

## Limitations of Satyagrah

Gandhi's theory of satya-graha, which goes right to the heart of his theory of human nature, was a highly original and creative contribution to theories of social change and political action. He was right to stress the limits of rational discussion and the dangers of violence, and explore new forms of political praxis that broke through the narrow straitjacket of the reason-violence dichotomy. Satya-graha took full account of the rational and moral nature of human beings and stressed the value of rational discussion and moral persuasion. And it was also sensitive to the human capacities for intransigence and moral blindness and sought to overcome these by awakening the shared humanity of the parties involved and transforming their mutual perceptions and relationships. Satya-graha aimed not just to resolve existing disagreements but to build deeper moral and emotional bonds, and thus both give the compromise reached a firmer foundation and make future conflicts less likely and less intractable.

While the moral and political significance of Gandhi's satya-graha is beyond doubt, it is not the panacea he thought it was. Although he was right to stress the unity of reason and morality, or the head and the heart as he called it, he was wrong to think that all or even most social conflicts could be resolved by touching the opponent's heart. They sometimes occur because persons of goodwill take very different views of what constitutes human well-being. On the basis of the principle of the sanctity of human life, some find abortion, euthanasia, and war morally unacceptable while others reach the opposite conclusion. It is difficult to see how Gandhi's method can resolve these differences and the consequent conflicts.

Gandhi was probably right to argue that human beings are generally affected by the suffering of others and regret that suffering even if they are unable or unwilling to do

anything about it. However, he overlooked the fact that, if they thought the suffering deserved, their reaction would be different. Not the suffering per se but one's judgement of it determines one's response to it, and that in turn depends on one's beliefs about which individuals may deeply disagree. The Sharpeville massacre left many a white South African unmoved, the pictures of the Vietnamese victims of American napalm bombs did not disturb the consciences of many Americans, and the brutal Nazi treatment of the Jews had no effect on many a German.

Gandhi was wrong to argue that satya $\bar{g}$ raha never failed and that it was effective under all conditions. If he had said that it was a self-chosen way of being in the world and that one would die rather than kill irrespective of the outcome, his view would have made moral though not political sense. To his credit he insisted that satya $\bar{g}$ raha was meant to succeed and achieve practical results. And that subjected his claim to a different kind of scrutiny. It was an article of faith for him that all human beings had souls, which could be 'touched' and 'activated'. As a result he did not and could not acknowledge that some human beings might be profoundly distorted and beyond hope. Satya $\bar{g}$ raha presupposes a sense of decency on the part of the opponent, an open society in which his brutality can be exposed, and a neutral body of opinion that can be mobilized against him. It also presupposes that the parties involved are interdependent, as otherwise non-cooperation by the victims cannot affect the vital interests of their opponents, and that the victims have both sufficient self-confidence and a reasonably effective organization to fight against injustices. Human skeletons in the Nazi concentration camps could hardly have launched a satya $\bar{g}$ raha, nor would it have succeeded in a closed and ruthless totalitarian system. As Martin Buber wrote to Gandhi, where there is no witness, there can be no martyrdom, and without the latter satya $\bar{g}$ raha loses its moral force. Hayim Greenberg, editor of *The Jewish Frontier* and an

admirer of Gandhi, wrote to him, 'a Jewish Gandhi in Germany, should one arise, could function for about five minutes and would be promptly taken to the guillotine'. Gandhi replied that Hitler too was a human being, that the Jews, who were going to be slaughtered anyway, should have asserted their dignity and freely chosen their way of death, and that such an action was bound to have an effect on ordinary Germans, if not immediately at least a little later (lxviii. 137–41). His reply had a point, but it rested on an uncritical faith in the power of non-violence, and showed little understanding of the complex ways in which totalitarian systems brutalized the community, demoralized the victims, distorted public discourse, and undermined the basic preconditions of satya $\bar{g}$ raha.

Gandhi's satya $\bar{g}$ raha has much to be said for it, but it cannot be a catholicon. Although Gandhi insisted otherwise, violence need not be accompanied by hatred and ill-will or be uncontrolled. Like non-violence it too can be restrained, measured, born out of love for both the victims and the perpetrators of injustice, and used to arrest human degradation. Gandhi would have been wiser to insist not on one 'sovereign' method of action but on a plurality of methods to be used singly or in combination with others as the situation required. Since different circumstances require different responses, violence might sometimes achieve results that non-violence either cannot or do so only at an unacceptably high price in human suffering.

Although Gandhi's satya $\bar{g}$ raha had its limitations and he was wrong to claim 'sovereign efficacy' for it, it is a powerful, novel, and predominantly moral method of social change. Not surprisingly, it has been borrowed and tried out in different countries with suitable adjustments to local circumstances. The United States is an excellent example of this. Many black American leaders had gone to India from the early 1930s onwards to seek his advice and study his method. He was so impressed with their commitment that he remarked

that 'it may be through the Negroes that the unadulterated message of non-violence will be delivered to the world' (ixii. 202). The American civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s under the leadership of Martin Luther King confirmed Gandhi's hope. Embarking on 'a serious intellectual quest for a method to eliminate social evil', King turned to a number of writers including Marx, and found them all unhelpful. A sermon by Mordecai Johnson, the then President of Howard University, in 1950 alerted him to the importance of Gandhi's satya-graha. King read Gandhi closely, found 'intellectual and moral satisfaction' in his writings.

King shared Gandhi's belief in the power of suffering love, his abhorrence of violence, emphasis on both the head and the heart, concern to raise the consciousness and build up the self-confidence of the victims of injustice, and stress on the crucial role of effective organization and an inspiring leader. King, however, could not apply Gandhi's method to the American situation without suitably revising it.

He was a Christian, and hence Gandhi's metaphysics had only a limited appeal to him. As he put it, 'Christ furnished the spirit and motivation [for non-violent resistance], while Gandhi furnished the method' (K 67). Gandhi's fasts, his belief in the spiritual power of personal purity, and the concomitant emphasis on simple living and the conquest of the senses had no attraction for King. This is puzzling for Christ's crucifixion is the central motif of Christianity, and one would have expected King to explore ways of reaffirming and re-enacting it and mobilizing its immense symbolic potential in his repertoire of political action, as Gandhi did with his fasts. Again, given the fact that King was operating within a largely democratic context and wanted black integration into American society, Gandhi's method of non-cooperation with the established legal, political, and cultural institutions was of little relevance to him. In some respects King seems to have been more acutely aware than

Gandhi of the power of evil (an awareness reinforced by the intellectual influence of the American Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, who both admired and stressed the limits of Gandhi's non-violence), and guarded himself and his followers against the 'illusions of a superficial optimism concerning human nature and the dangers of a false idealism' (K 81). King's civil rights movement showed both the universal relevance of Gandhi's satya-graha and the need for its creative adaptation and development.

(From *Gandhi: A Very Short Introduction* by Bhikhu Parekh)