

Mahatma Gandhi's suggestions for Miniature Satyagraha:

Some Reflections

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Abstract

The concept of Miniature Satyagraha represents an important yet understudied dimension of Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy of non-violent resistance. Conceived as a localized, disciplined, and ethically grounded form of satyagraha, it was intended to address specific injustices while preparing individuals and communities for larger struggles through the cultivation of truth (*satya*), non-violence (*ahimsa*), self-discipline, and voluntary sacrifice. Rather than viewing satyagraha solely as a mass political movement, Gandhi regarded small-scale, issue-based campaigns as effective instruments for moral education, constructive social reform, and democratic participation. This article examines Gandhi's suggestions on Miniature Satyagraha through a historical and analytical reading of his writings in *Young India*, *Harijan*, *Navajivan*, and *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*. It argues that Gandhi envisioned these localized movements not merely as tactical responses to injustice but as essential components of his broader constructive programme and strategy for achieving social and political transformation. By reassessing the

principles, objectives, and practical significance of Miniature Satyagraha, the study highlights its contribution to Gandhian thought and demonstrates its continuing relevance for understanding decentralized, non-violent activism in contemporary democratic societies.

Key words

Mahatma Gandhi; Miniature Satyagraha; Satyagraha; Public activist, democratic consciousness,

Satyagraha is one of the most important tools of Gandhi's intellectual armory that he pursued for his organic politics and social transformation.¹ Gandhi, in his long political career, elaborated Satyagraha in these multidimensional ways to prove that his scheme of Satyagraha was not meant for rigid or literal implementations devoid of any enlightened holistic considerations.² Gandhi's notions of Satyagraha are highly contextual and circumscribed. It is not always like a 'Call for Political Action of huge demonstrative nature' or 'street demonstration drives' to make a show of the personal strength of a self-righteous person or group.

He referred to Satyagraha doctrine in multifarious and multidimensional ways. In prescribing Satyagraha, he gave full attention to the peculiarities of and multiple situations of different shades and orientations. One of the major modes of Gandhi's Satyagraha was of personal whom we may call as Miniature Satyagraha. The purpose of such Satyagrahas was to provide a tool for fighting injustice, bad practices of society, gender discrimination related issues and oppression in general. This paper focuses on this aspect of Satyagraha.

Public Activists (active and aspirant both) have to face a lot of problems and challenges within their families and in the general societal milieu because of general orthodox view point of others.

They have to confront those persons who are indifferent or hostile to them and with whom they have otherwise emotional attachments and lifelong family associations. Moreover, materialistic world's temptations and attractive dreams of settled life also contribute to their dilemmas of how to choose and adjust a new mode of life of an activist. Uncertainty over future prospects keeps the pressure on a nascent activist to retrace his steps for easy regular life. The inherent weaknesses of the activists add to these complex problems. Thus, these and similar types of conundrums and confusions creep into the minds of public activists. Succumbing to these challenges and leading a conventional life is the obvious selection offered by the status-quo conservative milieu by which the activist is surrounded. But he would not want to succumb to it. It requires a great deal of sacrificing spirit combined with knowledge to combat these alluring attractions and family problems. In some activists, all these conditions evoke an inner struggle and introspection. Gandhi was familiar with these types of problems from his own personal life experiences and also from keen observations of contemporary society. He applied the notions of Satyagraha to offer advice to these types of challenges.³

Moreover, an activist has to function in surroundings which, if not totally hostile, are not friendly or accommodative due to inconvenient transformation processes or broader social ideas. Activists have to face and experience a lot of humiliating situations in their life. They feel often clueless about 'what to do' due to mighty rigid societal structures and their own inability to instantly fight and alter situations. Gandhi was convinced that a silent suffering of injustice ought not to be the fate of any genuine public activist. These things would also obstruct the path of small but significant skirmishes for social reform and other constructive drives. Gandhi as a mass leader



knew that mobilization of masses for their own welfare was not a flat sentimental task. So, he propagated miniature Satyagraha to respond to these conditions so that at least some resistance could always exist in every prevailing unjust situation.⁴ He regularly gave valuable insights to public activists in Satyagraha to resist all these negative features of society.⁵

Gandhi was aware that in miniature Satyagraha, activists have to deal with those who are otherwise their loved ones and those who act in particularly hostile manner due to their cultural or ideological constraints. Of course, the activist has a better and enlightened understanding of situations, but he is not supposed to place the opponent in the enemy camp. So, the opponent does not deserve to be irrevocably exposed to humiliating ways, because, most of the time, it is the difference of opinion and 'fixed mindset' which make them do wrong. In such matters Gandhi preferred non-violent ideological struggles through available means. So, the method of miniature Satyagraha has to be different from political Satyagraha. Persuasion, discussion and constructive dialectical transformation attempts has a very important role to play in Satyagraha. Self-respect and dignity of opponent has to be maintained in the hope that one day that fellow might be transformed from his present wrong position to a more reasonable and seasoned one. That is why a lot of friendly persuasive discussion and good gestures are the integral part of the miniature Satyagraha method. The question of winning or losing does not involve in it because its aim is to enhance the self-worth and self-esteem of the activist and initiation of the process of introspection in the opponent. But it does not mean to

surrender to wrong in any way. One purpose of miniature Satyagraha is a gradual evolution of the activist so that he might evolve as an able instrument for furthering the case of constructive social change.

Even after all this, the activist finds that the opponent is cruelly rigid and will not change his mind set even a little bit and the activist is convinced within himself of the correctness of his position, then, he has a right to dissociate from the opponent, without abandoning cordial, companionate personal relationships with him. The activist has every right to follow his convictions because individual freedom and liberty to act according to one's conscience cannot be diluted if it is not physically harmful to society. Dissociation and 'parting of ways' alternative is every one's right and duty because distancing from 'evil' is a worthy cause in itself.

Gandhi's suggestions on these individual Satyagraha practices were not aimed for instant political fruits. Its purpose was to make the person fearless, preservation of human dignity in his personality, to be brave enough to act according to his inner lights, ready to sacrifice his privileges for the cherished cause, be the apostle of morality and non-violent spirit (which is, in essence revolutionary democratic consciousness), courageous enough to part ways even from dearest ones if left with no other choice.

For example, in 1924, an aspiring public activist got agitated in personal capacity over an inhuman old custom about marriage in his locality. He intended to launch Satyagraha there and for that he sought the advice of Gandhi. It was a probable case of miniature

Satyagraha. He gave him a detailed reply which reflects over the inner construct of his mind on the issue of social reform. Gandhi wrote,

As the principle of Satyagraha comes to be better understood, it is being put to ever new applications. It is used not merely in fighting the Government but we find it being applied within the family and the caste as well. In a certain community there prevails the inhuman practice of offering girls in marriage for a consideration and a youth has felt the urge to end it. It has been asked what he should do. An easy form of Satyagraha is non-co-operation. The young man wishes to banish this custom from his community. His intention is good. But should he start non-co-operation and, if so, how and against whom?

It is difficult to give a definite opinion in this particular case. But one can suggest some general rules for all situations of this type.

In the first place, one should never embark upon non-co-operation all of a sudden. Evil customs which have prevailed for ages cannot be eradicated in a moment. Reform is one-legged, and so proceeds haltingly. Anyone who loses patience can never become a pure satyagrahi. The first step for a reformer is to educate public opinion. He should meet the wise elders of the community and listen to their points

of view. Maybe the reformer is a poor man, no one knows him and the elders will not listen to him. What should he do then? A poor person like this should know that he is not destined to be an instrument of reform....

The thing is that a reformer should be free from egotism. Why should we assume responsibility for ending all evils? We should be content with speaking the truth ourselves and acting truthfully. Likewise, in regard to the evil practices in the community, we should see that our own attitude and conduct are blameless and maintain a neutral attitude towards others.

To think “I do this, I do that” is ignorance, like that of the dog who thought that the cart was being drawn by him.

We should learn these by heart and, as they suggest, remain free from pride.

If, even then, we feel that the responsibility is ours, an especial duty devolves upon us....

If, however, the leaders of the community do nothing to stop evil practices and themselves follow this one of accepting money for a daughter given in marriage, what should this poor member of the community do? He has made his own life above reproach, and has met all the leading men of the community. All of them have treated him

insultingly and driven him away as they might a dog. Abuse had been showered on him. Dispirited, tired and sad, he has returned home. He sees no shelter save the sky above and no support save the earth below. Now, will God hear his prayer for help? Now he can hear his inner voice. He asks the God within him: “Though insulted, do I yet love my brethren? Am I ready to serve them? Shall I be able to submit even to blows and kicks with their shoes?” If the in-dwelling God answers all these questions in the affirmative, then he is fit to take the second step. Now he may start non-co-operation in the spirit of love. Such non-co-operation means giving up all rights – but not duties.... The poor servant, instead of despairing, should have confidence that from the pure seed sown by him will grow a huge tree....

This poor man of God is now a dweller in a forest. If an unmarried man, he takes a stern pledge that he would remain so until the evil had disappeared from the community and, if married, that he would live with his wife as her friend and not as a husband.... The seed which has been sown needs to be wanted with self-restraint.... A non-co-operator who is a man of restraint will do *tapascharya*, living in the village of his community.... If the leaders of the community have disregarded him, one reason may be that they have taken him to be a thoughtless, unmannerly young man. He has yet to prove that, though poor and

young, he is neither devoid of thought nor unmannerly, but is humble and thoughtful.

Working in such a spirit and serving the members of his community on occasions demanding his service and yet not hoping for a return, he will find others joining the movement for reform. Even though they may not be offering non-cooperation [against the community] their sympathy will be with him. As proud of our sacrifices and in the arrogance of our views, we abuse our friends who co-operate with the Government; this self-controlled young man will not abuse his caste-fellows because they are not with him, or express agreement with his ideas but do not go beyond that and join him in non-co-operation. He will show nothing but love for them and win their hearts. It will be his experience every day that love is the philosopher's stone. But even if he does not have this experience immediately, he will not be impatient, but will keep up his faith that the seed of love can produce nothing but the abundant fruit of love.

From this we can understand that:

1. Many steps will have to be taken for educating public opinion before starting non-co-operating.



2. A non-co-operator should have the strength to put up with abuse, etc., without losing his temper.
3. There should be nothing but love in non-co-operation.
4. After starting non-co-operation, one should not leave one's town or village.
5. A non-co-operator should observe rigid self-restraint.
6. A non-co-operator should have full faith in the means which he adopts.
7. A non-co-operator should remain indifferent towards the fruits of his labors.
8. There should be judgment, thoughtfulness and humility in every step that a non-co-operator takes.
9. Everyone does not have the right or the obligation to start non-co-operation. Non-co-operation started by those who have no right to do so will fail in its aim.

If some or most people feel that the observance of these rules is almost impossible, they will be right. Pure non-co-operation is impossible without rigid self-restraint. Moreover, in the case which we have considered, that man of God is himself the doer and the beneficiary, the commander and the soldier. If there is anything wanting in him, we may take it that he has only disappointment in store for him. For anyone, therefore, who intends starting

non-co-operation in such independent fashion, the first sign of wisdom is to refrain from taking any such step. But once he has taken it, he cannot give up his ideal even if that means laying down his life.⁶

He was a vigilant public leader who primarily judged the activists' zeal of social service in view of their inner strength and convictions. He loved to pick comrades in arms who qualified for these essential character attributes. Firmness with humility and democratic consciousness was also one among them.

Gandhi frequently addressed the complex question of 'who can be a genuine Satyagrahi (public activist).' His repeated emphasis that 'public life and private life should be one' has this context of honesty and personal morality in a person. Any falsehood, camouflage, high sounding radical verbal gestures without concrete action corresponding to it, stubborn rigidity or sheer imitation did not interest him. So, Gandhi's fascination for miniature Satyagraha was also a parameter to gauge the depth and strength of inner reservoir in public activists.

Moreover, this type of Satyagraha can be commenced by anybody for combating any injustice.⁷ The pre-requisite condition is that one must be prepared for suffering and sacrifice on one's own part, and, it should be, in principle, done in personal capacity without any compulsive expectations of outside help.⁸

One very important aspect of Gandhi's miniature Satyagraha is his ideological struggle against orthodox religious fundamentalism based on religious texts and practices. He was a great fond of Sacred Religion Texts of all kinds but he never submitted to any reactionary, in-human interpretation of religious texts. If he found anything in any religious text, which was in contradiction with broader human values and principles, he criticized it on rationalist human domain in his typical non-confrontational way. Insistence on derivation of 'Truth' was an inseparable focus in his all Satyagraha quests which prominently figures in miniatures Satyagraha drives against orthodoxy. A constructive interpretation of religious texts and discrimination in judging the content or intent of them was his method of dealing with them. It was, in fact, an ideological struggle based miniature Satyagraha against fundamental of all kind.

Gandhi believed that these miniature Satyagrahas were not meant for or easily discernible in grabbing political power, but, in totality, it would enhance the inherent 'soul' quality of an activist and prove a facilitator for constructive hegemony. Gandhi did not fear being reduced into a minority if the cause was correct in his eyes. Since he was a believer of Geometrical Progression (GP-a mathematical proposition) in establishing hegemony, Gandhi always argued that enlightened activists might, in due course, multiply fast. In this way, he resembles in Che Guerra style revolutionary understanding of societal change. The difference between the two is of violent mobilization and non-



violent method. And, in the process torch bearers would be created in society which would multiply and assist in the all-round societal transformation process in miraculous geometric progression. This insight of the further ‘permutation effect’ is also true for other two types of Satyagraha. But, for this effect it has to function in institutional genre and thus it would be instrumental in generating ‘natural flow of democratic consciousness’ and constructive political awareness.⁹

¹ Not to quote his later statements, even in 1919 during his first national call for Satyagraha, he clearly stated, “Satyagraha is like a banyan tree with innumerable branches. Civil disobedience is one such branch. Satya and Ahimsa together make the parent trunk from which all innumerable branches shoot out.” *ibid.*, Volume I, ‘Jalianwala Bagh’, 1919, p. 261-62

² By emphasizing literal meaning of Satyagraha, I refer to conventional understanding of role and scope of Satyagraha which has to be limited, stereo-type and of fragmented genre. In this framework Satyagraha is understood merely as ‘Popular Protest Movement’ or as ‘Conflict-Resolution Non-Violent Method’. Similarly, some scholars attribute to it a ‘Universal value’ or combine with it ‘Metaphysical abstractions and philosophical moorings’ which also limits its dynamic functioning.

³ Apart from Satyagraha dialogic, Gandhi also applied his knowledge of transcendental ethical writings and applications to remove the status-quo cobwebs. His conceptions of God etc. offer greater insights to sustain the inner struggles and self-content personality which, according to him, were of crucial importance for an activist for a prolonged non-violent fight.

⁴ A quest for dignified self-respectful life was an inseparable part of his politics. For the preservation of this fundamental human right he even extinguished the distinction of non-violence or violence. We all are familiar of his lifelong argument that violence is always preferable than cowardly silence. His conversation with Chinese delegates is quite significant in this respect.

⁵ It is important to note that these miniatures Satyagraha are not to be offered for political purposes and Systematic Political propaganda is not to be attached to it. Other two types of Satyagraha are more fitting for that purposes

⁶ CWMG, Volume 23, ‘Satyagraha and Caste Reform’, *Navajivan*, 13.04.1924, p. 432-436. It is important here to note that Gandhi did not engage with absolute truth. Most of his advises are of a concrete context.

⁷ Gandhi’s notions of all pervading Satyagraha possibility have the context of miniature Satyagraha by which he induced everyone to struggle against injustice or orthodox situations in their everyday life.

⁸ An activist wanted to offer satyagraha against the landlords of his locality. Gandhi replied to him in a personal letter. “You are free to do anything, but should do nothing at my instance. My advice is that you should make your own decision in the context of the situation prevailing there.... Launch a pure Satyagraha against the landlords if there are

people who can offer Satyagraha. If they are not ready for it do whatever is possible.... There is nothing at all to prevent our meeting the rulers if they are ready to help us. Nothing of this is meant for publication under my name. It is meant only for your understanding.” CWMG, Volume 79, ‘Letter to Bholanath’, 02.02.1945, pp. 88-89

⁹ The purpose of Gandhi about these insights in miniature Satyagraha is to make the nascent activist content and restrict him last he indulges in populist caricatures of his much thoughtful weapon of Satyagraha. Gandhi was of the view that unnecessary prediction of future events is not a proper mindset for an activist because this mode of constant thinking might culminate in masquerading action designs and rigidity in this attitude. Moreover, above that, it was also a qualification test for public activists for further engagements it more systematic satyagraha drives.