

An Epitome of Nonviolent Resistance: A Study of Gandhi's *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*

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Abstract

Truth and non-violence are the twin pillars on which rest the entire framework of the magnificent edifice of Mahatma Gandhi's glorious life and work. Gandhi names the protest satyagraha, which means the "force contained in truth and love," or "nonviolent resistance." The philosophy of satyagraha requires that a person who decides to break a law considered unjust must accept the consequences of that decision. Mahatma Gandhi, a determinant and an all committed human soul, ascends this material world and reigns in the hearts of billions and billions of people all around the world. The ideas of Mahatma Gandhi have had a lasting impact on crusades for rights and freedom: from the civil rights movement of the 1960s through the movements against corporate greed and racism that are developing today. This paper serves to locate some nonviolent resistances in reference to Mahatma Gandhi's The Story of My Experiments with Truth.

Keywords: Satyagraha, non-violence, resistance, experiment, truth

Introduction

Mohandas Karmachand Gandhi- hereafter referred as Gandhi - is the father of Indian independence. Throughout his lifetime, Gandhi has resisted against different cultural norms and values, and colonial powers. Some of his resistances are visibly against the then ruling government of the colonized power, that is, that of the British; whereas, some seem just his severe reluctance to surrender to the orthodox cultural beliefs, and general cultural norms and values. This essay attempts to focus on these resistances of Gandhi in reference to his autobiography *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*.

To begin with, the paper serves to locate some cultural resistances. The foremost thing Gandhi did was to keep himself far from surrendering to the temptation of lies. Gandhi experienced this sort of luring temptation in his early childhood. It is visible in the autobiography which says that he ignored the nudging sign of his teacher for going for copying the correct spelling from his friend. Therefore Gandhi writes in his autobiography, "I never could learn the art of copying" (Gandhi 18). This seems a small matter in the case of ordinary people but in relation with Gandhi this is a grand issue because he does not become vulnerable to the lies later on in his life either.

Though Gandhi, in the later phase of life, realizes that some moments of his early life he did cheat his parents but he does not hesitate to accept his blunders. Lying also makes Gandhi uneasy; he feels as if he has lost his appetite- it means a

seemingly small thing has a huge impact on Gandhi. And it is worth mentioning, since acceptance of faults and mistakes is always comprehended. Gandhi speaks his heart:

I have no appetite today; there is something wrong with my digestion. It was not without compunction that I devised these pretexts. I knew I was lying and lying to my mother. I also knew that, if my mother and father come to know of my having become a meat eater, they would be deeply shocked. This knowledge was gnawing at my heart. (34)

Gandhi never refrains himself away from accepting the blames for the wrong doings. He dares also to reveal the facts to his father. Once Gandhi writes a letter to his father in which he asks for his father's forgiveness:

I decided at last to write out confession, to submit it to my father and ask his forgiveness. I wrote it on a slip of paper and handed it to him myself. In this note not only did I confess my guilt, but I asked adequate punishment for it, and closed with a request to him not to punish himself for my offence. I also pledged myself never to steal in future. (39)

Gandhi accepts his failures while stealing in the due course of smoking and in the process of meat eating. Gandhi wants his father's punishment for his offences more than asking for the mercy.

Gandhi takes such measures during his study period in England in his adult age; however, England which, by its nature and environment, entices people to become meat eaters. Gandhi promotes vegetarianism in England and for the same matter Gandhi, in collaboration with other vegetarians, forms a vegetarian community in England in which some of the British also become members. Gandhi reveals, "I decided to start a vegetarian club in my locality. I invited Sir Edwin Arnold, who lived there, to be Vice-President. Dr. Oldfield who was editor of *The Vegetarian* became president. I myself became the secretary" (70). Gandhi was the secretary of vegetarian club in England.

Gandhi does many such experiments with his food and at times he survives on just boiled spinach. Louis Fischer writes: "He began to eat and enjoy, boiled spinach with no condiments. Many such experiments, he remarked, 'taught me that the real seat of taste was not the tongue but the mind,' and Gandhi had commenced that remarkable lifelong task of changing his mind" (40). After several experiments, Gandhi understands the fact that our mind is more tempted for different foods rather than our tongue. He prefers very simple and spice less food items for his use.

Gandhi rather survives on vegetarian diets. It can further be supported by the view of Joseph Campbell:

As in the Orient, we hear, rather, of the “cycle of birth or becoming” (kyklos tes geneleos); and the call to the individual is to save, not the world, but himself: to purge away the wicked portion of his nature and to cultivate the godly, by vegetarianism, ascetism, and assiduous practice of the Orphic rituals through many lives. (Qtd. in Lefkowitz 429)

Campbell’s observation matches with the thoughts of Gandhi quite well. Since Gandhi studies the holy text *Gita* for his religious upliftment, and practices the teachings of *Gita* throughout his life taking inspiration religiously.

Gandhi’s resistance becomes piercing when he abjures the eating of eggs. In England all of the members of Vegetarian society are likely to eat meat under different definitions. They accept eggs and eat them saying that eggs do not incorporate the flesh, but for Gandhi it is contrary. He, as per the promise made to his mother, observes eggs as something carrying something fleshy inside it. Gandhi mentions, “I was convinced that my mother’s definition was the definition binding on me. If, therefore, I would observe the vow I had taken, I must abjure eggs. I therefore did so” (69). An expert convinced him that eggs are not meat; the consumption of eggs injured no living creatures. After a while, however, Gandhi thought better of it. His mother, he reasoned, regarded eggs as meat, and since she had received his vow, her definition was binding. This nature of Gandhi expresses boldly his adamant desire to abide by the promise made to his mother. Gandhi’s cultural resistance is perceived in his being celibate.

Gandhi observes celibacy in South Africa as well as in England. Gandhi ponders on his deeds of sex in South Africa and tries to evaluate his lustful yearning. Gandhi perceives that his wife is never a temptress but he is tempted at times. Still on close scrutiny Gandhi further solidifies his reason of becoming celibate in South Africa and takes another oath of adopting Brahmacharya so strongly in his lifetime. Moreover Gandhi’s lust becomes a part of fulfilling his desire rather than a godly union for recreation. Gandhi also realizes that refraining from the carnal desire is useless and also impossible - especially when such a relationship is concerned in relation with the wife - but he has a great faith on God: “The elimination of carnal relationship with one’s wife seemed then a strange thing. But I launched forth with faith in the sustaining power of God” (215). This is how he entrusted in power of God.

The desire of Gandhi to become celibate is not only meant for keeping himself away from the craving desire for sex, but he wants to be in pursuit of something which is not possible with such filthy thoughts. A.K. Damodaran in “In Search of Gandhi” explores: “The organic relationship in Gandhiji’s mind, between his personal anguish and his public activities, is brought out very clearly. The search for Brahmacharya, again and again thwarted down the decades, is a part of his

personal pursuit of the unknowable” (19). Surely, Gandhi is not an ordinary human being who has a very visible pursuit. He craves for something which is far off.

South Africa is supposed to be the first place of Gandhi for imbibing the conception of discrimination between white and the rest of the people. As Gandhi goes to South Africa with a mission as a lawyer, he observes deep-rooted bias against the Indians. This is evident when he faces the derogatory world of English men when they call all the Indians ‘coolies’. Gandhi observes, “Englishmen call them ‘coolies’ and as the majority of Indians belong to the labouring class, all Indians were called ‘coolies’ or ‘Samis’” (117). This attitude of the English people surprises Gandhi because the labeling is unsatisfactory. Since in South Africa there are lots of Indians who possess their own factories, land and properties and even some of them overdo the English People.

As Gandhi does not accept to travel by another compartment, he is coerced by the constable to board off the train and his luggage is also thrown out. Gandhi goes to sit in the waiting room and starts absorbing the deep-rooted color prejudice. But he shivers in the cold night because that part of the place is very cold. He has his over coat but he does not dare to ask for it since it is in the luggage which is under the vigilance of the railway authority and he foresees another humiliation. The concept of resistance starts cropping up in Gandhi’s mind because he seems impenetrable to tolerate such a heavy discrimination. Gandhi soliloquies: “I began to think of my duty. Should I fight for my rights or go back to India, or should I go on to Pretoria without minding the insult, and return to India after finishing the case? It would be cowardice to run back to India without fulfilling my obligation” (122). Now he feels the necessity to fight for his rights. But after a short while he realizes that this insult of him is just a simple matter, since it happens with other Indians quite often. The discriminatory attitude is all-pervasive in South Africa.

Gandhi is seen adamant to his duty when the white leader puts a rag of cloth on the footboard and addresses Gandhi to sit there so that he can sit at the place of Gandhi for fresh air and smoke. It is more than humiliation in the part of Gandhi and he tries to defend himself by saying that it was the leader who made Gandhi sit there. The leader does not listen to him but becomes quite aggressive. And his anger and aggressiveness culminates only when he indulges in humiliating Gandhi by beating. Gandhi expresses the incident:

‘So he took a piece of dirty sack-cloth from the driver, spread it on the footboard and, addressing me said, ‘Sami’, you sit on this, I want to sit near the driver.’ The insult was more than I could bear. In fear and trembling I said to him, ‘it was you who seated me here, though I should have been

accommodated inside. I put up with the insult. Now that you want to seat outside and smoke, you would have me seat at your feet. I will not do so, but I am prepared to sit inside. (123)

The powerful and most appraised resistance comes against the authorities of South Africa in his professional life and in India eventually in his patriotic mission. The situations of the colored people in South Africa are quite pathetic and Gandhi moves forward with courage to resist such a prejudice. For each and every action he uses '*Ahimsa*' – non violence. This non-violence has been then the trademark of Gandhi. He himself considers *Ahimsa* a strong weapon which he possesses and with the help of *Ahimsa* he strongly challenges the existing situations. Gandhi believes: "This *Ahimsa* is the basis of the search for truth. I am realizing everyday that the search is vain unless it is founded on *ahimsa* as the basis" (281). By applying *ahimsa* Gandhi also tries to imbibe truth.

Another fundamental reason of Gandhi not falling into the victim of coercive force is that he strongly believes that even thinking of attack or physical retaliation means to demean the almighty god and ultimately the humanity as a whole. Gandhi unpacks: "It is quite proper to resist and attack the system, but to resist and attack its author is tantamount to resisting and attacking oneself. ... To slight a single human being is to slight those divine powers, and thus to harm not only that being but with him the whole world" (181). Attacking the system means raising the strong aversion towards the biased rules and regulations but the moment attack gets entangled with the physicality, it threatens the authority of the almighty as well.

Gandhi not only accepts non-violence as a means of fight but he also preaches the same to the people. He opines that with non-violence one can defeat any sort of tyranny. Allan Douglas puts his idea about Gandhi's non-violence: "Gandhi, of course, is very concerned with violence in the more usual sense of overt physical violence. He devotes considerable attention to identifying such violence, trying diverse approaches to conflict resolution, and providing nonviolent alternatives" (293). It is very clear from the quote that it becomes the work of impossibility to turn a person from violence to non-violence. But for Gandhi the tougher the job the livelier he feels.

Satyagraha is the word coined by Gandhi for the meaning truth. And the primary thing Gandhi takes is the self-purification. For the matter of self-purification Gandhi initially takes the stricter measure against the sexual gratification. This is his prime resistance against the natural phenomenon. Another thing Gandhi takes into consideration is the food and diet. However, the most fundamental issue to discuss here is the self-restraint. Gandhi mentions:

I was anxious to observe Brahmacharya in thought, word and deed, and

equally anxious to devote the maximum of time to the Satyagraha struggle and fit myself for it by cultivating purity. I was therefore led to make further changes and impose greater restraints upon myself in the matter of food. (324)

So, the idea of Gandhi is that self-restraint is a means to qualify for *Satyagraha*.

Over indulgence in any sort of sensual gratification act is harmful, since a Satyagrahi should try to live on things needed – not on the luxury. Gandhi further writes, “One should eat not in order to please the palate, but just to keep the body going” (326). Mostly ordinary humans eat for just satisfying the sense and it even kills the capacity of enjoyment.

The resistance is materialized because these two activities are religiously affiliated: the first is observed by Hindus and the latter is practiced by the Muslims. But whatever is the case, Gandhi succeeds in cultivating such practices in all the members who are Satyagrahis. A.S. Woodburne unfolds: “Upon those who know Mr. Gandhi intimately he always makes the impression of one who is sincere in his quest for truth and in his desire that soul-force (*satyagraha*) should be the guiding influence in his own and the life of his fellow countrymen” (269). Gandhi believes that all the people around should have the desire of truth. They are real Satyagrahis who, without any hesitation, harbor the passion for dying for the sake of truth.

He, furthermore, says that surrender to the sensual desires means surrendering to the beastlike attitudes. Gandhi observes, “If I had failed to develop restraint to the extent that I have, I should have descended lower than the beasts and met my doom long ago” (325). Gandhi witnesses that a person filled with the passions can never reach the truth, because truth reaching is only possible through self-denial. Gandhi pens his heart in the Autobiography: “A man who is swayed by passions may have good enough intentions, may be truthful in word, but he will never find the Truth. A successful search for Truth means complete deliverance from dual throngs such as of love and hate, happiness and misery” (349). With these words Gandhi focuses on complete resistance against the ordinary passions which engulf human beings.

Gandhi, along with Kastubai, tries to educate the people of Champaran by providing them the education of cleanliness. These are the basic fundamental approaches of Gandhi in India and more influencing resistances come through the concept of Hind Swaraj and Non co-operation movements.

Since Gandhi is completely immersed in the movements against the British rule in India, he has to identify strategies to resist the British rulers but in a peaceful manner. Gandhi, for that matter, thinks of Hind Swaraj movement – the movement which would resist the things produced in the factories which

use imported materials. The first of such things is the use of clothes. Gandhi concentrates on using the cloth being produced by the manual labors. And with the same aim few handlooms are established in the ashram. Gandhi makes it clear, “When the Satyagraha Ashram was founded at Sabarmati, we introduced a few handlooms there” (496). The first challenge is that of the artisans since all of the people associated with the ashram belong to either liberal professions or to business. However, the problem is solved later upon finding some experts for the same. The resistance is much more powerful than it can be articulated ordinarily. As Gandhi puts forth:

The object that we set before ourselves was to be able to clothe ourselves entirely in cloth manufactured by our own hands. We therefore forthwith discarded the use of mill-woven cloth, and all the members of the Ashram resolved to wear hand woven cloth made from Indian yarn only. (496)

This movement not only vouches for the resistance against the then rulers but it also helps find out the positions of the wavers in the nation. Along with the resistance the wavers also become successful enough to express themselves and come into contact with other people.

Therefore, Gandhi visualizes that such affiliation with spinning mills gives no service to the country. He puts forth, “We did not feel that we could render any service to the country by continuing as agents of Indian spinning mills” (497). That’s why the resistance takes place against such mills as well. And it inaugurates the products of the goods on their own. However for the matter of the production of the cloth, Gandhi needs the sliver. For the same matter he consults Umar Sobani and the latter instantly agrees to send the sliver needed for the production of the yarn at ashram. Sobani sends the sliver without hesitation and this practice goes for some time without any difficulty but ultimately Gandhi thins otherwise.

The non-co-operation means Gandhi completely disregards the system of the government, thus he boycotts each and every action taken by the then government. As Louis Fischer writes in his book *The Life of Mahatma Gandhi*, “Gandhi was still a non-co-operator, still a champion of civil disobedience and ‘a strong disbeliever in this government’, he declared in young India of 10 April, 1924” (277). By disbeliever he means that Gandhi boycotts courts, schools and government jobs and titles. In this fashion Gandhi enters into the politics of India. Gandhi actually stirs the mass not to follow the above-mentioned things so as to liberate India from the colony of the British.

Gandhi after reaching the destination leads the populace towards the bank of the sea. He does not stay idle on the bank of the sea but rather he initiates the action on himself. This activity of Gandhi brings joy among the followers and this is taken by all as a harsh resistance against the British monopoly of salt. Fisher

writes on the activities in his book *The Life of Mahatma Gandhi*:

The entire night of 5 April, the Ashramites prayed, and early in the morning they accompanied Gandhi to the sea. He dipped into the water, returned to the beach, and there picked up some salt left by the waves. Mrs. Sarojini Naidu, standing by his side, cried, 'Hail, deliverer.' Gandhi had broken the British law which made it a punishable crime to possess salt not obtained from the British government salt monopoly. Gandhi, who had not used salt for six years, called it a 'nefarious monopoly'. Salt, he said, is as essential as air and water, and in India and all the more essential to the hard working, perspiring poor man and his beast because of tropical heat. (337)

Gandhi does not use salt for six long as a resistance of common assumption of the people but still he resists the law of the British government because he thinks of the Indian people as a whole. He challenges the act of the British for the common good which even makes the British realize his influence on the common populace. Gandhi further resists his own followers in the case of unification of Hindus and Muslims. Anti Muslims mass of the followers are against the concept of Gandhi in his approach to unify both the religious communities. The ground of being anti as Fisher writes is, "The two constant causes of friction' with the Muslims were cow-slaughter and music" (278). But Gandhi does not agree with such a notion, therefore the friction becomes non avoidable.

The concept Gandhi harbors is that there should be no discrimination between Hindus and Muslims. He treats all as the same even though he is a Hindu Brahmin. To illustrate such a strong discriminatory attitude it is pertinent here to quote from Dominique Lapierre and Larry Collings: "Caste Hindus would not touch food in the presence of a Moslem. A Moslem entering a Hindu kitchen would pollute it. The touching of a Moslem's hand could send a Brahmin shrinking off to purify himself with hours of ritual abolutions" (29). Gandhi's strong conviction in equal treatment with people irrespective of their cultural practices and ideological backgrounds resonate Tagore's belief system in South India

With furious Nathuram Godse sees no option but to shoot Gandhi. Freedom at Midnight contains the information in this fashion:

'Gandhi said India would be divided over his dead body,' he intoned. 'India is divided, but Gandhi lives. Gandhi's non-violence has left the Hindus defenseless before their enemies. Now, while refugees are starving, Gandhi defends their Moslem oppressors. Hindu women are throwing themselves into wells to save themselves from being raped, and Gandhi tells them "victory is in the victim". One of those victims could be my mother! (453)

Godse observes that Gandhi's non-violence is a sort of hindrance, albeit there are thousands of people to follow it.

Conclusion

Gandhi has been given the name of Mahatma by Tagore not only for his visible contributions to Indian Independence but also for his incessant and strong determination to abide by certain rules and regulations. Gandhi showed the world that an ordinary human being can be an exemplary to commitments. Gandhi fulfilled his commitments, be it the commitment for not taking meat; be it for pleading against subjugation; be it not compromising with the norms and values; be it not accepting the label put on him by the authority; be it in relation with celibacy and many more. But the fact remains in the history with visible black letters that Mahatma Gandhi, a very determinant and all committed human soul, ascends this material world and reigns in the hearts of billions and billions of people all around the world.

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