

# SATYAGRAHA IN SOUTH AFRICA

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SATYAGRAHA, a philosophy of non-violent opposition to injustice, comes to us in an age which has seen the worst forms of human violence. As a philosophy of social change, it advances the theory that social reform is dependant wholly on the method used to bring about reform. It thus denies the possibility of instituting good through methods of evil, of realizing peace through techniques of violence, of achieving democratic rights by forms of action hostile to the spirit of democracy.

The constant use of the name of Mahatma Gandhi, of the word Satyagraha, and of such terms as civil disobedience, "hartal" and non-violence in the non-European struggle against racial injustice in South Africa seems to suggest that the Gandhian concept has had a lasting impact on our people and is in the process of emerging as a salient factor in the struggle for democracy in the Union.

Literally translated, the word "Satyagraha" means the demonstration of a heart firm in the concepts of love and truth. To Gandhi himself, the author of the word and the philosophy it expressed, it was the belief that social change, where necessary, can be effected by the impact of soul force upon the hearts of those in power.

It is doubtful whether this concept, deeply inspired by religious beliefs of a universal trend and significantly influenced by the writings of the Russian philosopher Tolstoy, was adhered to in its purity by many people other than Gandhi himself and a handful of his close disciples like Vinoba Bhave. To Nehru, Gandhi's personally chosen successor, and to the masses of India, it remained a political tactic to be utilized for the obtaining of greater political power by a voiceless people. The Indians of South Africa saw Satyagraha in this light when, under the leadership of Gandhi, they became the first people to use the weapon and develop its technique.

Numerically, the Indians constitute the smallest group in the multi-racial society of South Africa, representing only 2.9 per cent. of her total population. For the most part, they share with the rest of the non-European peoples in the country an inescapable existence of slums, endless overcrowded dwellings and a low resistance to death and disease. Three-

quarters of the Indian breadwinners earn less than £100 a year with an average family of five dependants to support. While European politicians utilize the high Indian birth rate to fan fears of insecurity in the minds of the vote-exercising public, some 65 Indian babies in every 1,000 never survive their first year.

The Indian, alone of the South African peoples, remains voteless. While some Africans have the ineffective "Native representation" and the Coloured is to be placed on a communal roll, even the Opposition United Party which in 1946 had prescribed a form of dummy representation for Asiatics, has in a recent statement expressed its complete aversion to the granting of any political rights to the Indian people. And yet, of all the non-White peoples in South Africa, it is the Indian community which has within its ranks the most articulate and powerful economic group—merchants and professionals who constitute that middle-class so vital to any suppressed people in its struggle for political rights.

It is through the unique presence of this class within the ranks of the non-European people that South African Indians have endured their peculiar oppression and earned their peculiar history in the development of the country. For basic to the emergence of the "Indian problem" is the question of European monopolization of South Africa's wealth. As early as 1880, the Indian middle-class revealed signs of entrenching itself as a non-European group of economic strength, and from that date onward, European politics commenced its bitter history of Indian antagonism.

The Indians migrated to Natal in 1860 essentially under the indenture system and on the clear understanding that complete and full participation in the citizenship rights of the country would be their ultimate reward when freed of their contracts.

It was this aspect of the British contract of indenture which allowed some compensation for the harsh and slave-like conditions of labour embodied in the agreement. At the time, the Indians held a crucial potential for increasing the numbers of a White minority which lived in perpetual fear of an African avalanche. The presence of a Black people, however, in the urban life of the colony, sharing privileges equally with the Whites, was a contradiction in a society conceived for the exclusive benefit of a White pigmentocracy. The theoretical acceptance of Indian citizenship rights was bound to lead to a

practical rejection as soon as Indians in sufficient numbers gathered sufficient sophistication to threaten the economic monopoly of the dominant group.

The breach in the agreement which followed was inevitable, and the Indian problem emerged as the problem of a White government seeking constitutional means to whittle away Indian rights and reduce their status to that of the other non-White peoples.

From 1883 onwards the Indians in Natal and in all the provinces to which they travelled became subjected to discriminatory legislation. The Transvaal treated them as pariahs who, on grounds of hygiene, were to be separated from the European community. The Orange Free State banned them completely from its territory, while in Natal, restrictions on licence applications and severe taxes crippled their freedom. The poll tax introduced in Natal to resolve the conflict between industry which depended on Indian labour and commerce which believed itself outdone by Indian competition, was exorbitantly high. Equivalent to six months' salary under indenture, it applied to all indentured Indian males over the age of 16 and all females over the age of 13, who failed to return to India or to re-indenture themselves. It set up such barriers to enterprise that some 32,000 Indians, representing 25 per cent. of the population, repatriated themselves during the years of its operation.

The situation called for counter-action, but the Indians were divided among themselves economically and ethnically, with religious and linguistic barriers preventing the organization of a common front. Whilst the business class made legal representations of a personal type or organized petitions of a small group nature, the large majority of the indentured labourers remained inarticulate and inhibited in their social and economic depression. Generally, the Indians possessed little appreciation of the efficacy of the vote, and even when entitled to it, used it to little purpose.

The dramatic awakening of Indian political conscience may be traced to 1890, when Gandhi came to Natal. A highly educated and principled young man, he was appalled by the degradations imposed on British Indian subjects. On a journey from Durban to Pretoria, he was thrown out of the coach at Pietermaritzburg for daring to travel first class with Europeans, soundly boxed about the ears at Charlestown for exerting his rights as a passenger, and rudely pushed off the sidewalks in

Johannesburg. He felt keenly the need for enlightened guidance in the Indian community and accurately diagnosed its immediate weakness as its complete inarticulateness in the language of the government.

Founding the Natal Indian Congress in 1894, he accepted the challenge of his environment, and with the theme of Satyagraha, succeeded in identifying the political purpose of the Hindu with the Muslim, the freed with the indentured, the South Indian with the North Indian.

His first reaction to the Indian problem in Natal was to inform the British government and public of the atrocities committed under their names. He was convinced of their ignorance in the matter and believed the solution to the question to lie in British enlightenment. Satyagraha itself, expressing active opposition to inflexible authority, developed as a final appeal to the British conscience when all other constitutional methods of approach had failed.

Despite the magnificence of his contribution in arousing the political consciousness of the Indian people and giving to the world a new approach to political struggle, his philosophy has not remained unchallenged, even by his followers. No great figure of theory remains without criticism, and Gandhi himself admits to having committed Himalayan blunders, which have had the effect of placing brakes upon the militancy of the people. There is little doubt that in South Africa, as later in India, his preoccupation with the impact of soul force reacted against the interest of the people's immediate and material benefits, and tended to validate the accusation that the allegiance of Satyagraha ultimately and objectively served the interests of those in power.

The practical applications of his philosophy in the South African passive resistance campaigns of 1908 and 1913 resulted in meagre gains and frustration for the Indian people. As forces of political education, their impact was unquestionable. But as techniques of liberation, they were ineffective. While both campaigns unified and strengthened the Indians in their struggle, they also halted progress during moments of supreme strategic importance, because Gandhi placed greater value on the achievement of spiritual victory over the hearts of those in power than on the acquisition of material benefits for the Satyagrahis.

In 1907 he called off the Transvaal campaign, after a 100 per

cent. boycott of the Indian pass-imposing Act had been achieved and a popular resistance movement launched, on the misguided assumption that governmental overtures to compromise were caused by a conversion of heart. In 1913, at a time when it appeared obvious to all that the government had been brought to bay, he chose to demonstrate Indian magnanimity of heart, rather than exploit the situation for the immediate rectification of Indian rights. Never before and never since have the Indians in South Africa held such a position of crucial economic importance. The mammoth Indian strike, in sympathy with the heroic march of the Newcastle mine workers who, with women and children, had set out to cross the Transvaal border on foot in violation of unjust anti-Indian laws, had disastrous effects for industry in Natal. The European mineworkers' strike on the Rand coinciding with this demonstration, placed the government in a particularly precarious position. Gandhi, however, intent on his spiritual victory, called off the Indian campaign, thus leaving the government unhampered to deal all the more effectively with the European strikers.

Gandhian concepts never quite convinced the Indians in South Africa or in India. The technique of passive resistance was invariably used with a difference in interpretation between Gandhi and his followers. Gandhi himself had visualized such a misunderstanding and, in order to obviate it, had in the first instance suggested the restriction of its use to highly trained personnel. He conceived passive resistance as a specialized weapon which only the spiritually pure could utilize.

His concept, logically followed, precluded mass utilization of the technique, and his first appeal was thus made to the middle-class trading element, who he felt would be sufficiently enlightened to appreciate and follow it. It was the unsophisticated worker, however, who gave passive resistance its strength and developed its potential as a force of mass coercion. In 1913, he followed Gandhi with unflinching faith. In 1946, he responded to the call of Satyagraha with matching valour, and, in more recent years, the non-European workers have responded to the call of non-violence with admirable discipline.

It is undoubtedly the aspect of Passive Resistance which gives forth hope for the effecting of social change without recourse to violence which has upheld it in the hearts of the Indian people. It is also this aspect of the philosophy which has attracted to its orbit the co-operation of large groups of people

professing allegiance to different ideological creeds.

Satyagraha as a weapon of multi-racial usage, however, did not occur until almost half a century after its origin on South African soil. For many years after the departure of Mahatma Gandhi from the country, the creed of Satyagraha lost its continuity in the life of formal Indian political expression. The period following his departure, however, a period offset by two World Wars and the tremendous impact of industrialization, laid the basis for a vitally changed South African society, in which circumstantial forces paved the way for a future state of non-European co-operation.

Economic factors, especially in Natal, acted as great levellers of African and Indian interests. The "civilized labour policy" had retrieved and isolated the European worker from the morass of labour competition and passed economic legislation which affected all non-European workers equally.

Indians, though organized into a strong trade union movement, realized the futility of their labour strength in the absence of an equally strong African labour movement. Tragically they watched their strike actions increase their own unemployment as unsophisticated African workers replaced their labour.

The Gandhian movement had based itself on the theory of Indian exclusiveness, and had believed in the political distinctiveness of the Indian problem. To the average Indian who groped in the maze of industrial competition and who became quickly identified with the social and economic depletions of the non-European people, this was a myth which exploded all too dramatically.

Unfortunately, formal Indian political organization did not reflect the vitally changed situation in which Indians were finding themselves. The post-Gandhian era saw a leadership which remained pathetically aloof from the problems of its following. Inheriting neither the philosophy of Satyagraha nor formulating any political principles of its own, it preferred a state of precarious suspension between the two major race groups, in the false belief that acceleration of their acceptance within the ranks of the dominant class depended on Indian isolation from the general problems of racial discrimination in South Africa.

Indian political leadership approved the diplomatic interference of the British Indian government and the conclusion of the Cape Town Agreement in 1927—an Agreement which accepted the principle of repatriation for South African Indians

at a time when every Indian had become a Union national. Instead of a principled and logical opposition to all facets of racial discrimination, it endured in 1944 the conclusion of the Pretoria Agreement, which accepted the policy of segregation for the Indian people in return for certain economic concessions of a temporary nature safeguarding the vested interest of a small section of the community.

It was inevitable that a leadership at such variance with its following would soon lose its authority. In 1946, it was finally ousted by those who joined together working class interests with the intellectual guidance of Gandhian principles and Socialism. It had watched in awesome anticipation the forces of Satyagraha under the emotional impact of Mahatma Gandhi and the practical guidance of Nehru cleave the path to Indian liberation.

In 1946, this new leadership restaged Passive Resistance in South Africa and led some 2,000 enthusiasts to prison in opposition to an Act which sought their isolation from the rest of South African society. Their campaign, though in obvious form similar to the original Gandhian campaign, was appreciably different in its ultimate direction and political aspirations. It was launched in a mood which understood both the expediency and ethics of joint political action, a mood which sought non-European rather than Indian liberation.

For South Africa, this revised interpretation of the Passive Resistance weapon held crucial significance. It accelerated the growth of united militancy among the non-White peoples and heralded a new era in the development of a non-racial united democratic front in the country. There is little doubt that, despite its 'Indian' character, the campaign stressed and eloquently exhibited faith in a united struggle, ultimately directed towards the achievement of ends which would benefit equally all South Africans, not Indians alone.

Fundamental to non-European political maturity in South Africa has been the alliance of the African and Indian Congresses. Whilst 1946 saw the organization of an Indian political front which had rid itself of group restrictive sentiments, it was not until 1950 that a similar change expressed itself on the African frontier; a year after the tragic racial disturbances in Durban between the Indian and African peoples. The riots came as a serious warning to the Leadership, who realized that if the economic identification of the two peoples did not



receive progressive political guidance, the situation could be horribly misused by the government to create racial strife within the ranks of the non-White race. It expedited united action on the part of the two Congresses who, despite the Dadoo-Xuma Pact of 1946, had remained aloof from each other. In 1950, Africans and Indians jointly and equally participated in the National Day of Protest against racial discrimination, and in 1952, the two Congresses together launched the Defiance of Unjust Laws Campaign, patterned on the lines of the 1946 Passive Resistance movement. The success of their unity served as a forerunner to the formation of the Coloured and European Congresses and to the setting up of an effective united barrier against anti-democratic forces.

Though many factors have combined to effect this democratic unit in South Africa, central to its theme of action has been its adherence to the form of Satyagraha. There is little doubt that, but for the profound humanitarianism and the generous tolerance of all creeds intrinsic in its philosophy, it could not have drawn together such diverse elements of political struggle. It also seems fairly clear that without its direction in the non-European movement itself, the non-White struggle for self-expression would not have drawn to itself the magnificent world support which it has done.

The racial situation in South Africa beckons a major upheaval. The Indians are aware of this and see the solution in the alliance of their political sympathy with those who wish to broaden the frontiers of democracy and who readily accept that the lead in this respect lies in united thought and action.

Satyagraha, non-violence, passive resistance, civil disobedience—one may choose any of these terms and accept either the Gandhian philosophy or the tactics of the struggle. The fact is that the Indian people are marching forward as a vital section of the democratic force of South Africa, and their philosophy of Satyagraha continues to play an invaluable role in their progress to freedom.