in the critical months of 1946 and 1947, the values of ahimsa and Satyagraha as Gandhi had preached them appeared to have been rejected he was bitterly disappointed. The entire set of values, including ahimsa, which had inspired Gandhiji's political and religious life, and which he had displayed, sometimes theatrically, on every possible occasion, had won him an invincible position for many years as the greatest all-India political leader, and the title of Mahatma. But when independence came Gandhi, still idolised by many, found his ideals rejected.

Nevertheless, his passionate belief in Satyagraha inspired others to adapt this part of his teaching to their own local situations. The best-known example of this is Martin Luther King Jr., who deliberately borrowed from India the system of non-violent protest which Gandhiji had constructed by grafting Western ideas onto the ancient doctrine of ahimsa.<sup>40</sup>

This adaptation of Gandhian methods to places outside India and times other than Gandhi's own suggests that Satyagraha can be isolated from the total package of Gandhian philosophy. The point was made by Joan V. Bondurant, in *The Gandhian Philosophy of Conflict*:

... it is not necessary to subscribe either to the asceticism so characteristic of Gandhi nor to his religious notions in order to understand and to value the central contribution of his technique of non-violence... Satyagraha... is basically an ethic-principle, the essence of which is a social technique of action.<sup>41</sup>

Vegetarianism, cow-protection, home-spinning, Hindi language, caste and untouchability, and an ostentatiously simple style of living were all part of the Gandhi image. But it is possible to isolate Satyagraha from these other concerns, identify its characteristics, and assess its more general value.

### Contemporary Reactions to Gandhi

It is good to bear in mind, however, that reactions to Gandhi during most of his career were mixed. Indian nationalists had to acknowledge his power to command the following of people throughout the sub-continent, but nevertheless had reservations about some aspects of his teaching. His views of diet, fasting, celibacy, prohibition, the simple life, and even non-violence sometimes seemed more like obscurantism than practical politics. So Srinivasa Sastri wrote:

His fasts irritate me. His frequent invocation of his inner voice makes me impatient. His fetish civil disobedience and apotheosis of the jail... have transcended reason and begun to do harm.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>40</sup> H. B. Takulia, 'The Negro American's Experiments with Non-Violent Protest,' in *Gandhi, Theory and Practice* (India Institute of Advanced Study, Simla, 1969—Report of a Seminar, 13/10/1968—26/10/1968—NMML).

<sup>41</sup> Joan V. Bondurant, *Conquest of Violence—The Gandhian Philosophy of Conflict* (OUP, Bombay, 1959), pp. vi and 12.

<sup>42</sup> Sastri Papers, 24/11/1933, N.A.I. Qtd. Judith M. Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 353.

Jawaharlal Nehru, with his more pragmatic approach to politics, expressed different views on Satyagraha at different times.

For example in his Presidential address to the Bundhelkhand Congress Conference at Jhansi on the 13th June, 1921, he acknowledged that violent revolt was not likely to work in the context of the Indian struggle because of the superior force at the disposal of the British. Non-violence was the correct tactical weapon.<sup>43</sup>

In 1928 Nehru wrote to Ratanlal Bhatia:

Few people rule out violence on moral grounds. Many might prefer non-violent methods but if at any moment they feel that violence has a better chance they would undoubtedly adopt it. It is a question of expediency more than anything else. I do not personally think that it is possible for us to organize any efficient militia on military lines . . .<sup>44</sup>

But from Naini prison in 1930, he wrote to Mahatma Gandhi:

Sitting here in Naini Jail I have pondered on the efficacy of non-violence as a weapon and have become a greater convert to it than ever before. I hope you are not dissatisfied with the response of the country to the non-violent creed. Despite occasional lapses the country has stuck to it wonderfully—certainly far more grimly than I had expected.<sup>45</sup>

And to John Gunther, in 1938:

. . . The ends cannot be separated from the means . . . I am not prepared to say that violence must be ruled out, but I should like to lessen it as far as possible, and any method which increases it encourages a wrong tendency.<sup>46</sup>

Nevertheless, for Nehru, non-violence remained a political expedient, and one may concur with the judgement expressed by V.T. Patil:

If Nehru accepted the relevance and utility of non-violence as a political weapon, it was not because he regarded it as a political faith but merely out of conviction that it was the right method for India in the conditions which prevailed at the time.<sup>47</sup>

If Congress leaders had doubts about Gandhiji's methods, Government records show less ambivalence on the part of those who spoke for British authority in India.

Judith Brown records two interesting comments about Gandhi made by Lord Willingdon in 1930, when he was Viceroy:

He may be a saint, he may be a holy man; he is I believe quite sincere in his principles . . . but he is one of the most astute, politically-minded and bargaining little gentlemen I ever came across.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>43</sup> SWJN, Vol. 1, pp. 182-184.

<sup>44</sup> Letter to R. Bhatia, 4/5/1928—SWJN, Vol. 3, p. 408.

<sup>45</sup> SWJN, Vol. 4, p. 370 (Jawaharlal Nehru Correspondence, 28/7/30).

<sup>46</sup> SWJN, Vol. 8, p. 870 (Jawaharlal Nehru Correspondence, 16/3/38).

<sup>47</sup> V. T. Patil, *Nehru and the Freedom Movement* (Sterling Pubs. Private Ltd., New Delhi, 1977), p. 230.

<sup>48</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 239.

And again:

Gandhi is a sort of Jekyll and Hyde, and while he may possibly have his saint-like side, on the other he is the most Machievellian bargaining little political humbug I have ever come across.<sup>49</sup>

The *Times of India* in 1930 referred to Gandhi as 'the man who is leading India to chaos and anarchy', and said that he had given abundant proof that he rejected 'the way of reason in favour of destructive methods.'<sup>50</sup>

And, commenting on Gandhi's arrest a few days later, said:

... a movement which is professedly non-violent has led, as was expected, to acts of violence which Mr Gandhi is unable to control... Mr Gandhi was deliberately leading India to chaos.<sup>51</sup>

At the time of his fast during the civil disobedience campaign in 1933, a civil servant in the India Office, Whitehall, wrote to the Director of Public Information, Government of India:

Of course, the little beggar will survive the fast—his friends I expect will see to that, and, of course, he will then have the prestige of a semi-deity. In my own mind he deserted the political pedestal because there the eyes of India were turning from him and he has mounted the religious one to regain attention.<sup>52</sup>

For many Congress workers a political expedient, and for establishment figures of the British Raj a piece of political trickery, Satyagraha was for Gandhiji a deeply-held conviction. But even he had to acknowledge the failure of its methods at the time of partition. The bitter Hindu-Muslim violence of the time led Gandhi to declare:

I find myself in the midst of exaggeration and falsity. I am unable to discover the truth. There is terrible mutual distrust. Oldest friendships have snapped. Truth and Ahimsa by which I swear, and which to my knowledge sustained me for sixty years, seem to fail to show the attributes I have ascribed to them...<sup>53</sup>

And just before Independence, eight months later:

I have admitted my mistake... I thought our struggle was based on non-violence, whereas in reality it was no more than passive resistance which essentially is a weapon of the weak. It leads naturally to armed resistance wherever possible.<sup>54</sup>

Mahatma Gandhi had assumed that Satyagraha was a natural expression of ahimsa, that ahimsa was deeply rooted in the Indian character, and that therefore it would gain widespread acceptance in India. Events in 1946/47 showed the weakness in his assumption, and India since Independence has not demonstrated to any appreciable degree that it

<sup>49</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 279.

<sup>50</sup> *The Times of India*, 2/5/1930, Leading Article (NMML).

<sup>51</sup> *The Times of India*, 6/5/1930, Leading Article (NMML).

<sup>52</sup> Letter from H. MacGregor, India Office, Whitehall, to Director, Public Information, Home Dept., Govt. of India, 12/5/1933 (N.A.I.—44/57/33).

<sup>53</sup> *Harijan*, 1/12/1946 (p. 421, Vol. 10, NMML).

<sup>54</sup> *Harijan*, 27/7/1947 (p. 253, Vol. 11, NMML).

is especially a land of non-violence. Indeed, Gandhiji appears to have shared the fate of many of the great figures of history: the adulation accorded to him is often in inverse proportion to the admirer's willingness actually to embrace his teaching.

But was his Satyagraha in the main tradition of Indian thought and practice? The suggestion of this article is that because Satyagraha was the result of a mixing of ideas from different and sometimes incompatible sources many of his followers failed to understand or enter into Gandhi's idea of Satyagraha; that this contributed to the ambivalent attitudes of his fellow freedom fighters; and that it was a significant factor in the failure of Satyagraha after Independence.

### A Technique for Loving

Satyagraha as Gandhiji taught it was not simply ahimsa applied to the twentieth century, although it owed much to ahimsa. Gandhi borrowed freely and dispassionately from many sources. As a Hindu, speaking chiefly to Hindus, it was natural for him to identify non-violence with ahimsa and to press Hindu authorities, however unlikely, to the support of his system. But his own spiritual and political pilgrimage was highly unusual, and brought together a wide range of ideas.

For Gandhiji non-violence, unlike most of the causes he espoused, was not a dogma. He was prepared to admit compromise. It was not so much an unshakable belief as a technique, to be applied differently to different situations. The technique has been defined well by Joan Bondurant:

Non-violence when used in connexion with Satyagraha means the exercise of power or influence to effect change without injury to the opponent.<sup>55</sup>

This technique has some roots in ahimsa. But ahimsa alone, with its firm ideas of renunciation and its largely negative emphasis, cannot supply all that is demanded by Satyagraha. For it is a technique of love. To be fully effective it must include, as Gandhi often urged, the desire to do good even to one's opponent. It is not likely to succeed, as Gandhi's theory did not explicitly acknowledge, when used without passion and without a deep concern for human relationships.

For, largely unnoticed, there slipped into the technique of non-violence and Satyagraha a strong flavour of the New Testament. This was what Tolstoy contributed. It included things gleaned by Gandhiji from his reading of the Sermon on the Mount. It was summarized in such vivid illustrations of the ethic of Christ as, 'Love your enemies and pray for your persecutors'<sup>56</sup> and in the Pauline injunctions: 'Bless those who persecute you' and 'Do not be overcome with evil, but overcome evil with good.'<sup>57</sup>

<sup>55</sup> Joan V. Bondurant, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

<sup>56</sup> Matthew 5:44.

<sup>57</sup> Romans 12:14 and 12:21.

The technique of non-violence is helped by the New Testament understanding that love, expressed in practical human relationships, is what chiefly contributes to the knowledge of God, and that such love is itself a reflection of a God of grace and forgiveness.<sup>58</sup> It is significant that in practice this aspect of the New Testament had been largely ignored by Christians for centuries, until Gandhi brought it into political use.

So it is no surprise that Gandhiji's Satyagraha has aroused widespread interest and admiration throughout the world in a way that his other ideas have not. The interest is not confined to the political aspects of his campaigns, but includes a genuine desire to know how high ethical principles can be applied to the hard realities of social relationships.

For in spite of his failures, Mahatma Gandhi has given the world an unparalleled demonstration of a technique for loving; a technique which resolutely seeks justice, but also desires only good for those against whom the struggle is carried out; a technique which demands of its users much courage, tenacity, and sensitivity, and a technique which blends in an unusually effective way moral and spiritual insights from East and West.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. 1 John 4:7-8, 12.

*Abbreviations*

SWMG	Selected Works of Mahatma Gandhi (6 Vols.), General Editor, Shriman Narayan (Navajivan Trust, Ahmedabad, 1968).
SWJN	Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru, General Editor, S. Gopal (Orient Longman, 1972).
CWVG	Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi (Publications Division, Govt. of India, 1958-1976).
NMML	Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi.
GMML	Gandhi Memorial Museum and Library, Delhi.
N.A.I.	National Archives of India, New Delhi.