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Mahatma Gandhi and his political philosophy: Impact of Satyagraha and non-violence

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Abstract

Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948) was one of the most important political and spiritual leaders of modern Indian history. His political philosophy was based on the ideas of violence, satyagraha and self-reliance, which gave a political basis to the people's movement against colonialism. "Satyagraha, literally meaning" "devotion to truth," "was a policy espoused by Gandhi that emphasized compassion for humanity while opposing injustice." The basic purpose of satyagraha is to achieve social and political changes by following the truth at the level of thought, word and deed. By embracing violence under this principle, Gandhi embodied the people's resistance to liberation from colonial rule. Non-violence is a key pillar of the Gandhian political philosophy, which prioritizes struggle based on the strength of the spirit of non-violence. Gandhiji believed that victory derived from violence is eternal, while the spirit of change through it is deeply rooted in the heart of society. He inspired various movements, such as the Co-operation Movement, the Civil Disobedience Movement and the Quit India Movement, to take an active part in the struggle for freedom, challenging not only British power but also the democratic power of the people. The impact of Gandhi's political philosophy can also be seen at the global level. World leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Nelson Mandela fought for social justice and human rights in their respective countries, drawing inspiration from Gandhi's principles of non-violent resistance. In India's perspective, Gandhian philosophy not only contributed significantly to the attainment of freedom but also attempted to instill the principles of morality-based politics, rural development, indigenous industries and welfare in the society even after independence. Although the political conditions have changed over time, non-violence and satyagraha still offer an effective path of moral and peaceful resistance. Gandhi's political philosophy thus presents a revolutionary dimension based on truth and non-violence that influenced not only the course of the freedom struggle but the entire world. His ideology is extremely relevant in the present times for re-establishing moral values and building social harmony.

Key words: Mahatma Gandhi, Satyagraha, Non-violence, Colonialism, Freedom Struggle, Morality, Non-Cooperation Movement, Civil Disobedience, Social Justice, Peaceful Resistance.

Introduction

The name of Mahatma Gandhi is a symbol of that revolutionary personality in modern Indian history, who through his moral values and peaceful resistance, not only took the country to a new stage



of freedom struggle, but also presented an exemplary example of truth and non-violence to humanity at the global level. His life and ideology showed a path where the use of Satyagraha activates the moral force of the individual for social and political changes. Truth and non-violence were not only the principle, but the basis of Gandhi's life and work, through which he inspired the Indian freedom movement with widespread public participation.

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was born on 2 October 1869 in Porbandar, Gujarat. After his early education, he went to London to study law, where he got the experience of Western lifestyle, but the emotional attachment of Indian civilization and cultural values remained constant in him. His inclination towards truth and honesty was evident in his student life, due to which the importance of moral conduct became deeply established in him. After completing his law studies, he went to South Africa, where he gained first-hand experience of colonial apartheid. This environment strengthened the spirit of social justice, human rights and struggle against inequality in their minds. He took the path of Satyagraha to protect the rights of the Indian community in South Africa, which earned him wide recognition in public life. After returning to India, Mahatma Gandhi gave an inclusive look to the freedom movement by linking it with moral ideals like truth and non-violence. He united crores of Indians through the Non-Cooperation Movement, Civil Disobedience Movement, Quit India Movement, etc. The simplicity in his attire, the symbolism of spinning the charkha and the respect for the national language Hindi made him very close to the common man. The call of 'Swadeshi' for economic self-reliance and his dream of rural reconstruction through creative programmes remains inspiring even today.

To understand the background of Gandhi's political philosophy, it becomes imperative to look at his personal and ideological journey. Ancient Indian religious-philosophical trends, such as the Vaishnava tradition and Jain philosophy, deepened his inclination towards truth and non-violence. At the same time, open to Christian and Islamic teachings, he sought the welfare of all humanity. The literary and philosophical influence of Tulsidas, Kabir, Ruskin, Tolstoy and Thoreau also influenced his ideas. He distilled the basic spirit of Satyagraha from the path of truth and love, in which injustice is resisted by renouncing any form of violence. He believed that the path of morality was the only powerful means to establish truth. While resisting the oppressive system, he constantly gave the message to the followers to rise above their personal interest and ego and aim for the welfare of the society at large.

The word satyagraha is made up of two basic words - satya (truth) and agraha (perseverance) - which means insistence on truth or determination to remain in truth. It is not merely a political strategy but a practice of living with truth at all the three levels of mind, word and deed. The purpose of satyagraha is not to physically injure or defeat one's opponent, but to bring about a change in one's heart by moral force. That is why satyagraha is based on non-violence, in which the resister distances himself from violent acts. According to Gandhi, non-violence is not merely abstaining from physical violence, but also renouncing the feeling of hatred, anger or revenge in the mind. Satyagraha is a practice in which there is a continuous process of self-introspection, discipline and renunciation along with the application of truth. The broad meaning of non-violence is not merely physical non-aggression, but compassion and harmony towards all beings. It is an integral part of this philosophy to adopt the path of humility and dialogue towards the opposite side while finding solutions to social or political problems. Gandhi said that no matter how great the injustice in society, eradicating it through violence does not provide a long-term solution; rather, a movement based on the value of non-violence brings about a moral awakening within the masses, which forms the basis for sustainable change. Through satyagraha, Gandhi did not limit the freedom movement to political emancipation, but added to it the undercurrents of moral uplift, social harmony and self-improvement.

Thus, an early introduction to the life and political philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi establishes that satyagraha and non-violence are central elements of his ideology, which not only resisted colonialism but envisioned a society based on peace, justice and mutual cooperation. Their historical context, practical application and global implications will be explored in greater detail in the coming chapters.

The political philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi

The background of Mahatma Gandhi's political philosophy underlines that his personality did not develop as a mere politician, but his thoughts got a distinct direction by being inspired by various philosophical and cultural trends. Fundamental principles such as truth and non-violence evolved not from a single event but from the combined influence of many individuals, texts and environments. The contributions of Tolstoy, Henry David Thoreau, Gopal Krishna Gokhale and the Indian tradition are particularly noteworthy.

The influence of Tolstoy, Thoreau, Gopal Krishna Gokhale and Indian culture on Gandhiji's thought can be seen at various levels. The essence of non-violence and love in Tolstoy's works made Gandhi aware of the importance of truth and self-power. Tolstoy's messages showed the way back to truth, as did works like the Bhagavad Gita, which provided Gandhi with not only a religious, but also a moral basis. The principle of civil disobedience, propounded by Henry David Thoreau, involved non-violent resistance to unjust laws of the state, a concept very similar to Gandhi's theory of satyagraha. Gopal Krishna Gokhale apprised Gandhi of the direction of Indian public life and Parliament-based constitutional reforms. Under Gokhale's guidance, Gandhi began to understand the Indian socio-political situation in depth, which in turn paved the way for the effective implementation of the basic spirit of Satyagraha on Indian soil. The spirit of non-violence inherent in Indian culture, moral values stemming from the Sant tradition and compassion rooted in Vaishnavism also inspired Gandhi to accept truth and non-violence as philosophy.

The beginning and experience of Satyagraha in South Africa proved to be a turning point in Gandhi's life. There discriminatory laws and racist behaviour against people of Indian origin deeply agitated him. The humiliating treatment at the railway station and many other humiliating incidents led Gandhi to peacefully resist injustice. As a laboratory of Satyagraha, South Africa gave Gandhi the unique experience of bringing about social and political change through truth and non-violence. He united the Indian community there through public meetings, awareness campaigns and the Satyagraha movement and opposed the discriminatory laws of the government on moral grounds. This experience not only refined Gandhi's personal thinking but also helped in strengthening the foundation of the Indian freedom movement in the future.

The entry of Satyagraha into the Indian national movement was a natural extension of the inspiration from South Africa. When Gandhi returned to India in 1915, he first travelled to know the country and formulated his strategy by understanding the local problems. The peasant movement of Champaran (Bihar) became a prime example in this direction, where he along with the peasants staged a satyagraha against the atrocities on indigo farmers. The movement proved successful under Gandhi's leadership, leading the country to believe that non-violent resistance could be effective in solving people's problems. Similarly, among the mill workers of Kheda and Ahmedabad, Gandhi used satyagraha to show that it was not a theoretical idea but a practical strategy. Satyagraha then emerged as the principal weapon of the Indian national movement through mass movements such as the Non-Cooperation Movement, Civil Disobedience and the Quit India Movement.

Thus, the background of Gandhi's political philosophy was formed by various ideological, cultural and practical experiences. The ideas of men like Tolstoy, Thoreau and Gokhale gave them ideological dimensions, while the experiences of South Africa matured satyagraha practically. Finally, on coming into contact with the rural problems of India, he became convinced that Satyagraha and non-violence were the most suitable paths for political freedom as well as for social and moral uplift.

The theory and practice of Satyagraha

The theory and practice of Satyagraha is central to Mahatma Gandhi's political philosophy, which creates a comprehensive socio-political concept based on truth and non-violence. The word satyagraha is derived from two Sanskrit words - 'satya' meaning truth and 'agraha' meaning insistence or determination. This is not just a protest, but a path of self-confidence, morality and ethics, where



humanity and compassion are not left behind even while resisting injustice. The basic aim of satyagraha is to strive towards the change of heart of the opposing side by pursuing the truth at all three levels of mind, word and deed, and not to defeat or humiliate it externally.

The definition and basic elements of Satyagraha were enunciated by Gandhi. These basic elements include unbroken pursuit of truth, constant adherence to non-violence, self-restraint, renunciation, patience and a loving attitude towards the adversary. Satyagraha is an integral companion of non-violence, because the path to establishing truth must be moral and peaceful. A person walking on this path has to practice introspection and self-purification in every situation. During Satyagraha, moral strength is the basis which makes the people participate in the movement with discipline and faith. That is why Mahatma Gandhi used to say that a satyagrahi should do his own penance so that he can awaken compassion and generosity in the hearts of others and also deal with unjust laws and systems.

The principal forms of satyagraha are non-cooperation, civil disobedience and hunger strike. During the non-cooperation movement, the followers tried to weaken them morally by distancing themselves from the institutions of British rule. Governance was challenged peacefully through resignations from government jobs, the Holi of foreign textiles and the trend of adopting swadeshi. Civil disobedience goes a step further and is a non-violent violation of laws which the satyagrahi considers unjust. The Salt Satyagraha, where Gandhi violated the British Salt Law by marching to Dandi, is a symbolic example of this. Hunger strike is a harsh form of satyagraha, in which the satyagrahi manifests his self-confidence through fasting. This is the culmination of renunciation, which proved to be a powerful way of exerting moral pressure in matters of larger public interest.

The analysis of individual and collective satyagraha highlights the multifaceted nature of this concept. In personal satyagraha, a person tries to show the path to the opponent on the basis of his self-confidence and morality. He expresses political or ideological opposition by adopting truth and non-violence. In contrast, mass satyagraha is dominated by mass participation, where the support of a large section of the society gives the movement a mass character. In India's freedom struggle, the Non-Cooperation Movement, the Civil Disobedience Movement, etc. are excellent examples of mass satyagraha in which Gandhi inspired millions of people to walk together on the path of truth and non-violence. In both forms, satyagraha may be aimed at protest, but its strategy is driven by the inner strength of the individual and the collective strength of the group. Satyagraha proceeds not by treating the opponent as an enemy, but by seeking his change of heart.

The principle of non-violence and Mahatma Gandhi's vision

The principle of non-violence and the vision of Mahatma Gandhi represent the moral and spiritual ideals on the basis of which Gandhiji gave direction to a comprehensive revolution from personal life to the national freedom movement. The spirit of non-violence includes not only the renunciation of physical violence but also the adoption of truth and love, free from malice, anger and vengeance at every level of mind, word and deed. In Gandhiji's view, non-violence should not be understood only negatively as "absence of violence"; rather it is an active manifestation of kindness, compassion and harmony as positive attributes. According to him, non-violence infuses moral strength within man which provides a sustainable foundation for solving social and political problems.

The meaning of non-violence and its interpretation is found in many spiritual traditions and philosophical schools of thought, but it was Gandhiji who laid the foundation, especially for the nationwide movement. Generally, the meaning of violence is assumed to be the infliction of physical harm on others, but Gandhiji associated it with the elimination of violence at the emotional and psychological level as well. According to him, stalking or behaving in a disrespectful manner towards someone is also a form of psychological violence. So violence can also be complete when we follow the path of renunciation, when we feel the challenge and pain of our adversaries. In this violent struggle, priority is given to strength, discipline and the desire for truth. Gandhiji believed that violence could not bring about lasting change; on the contrary, the victory achieved by it leaves a lasting impact on the people.

The meaning and interpretation of non-violence is again linked to the truth that one should keep his mind free from selfishness and anger. For Gandhiji, non-violence was the path of self-purification, where the satyagrahi has to first remove the negative tendencies within himself. In this sequence, it is necessary to imbibe the virtues of austerity, renunciation and self-discipline. A person who follows the path of non-violence not only keeps himself away from physical aggression but also tries to keep himself away from mental violence or bitter thoughts. That is why Gandhiji, in campaigns like the non-cooperation movement, civil disobedience, hunger strike, instead of seeing the enemy as “adversary,” considered him as a “friend worth changing hearts.”

Gandhiji's approach to religious texts and non-violence was very liberal and comprehensive. He drew inspiration from Hindu, Jain, Buddhist and many other traditions where the message of non-violence has been presented in diverse ways. The principle of “Ahimsa Paramodharma” in Jain philosophy inspired him towards self-training and dedication to truth. In Buddhism, the ideals of kindness and compassion reinforced his thought, while the Hindu scriptures - especially the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita - instilled in his moral philosophy a sense of purity of soul and public welfare. He believed that non-violence is enshrined in every religious tradition in some form or the other, but often people forget that inner message. Gandhiji, while promoting religious harmony in society, showed that if humanity resorted to violence because of material interests, it betrayed its own spiritual values.

Satyagraha and Non-violence in the Indian Freedom Struggle

In the Indian freedom struggle, satyagraha and non-violence paved the way for people to unite on the basis of morality. The various movements launched under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi became unique examples of resistance based on non-violence, emphasizing political freedom as well as social awareness and moral upliftment. In this sequence, mass movements like the Non-Cooperation Movement (1920), Salt Satyagraha (1930), Quit India Movement (1942) and the tragedy of Partition presented many challenges to Gandhian non-violence.

The Non-Cooperation Movement (1920) for the first time presented an effective form of organised non-cooperation against the colonial power. Against the backdrop of the Rowlatt Act and the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, the non-cooperation movement became a symbol of nationwide protest. Gandhiji called upon the people to boycott government jobs, foreign textiles, English educational institutions and law courts. The main objective of this initiative was to weaken the colonial system morally, without resorting to any violence. During the movement, actions like the citizens' walkout and the Holi of foreign clothes were successful in awakening the consciousness of freedom in the society. However, when Gandhiji withdrew the movement after the Chauri Chaura incident, some people were disappointed, but Gandhiji insisted that the principle of non-violence could not be abandoned under any circumstances.

The Salt Satyagraha (Dandi March, 1930) was a symbolic and inspiring form of the civil disobedience movement. Believing the salt tax imposed by the British government to be unjust, Gandhiji marched about 240 miles from Sabarmati Ashram to Dandi. Arriving at the beach on 6 April 1930, Gandhiji peacefully violated foreign law by making his own salt. This incident gave rise to widespread discussion of Satyagraha not only in India but also on the world stage. Millions of people continued the movement against government regulations by peacefully making salt, boycotting foreign goods, and even going to jail. This satyagraha showed the British rule how deep the roots of non-violent resistance were in the masses.

The Quit India Movement (1942) began at the height of the Second World War, and the British Raj faced intense Indian resistance. With Gandhiji's slogan of “do or die,” the movement became a melting pot of violent and non-violent tendencies. The government tried to suppress it brutally and imprisoned all the prominent leaders. Despite this, the masses kept the flame of freedom burning through underground activities. Even in the face of some incidents of violence, Gandhiji continued to insist on the importance of non-violence, although this movement made it clear that the people were ready to go to any extent for political freedom.



The challenge of Partition and non-violence proved to be one of the most formidable tests of the last phase of independence. The unfortunate incidents of violence escalated rapidly in an atmosphere of communal tension. Gandhiji went to places like Calcutta, Noakhali and Delhi, appealed for peace, fasted and tried to convince the people. It was his endeavour that India should not forget its original philosophy of non-violence as it stood on the threshold of freedom, but the horrendous riots during Partition made it clear that the path of non-violence could be fraught with very difficult challenges. Yet, Gandhiji kept trying to restore communal harmony till the end and even sacrificed his life in the protection of this basic principle. In the background of these movements and partition, it is concluded that in the Indian freedom struggle, people got moral strength through satyagraha and non-violence. It not only shook the foundations of English power, but also laid the foundation of a political and social value that can still be seen around the world today.

The Influence of Gandhian Thought on Modern World Politics

The influence of Gandhian thought in modern world politics can be widely seen on the strength of its moral and peaceful resistance. Mahatma Gandhi did not confine Satyagraha and non-violence to the Indian freedom movement, but his teachings provided the moral foundation and inspiration for various movements against inequality, injustice and colonialism across the world. From the struggle for civil rights to campaigns for environmental protection and social justice, Gandhism continues to be relevant as an ideological and moral reference.

The influence of Mahatma Gandhi's ideas in the civil rights movement was seen primarily under the leadership of Martin Luther King Jr. and Nelson Mandela. Martin Luther King Jr. took the path of nonviolent resistance to the racism and discrimination that permeated American society. He spread public awareness through rallies, peaceful marches and boycotts, making the question of equality between white and black citizens of the country a central issue in the national discourse. Luther King used to admit that the cornerstone of his movements was inspired by Gandhiji's principle of non-violence. Similarly, in South Africa, Nelson Mandela took the path of peaceful resistance and reconciliation over a long period of time, fighting the apartheid system. Although Mandela had to resort to armed struggle for some time, when power came to him after independence, he set up the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, giving priority to peace and forgiveness in line with Gandhian ideas. Thus, both leaders underscored the significance of Gandhian philosophy in strengthening democratic values and human rights in their respective countries.

The doctrine of world peace and non-violence has also spread to international forums, where Gandhiji's ideas are known on the basis of human sensibilities and co-existence. The declaration of October 2 as the International Day of Non-Violence by the United Nations General Assembly symbolizes that Gandhian non-violence can show the way to solutions to global problems even today. In many countries, voices of political dissent or opposition to the ruling system gain international sympathy by resorting to non-violent mass movements rather than violence-based struggles. The spirit of non-violence was adopted as a moral strength by citizens in the Arab Spring, post-apartheid peacekeeping in South Africa, and the restoration of democracy in Myanmar.

Conclusion

The political philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi is based on concepts like Satyagraha and Ahimsa, which were instrumental in giving direction to the society not only during the Indian freedom movement but also after independence. The effectiveness of his ideology lies in the fact that it gives man the opportunity to resist injustice on the basis of inner moral force, so that social change is not limited to external control, but starts from the inner mind of the person. The basic spirit of Satyagraha is to awaken the consciousness of the adversary rather than to defeat him and lead him to the right path, whereas Ahimsa means not merely absence of violence but the positive side of compassion, empathy and love. The present relevance of Gandhiji's political philosophy is evident in many ways.

In the era of globalization, economic, social and environmental challenges are increasingly emerging, solutions to which are often sought through violence or coercion. In such times, Gandhiji's peaceful resistance and dialogue-based guidance can strengthen the culture of cooperation and understanding. Gandhiji's moral vision also provides a strong basis for ensuring human rights and personal liberty in the face of the growing influence of technology. Integrating truth and non-violence into the way of life promotes dimensions such as self-reliance, collective responsibility and social justice. This is not to say that Gandhiji's ideology offers an easy solution to modern problems, but it is certain that the ethical principles he outlined, together with the ideas of ecological balance and gender equality, can open the way for positive changes even today. Ultimately, Mahatma Gandhi's principles of satyagraha and non-violence have not only historical significance but also remain relevant in the modern age. His legacy reminds us that following the path of truth can prevent violence, and promote social justice and harmony. Today, when the world needs dialogue, cooperation and harmony more than ever, Gandhiji's thoughts can again serve as a beacon for us.

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