

## Satyagraha : 100 Years



The year 1906 may rightly be described as a turning point in the life of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. It was in this year when he experienced a deep spiritual awakening within and dedicated himself to the service of humanity. He took the vow of celibacy and stepped out of the narrow confines of the biological family to embrace the entire humankind as his own. It was also in the year 1906 on 11<sup>th</sup> September to be precise he opened the path of emancipation for the suffering humanity with his firm adherence to Truth and Non-violence. Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi described this path as *Satyagraha*.

The genesis of the Birth of *Satyagraha* can be traced to an Ordinance which the Apartheid regime in South Africa sought to impose upon the Indian immigrants. The proposed Ordinance required all Indian men and women, and children over eight, to register with the Authorities, submit to finger-printing and accept a certificate which they were to carry with them at all times. An Indian who failed to register and leave the fingerprints was liable to lose the right of residence and could be imprisoned, fined, or deported from Transvaal. If apprehended on the street or anywhere without certificate could

likewise be imprisoned, fined or deported, even though he owned valuable property or engaged in important commercial transactions.

More than two decades later, recalling that historic moment, Mahatma Gandhi gave a vivid description of the events of the day to his biographer Louis Fischer as if it was only yesterday: "On September 11<sup>th</sup>, 1906 nearly three thousand persons filled the Empire Theatre in Johannesburg. The big hall throbbed with the din of voices which spoke the Tamil and Telugu, Gujarati and Hindi, the languages of India. The few women wore saris. The men wore European and Indian clothes; some had turbans and caps, some Moslem

headgear. Among them were rich merchants, miners, lawyers, indentured labourers, waiters, rickshaw pullers, domestic servants, hucksters and poor shopkeepers. Many were delegates representing the eighteen thousand Indians of the Transvaal, now a British colony; they were meeting to decide what to do about pending discriminatory enactments against Indians. Abdul Ghani, Chairman of the Transvaal British-Indian Association and Manager of a big business firm, presided over the meeting and Sheth Haji Habib delivered the main address”.

Prior to the developments of September 11, Gandhiji had convened a meeting, on returning from service to the Zulus, and after acquainting wife Kasturbai with his vow of celibacy, he had rushed off to Johannesburg in answer to a summons from the Indian community. The *Transvaal Government Gazette* of August 22, 1906, had printed the draft of an Ordinance to be submitted to the legislature. If adopted, it would spell absolute ruin for the Indians of South Africa. Gandhiji decided, ‘better die than submit to such a law’.

The meeting on September 11, 1906 was called precisely for the reason to discuss and debate the manner of protest. One thing was clear: it had to be in a spirit of ‘**do or die**’. It was as if anticipating the Mantra which Gandhiji gave to his countrymen and women in 1942. ‘**But how are we to die!**’ Gandhiji wondered. He was groping in the dark, straining hard to hear the ‘small voice’ within. For days preceding the ‘big meeting’ Gandhiji had no clue as what to do. He only knew that the Ordinance must be resisted. “Nowhere in the world”, he believed, “had free men been subjected to such humiliating, restrictive legislation”.

Gandhiji counselled the Indian community to consider coolly what they were doing. “Notwithstanding the differences of nomenclature in Hinduism and Islam,” he declared, “we all believe in one and the same God. To pledge ourselves or to take an oath in the name of God or with Him as a witness is not something to be trifled with. If having taken such an oath we violate our pledge, we are guilty before God and man. Personally, I hold that a man who deliberately and knowingly takes a pledge and breaks it, forfeits his manhood...A man who lightly pledges his word and then breaks it becomes a man of straw and fits himself for punishment here as well as hereafter.”

Having warned them, he tried to stir them: “If ever a crisis in community affair warranted a vow, now was the time. Caution had its place but also its limits. The government has taken leave of all sense of decency. We will be revealing our unworthiness and cowardice if we cannot stake our all in the face of the conflagration that envelops us...”

The purpose of the resolution was not to impress the outside world. A vote in favour constituted a personal vow and each one of them had to decide whether he possessed the inner strength to keep it. In consequences of the vow,

they might be jailed; in prison they might be beaten and insulted. They might go hungry and be exposed to heat and cold. They might lose their jobs, their wealth. They might be deported. The struggle might last a long time, may be years. "But I can boldly declare and with certainty," Gandhi exclaimed, "that so long as there is even a handful of men true to their pledge, there can be only one end to the struggle—and that is victory".

The audience applauded. Gandhiji then lowered his voice and said, "Many in the hall, moved by the enthusiasm and indignation which dominated the meeting, might pledge themselves that evening and repent the next morning or the next month. Perhaps only a handful would be left to face the final contest with the powerful government". To him it would make no difference. "There is only one course open to me", Gandhi asserted, "to die but not to submit to the law."

The Indians were incensed. Orchestra, balcony and gallery were crowded long before the Chairman opened the proceedings. Angry speeches in four languages stirred the volatile audience to a high emotional pitch and then Sheth Haji Habib read a resolution, which Gandhiji had helped to prepare, demanding non-compliance with the registration provisions. Haji Habib called on the assembly to adopt it, but not in the usual manner. They must vote, he urged, 'with God as their witness'.

This Act was directed specifically against Indians and was, therefore, an affront to them and to India. If passed it would be the beginning of similar laws in other parts of South Africa; in the end, no Indian could remain in South Africa. Moreover, the Ordinance would permit a police officer to accost an Indian woman on the street or enter her home and ask for her registration document. In view of the complete or partial aloofness in which Indian women lived, this feature of the measure was highly offensive both to Moslems and Hindus. 'If anyone came forward to demand a certificate from my wife,' exclaimed an irate Indian at a preliminary committee meeting attended by Gandhiji, 'I would shoot him on the spot and face the consequences.'

That was the mood of the mass meeting in the Empire Theatre in Johannesburg in South Africa on September 11, 1906.

The Chairman added his sobering words. Then the vote was taken. Everyone present rose, raised his hand and swore to God not to obey the proposed anti-Indian Ordinance if it became law.

A sensitive ear and a keen intuition quickly told Mohandas Karmachand Gandhi that this was an extraordinary event. History is in the making. An action with God as witness. It was a religious vow which could not be broken. It was not the ordinary motion passed by a show of hands at a public function and immediately forgotten.

The next day, on September 12, the Empire Theatre was completely destroyed by fire. Many Indians regarded it as an omen that the Ordinance would meet a similar fate. To Gandhiji it was merely a coincidence. He did not believe in such omens. Fate did not beckon to Gandhi with mute signs. The future spoke in him through that awesome, Himalayan self-assurance which he displayed at the meeting and in all the subsequent events till his last breath proved beyond any shadow of doubt that he knew he could walk alone.

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi had, indeed, made history on September 11, 1906.

The next “urgency” before Gandhiji was to find the right name for the mass protest. The name ‘Passive Resistance’ was creating misunderstanding even in the minds of his earnest supporters. As it happened in the course of a meeting where Mr. Hosken, one of the magnates of Johannesburg, observed, “The Transvaal Indians have had recourse to passive resistance when all other means of securing redress proved to be of no avail. They do not enjoy the franchise. Numerically, they are only a few. They are weak and have no arms. Therefore they have taken to passive resistance which is a weapon of the weak.”

“These observations”, Gandhi writes, “took me by surprise, and the speech which I was going to make took an altogether different complexion in consequence. In contradicting Mr. Hosken, I defined our passive resistance as ‘soul force.’ I saw at this meeting that a use of the phrase *passive resistance* was apt to give rise to terrible misunderstanding. I will try to distinguish between *passive resistance* and *soul force* by amplifying the argument which I made before that meeting so as to make things clearer”.

There was nothing passive about the young Gandhi. He has explained in details in his book ‘*Satyagraha in South Africa*’, how he disliked the term ‘Passive Resistance’. Immediately after the collective vow at the Empire Theatre on September 11, an open contest inviting suggestions for a proper designation for the non-violent mass protest was held. He offered a prize for a better name for this new kind of mass-yet individual opposition to government unfairness.

Maganlal Gandhi, a second cousin of Gandhi who lived at Phoenix Farm, suggested *Sadagraha* which meant ‘firmness in a good cause’. Gandhi amended it to *Satyagraha* – *satya* is truth, which equals love, and *agraha* is firmness or force. *Satyagraha*, therefore, means truth force or love-force. Truth and love are attributes of the soul, hence *Satyagraha* is another word for Soul-force. The veteran Gandhian, Dr. R. R. Diwakar, explained: “*Satyagraha* is a new way of life. Moral strength was the major resource of the non-violent mode of action. Moral purpose gave it an element of invincibility.

*Satyagraha*, Gandhiji said, is ‘the vindication of truth not by infliction of suffering on the opponent but on one’s self’. That requires self-control. The

weapons of the *Satyagrahi* are within him. Inspired by this conviction, Gandhiji stepped forward to take on the collective might of the state. He was arrested while leading a mass-movement against the Black Act. He thus became the first *Satyagrahi* in the world to go to jail for upholding human rights. This was amongst the most significant experiment which held out great hopes for the world. It required the protagonist 'to be strong not with the strength of the brute but with the strength of the spark of God'. Eventually *Satyagraha* became his philosophy of life. It was the religion by which he lived and died.

A keen observer, Gandhiji could see the gradual transformation taking place even amongst the White populace in South Africa who showed signs of appreciation for the new technique, though they were only in a minority. He writes with certain degree of satisfaction, "As the movement advanced, Englishmen too began to watch it with interest. Although the English newspapers in the Transvaal generally wrote in support of the Europeans and the Black Act, they willingly published contributions from well-known Indians. They also published Indian representations to Government in full or at least a summary of these, sometimes sent their reporters to important meetings of the Indian, and when such was not the case, made room for the brief reports we sent them."

The account of the trials and tribulations of young Gandhi in search of some means of livelihood far away from his home in a distant land makes for an amazing story. From the very moment of his arrival in 1893, beginning with the humiliating incident at Pietermaritzberg railway platform, it was as if destiny had laid before him the course he had to follow in the next 21 years of his stay in South Africa, which can only be described in one word 'eventful'. These experiments are nothing but an immortal saga of advocate Mohandas Karmachand Gandhi's spiritual strivings which led to the birth of *Satyagraha*. It is the most revolutionary contribution of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to contemporary social and political philosophy, and also an ethical imperative in the strive torn world we live in.

The early unfortunate incidents vividly revealed to the sensitive mind of Mahatma Gandhi the abjectness and degradation of the Asian people in South Africa. Even as a child Gandhiji had shown the courage of conviction to rise against any kind of discrimination between man and man on the basis of his birth, creed, and colour. When his mother forbade him to play with a boy of his own age because he was an "untouchable", he revolted against this age old taboo. Once again in South Africa he launched a determined revolt against the tyranny of the White races.

Even before the informal launch of *Satyagraha*, we have evidence of Gandhiji's genius in organising an Indian Ambulance corps of nearly 400 Indians during the Boer war, when he himself acted as the Sergeant—Major. Scrupulously trying to avoid getting drawn into the local politics, Gandhiji

confined his activities to the Indian community. In 1906, he organised a stretcher-bearing unit of nearly two dozen Indians in the course of the Zulu rebellion.

On October 28, 1913 Gandhiji led the historic march, from New Castle to Volksrust, of nearly three thousand people, as if anticipating the Epic Dandi March. The protest was against £ 3 tax which Indian Indentured labourers were made to pay. Eventually General Smuts had to acquiesce to the *Satyagrahis* resistance and on January 21, 1914 the *Satyagraha* was suspended when General Smuts accepted Gandhiji's proposals.

These activities were organised by him in the hope that if Indians were to become full citizens they must perform their duties to the legally constituted government of South Africa. But no amount of humanitarian work could melt the hearts of the staunch racist regime of South Africa. The Asiatic Department of Transvaal and General Jan Smuts kept devising ways and means for inflicting additional affronts and insults on the Indian community.

The *Satyagraha* movement in South Africa under the leadership of Gandhiji rendered great service to the cause of social equality. The Universal appeal of the *Satyagraha* was forcefully brought out in an address made by Gandhiji at a public Meeting in Johannesburg in 1914, wherein he said, "Behind that struggle for concrete rights lay the great spirit which asked for an abstract principle and the fight which was undertaken in 1906, although it was a fight against a particular law, was a fight undertaken in order to combat the spirit that was seen about to overshadow the whole of South Africa. It was a struggle for the vindication of the great truth that all men are free and equal".

As is clear from the foregoing account, right from the day Gandhiji arrived in South Africa in 1893 to the time he departed in 1914, he worked for the restoration of Justice to his fellow countrymen who were subjected to degrading and mortifying discrimination, ever since their arrival in Natal in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. With his non-violent *Satyagraha* against social tyranny, Gandhiji soon became an acknowledged leader of the Indian community in the protracted *Satyagraha* movement, particularly from 1906-1914.

In South Africa, Gandhiji also came in contact with diverse streams of thoughts. It virtually turned out to be the nursery of his Experiments with Truth. His social, economic and political philosophy took concrete shape here. He read extensively John Ruskins 'Unto this last', Leo Tolstoy's 'The Kingdom of God is within you', Henry David Thoreau's work on Civil Disobedience and several other works, which left a deep impression on his mind. His philosophy of *Sarvodaya* was inspired by these enlightened readings.

Again, it was in South Africa, far away from his homeland, he evolved a clear perspective and strategy for the regeneration of his beloved country. He analysed the causes for the degeneration of the contemporary civilisation and

suggested a way out of the impasse through a holistic perspective of development. He prepared a blue print for an integrated philosophy of life and put them in a booklet which he called '*Hind Swaraj*' or the 'Indian Home Rule'. Written in 1908, *Hind Swaraj* is hailed as Gandhiji's 'seminal work' and has become a Bible for all those people who are dedicated to the cause of social regeneration across the globe.

By 1908 he had also experimented with civil disobedience and served jail terms. It was also during the *Satyagraha* that Gandhiji first saw the inner strength of the women through Kasturba and realised the potential of women power, which he called *Stri-Shakti*. These experiences in South Africa prepared him to plunge himself to the regeneration of India, and through India the whole World, weighed down by brute force of violence, hatred and greed.

For Mahatma Gandhi *Satyagraha* and *Sarvodaya* were the two sides of the same coin and rightly regarded as the most significant and revolutionary contributions to contemporary political and socio-economic thought. One is incomplete without the other. The fundamental concepts of *Satya* and *Ahimsa*, truth and non-violence, can be found in the world's major religious and philosophical traditions; Gandhi's originality lay in the way he fused them in both theory and practice. His doctrines of *Satyagraha* or non-violent resistance and *Sarvodaya* or universal welfare were at once the logical corollaries of his fundamental premise about human perfectibility, and the mature fruit of his repeated experiments with political action and social reform.

Further more, Gandhi, the scientist through his experiments with truth envisaged the Constructive Programme as the indispensable positive component leading towards the realisation of both *Satyagraha* and *Sarvodaya*, whether it was his experiments in Community Living, Hindu-Muslim Unity, Basic Education, Emancipation of Women, Elimination of Untouchability, Cottage Industries and Trusteeship. These are all basic to an Enlightened World view, which found form and strength in Gandhiji. His forays into journalism with the launch of 'Indian Opinion' in 1903 too was part of his Constructive Programme. Phoenix Ashram and Tolstoy Farm too were great experiments in these spheres. In a nutshell, *Satyagraha* will have meaning only if backed by the objective of Sarvodaya, which in turn can be realised only through a vigorous and sincere adoption of the Constructive Programme. It is a comprehensive, all embracing philosophy of social regeneration without which *Satyagraha* remains only an ideal that will never realise its ultimate goal. Each of these vital components is linked to the other and only if taken together provides dynamism to the Gandhian revolution unique in history. It is essential to understand that in Gandhi's scheme of things, revolution and reconstruction must run parallel.

That South Africa had been the nursery of Mahatma Gandhi's experiments with truth is acknowledged by him in all humility. Recalling his experiences, the Mahatma told his biographer Louis Fischer:

*"It was in South Africa, that God forsaken dark continent, where I found my God. And again, it was only when I had learnt to reduce myself to zero that I was able to evolve the power of Satyagraha in South Africa".*

It were these experiments that reinforced the Mahatma's faith in the philosophy of non-violence as a peaceful method of resistance to violence – the first step towards ushering a New World Order.

His work in South Africa won him wide acclaim in India too. Gopal Krishna Gokhale, whom Gandhiji described as his 'Political Guru', acquainted Indian National Congress with Gandhiji's work in South Africa amongst his fellow countrymen. Not only this, Gandhiji also won a great number of friends and followers, not to speak of the admirers even amongst his adversaries. Rev. C.F. Andrews was one amongst such friends, who became a devoted friend and follower of the Mahatma since the days of the South African *Satyagraha* Movement, whom Gurudev Rabindra Nath Tagore called 'Deenbandhu', friend of the poor.

*Satyagraha* is completing its 100<sup>th</sup> Year on September 11, 2006.

That there is an urgent need for the youth to be acquainted with the genesis, growth and future application of *Satyagraha* has not been understood well. One often hears that youth is indifferent to Gandhi. But are the youth to be blamed if they reject an emaciated Gandhi obsessed with some outdated fads and foibles? Every generation needs to be acquainted with the story of Mahatma Gandhi's Experiments with Truth in a scientific manner. It is a continuous process and not a one time programme. It is a story which must be told and retold.

It is important for the Generation X to understand the dynamics of *Satyagraha* because they are the ones who are going to be the inheritors of this world, good or bad. Violence still seems to be on a winning streak. In such a scenario adherence to non-violence teaches them that no one is infallible; a true *Satyagrahi* would not struggle to achieve his or her pre-planned ends only but to realize truth based on human needs. Moreover, it is essential for a vibrant society that the youth must be made to see the basic bond between Means and Ends. Wrong means will only lead to wrong ends, though it may not appear to be so in the heat of the moment. In the Gandhian framework, ends were only perceived as a logical culmination of the means. Gandhiji used to say, 'Ends and means are mutually convertible.' In other words, the means are merely ends in-the-making.

Perhaps the most appropriate way to commemorate the hundredth anniversary of the Birth of *Satyagraha* would be to reflect on how a colossal revolution took place in India without the violence that occurred in other countries of Asia and Africa. How it proves that it is possible to wrought a revolution without a bloody war. Why it did not lead to a military dictatorship as revolutions generally do? *Satyagraha* is the sum-total of the Life Message of this revolutionary social scientist Gandhi. It shows the alternative to terrorism and war, which threatens to destroy the very fabric of a civilized existence.

The year 2006 also marks the 2550<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the *Maha Parinirvan* of Mahatma Buddha. This comes along with the centenary of the Birth of *Satyagraha*, which indeed makes the year 2006 a historic year in the true sense, not only for Asia but for the whole world. The Enlightened One had held a great fascination for Gandhiji. He has acknowledged his debt to the Lord with a deep sense of veneration. "I owe a great deal to the inspiration that I have derived from the Life of the Enlightened One. His teachings like his heart, was all-expending and all-embracing, and so it has survived his body and swept across the face of the earth".

He looked upon "Lord Buddha's contribution to humanity in restoring God to his eternal place as a great gift. But greater still was his contribution in his 'exacting regard for all life, be it even so low'. The unadulterated law of human family, his boundless love went out as much to the lower animals, to the lowest life as to the human beings. And he insisted upon purity of life."

Like the Buddha, Gandhiji too followed the right path, right speech, right thought and right conduct. And like the Master before him he put his finger on the root cause of all our sorrows—desire. Desire for more and more. "I do not believe that multiplication of wants and machinery contributed to supply them, is taking the world a single step near its goals. I whole heartedly detest this mad desire to destroy distance and time, to increase animal appetites and go to the ends of the earth in search of their satisfaction".

Above all, he too, like The Buddha, was an astute observer of human affairs. He believed that the person who remains in the world of action, free of any kind of temptations and attachments, stands to gain more spiritual merits than the one who retires from the world only to lead a life of indolence. All through his life Mahatma Gandhi endeavoured to see God in the service of humanity. "I am part and parcel of the whole, and I cannot find him apart from the rest of humanity", was his firm belief.

Mahatma Buddha said: 'If you want to do any sacrifice, sacrifice yourself, your lust, all your material ambition, all worldly ambition. That will be an ennobling sacrifice.' If there was one complete and true follower of The Buddha, it was undoubtedly, Mohandas Karmachand Gandhi, who not only internalized

the Sermons of the Lord but also proved to the world that it can be adopted as a noble way of life. Ultimately Gandhi, the true disciple, made the supreme sacrifice to uphold the divinity of Truth and became a Mahatma.

In a world still darkened with intolerance, greed and hatred, the life and teachings of both Lord Buddha and Mahatma Gandhi shine as a beacon of light. The four Noble Truth, the Eightfold path, *Satyagraha* and *Sarvodaya* are the perfect manifestations of the principle of life which has the force to lead a new humanity on to a new path.

Gandhi Smriti and Darshan Samiti has planned year long special programmes in different parts of the country to commemorate the historic events. In all humility we believe that there cannot be a better tribute to these two Great Souls than Right Action.

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