

On Civil Disobedience

**(As a means of attaining social and political
ends as practiced in South Africa and India
under the Leadership of M.K. Gandhi)**

by

G.V. Desani

**Department of Philosophy
The University of Texas at Austin
Nov. 16, 1979**

Mahatma Gandhi's maximum good was his God who, he said, "alone is." And he saw him as "purely benevolent," adding, "... I cannot account for the existence of evil by any rational method. I know that He has no evil in Him and if there is evil, He is the author of it. I know, too, that I shall never know God if I do not wrestle with and against evil even at the cost of life itself...."

He was not a 'mystic' in the sense that he did not deny the existence or reality of material, did not claim identity, or even communion with God, though he often spoke of an inner voice. His emotional relationship with God caused him to make intimate and poignant acknowledgements such as these: "... It is an unbroken torture to me

that I am still far from Him. I know that it is the evil passions within that keep me far from Him and yet I cannot get away from them....” Asked by Dr. John R. Mott what had brought the deepest satisfaction to him in difficulties, doubts and questionings, he replied, “living faith in God.” And he said to a biographer (John S. Hoyland), “I cannot recall a moment in my life when I had [a] sense of desertion by God.” He renounced personal possessions, believing that men and women of prayer get everything in answer to prayer. “I want you to believe with me,” he said, “that those who voluntarily give up everything on earth, including the body ... will find they are never in want....”

His ethic was of ‘service’ and , although he conceded free will, in crises he depended on divine guidance: his inner voice. He was inspired by Hindu and Buddhist traditions, particularly the *Gita* – he regarded the war described in the book as allegorical – and by the *Sermon on the Mount*, Tolstoy, [John] Ruskin, Thoreau, and the Jain tradition, particularly the Jain exponent Shrimad Rajchandra who died at 32 and has left us a book of verses. After six years’ practice of *brahmacharya* – celibacy – in 1906, he publicly vowed to abstain from sexual intercourse for life. “Events were so shaping themselves in Johannesburg,” he said, referring to the subject, “as to make this self-purification on my part a preliminary as it were to (the practice of) *satyagraha*.” ... “I can see,” he adds, “that all the principal events of my life, culminating in the vow of *brahmacharya* (celibacy), were secretly preparing me for it. The principle called *Satyagraha* came into being before the name was invented.”

He had found the term “passive resistance” – as a means of attaining social justice or political ends – unsatisfactory because, as he said at the very beginning of the struggle against the government in South Africa, which was led by him, “It was supposed to be a weapon of the weak, and it could be characterized by hatred and that it could finally manifest itself as violence ... I had to demur to these statements and explain the real nature of the Indian movement. It was clear that a new word must be coined by the Indians to designate their struggle. I could not for the life of me find out a new name and I therefore offered a nominal prize through the *Indian Opinion* to the reader who made the best suggestion....” One of the readers suggested “Sadagraha” and won the prize. The Mahatma edited it to “Satyagraha”. (*Satya* Truth – *agraha* firmness.) *Satya* was a synonym of Love and *agraha* implied firmness in Love. That was the definition offered by him. Later on, he suggested other definitions, and subsequently translated it as Soul Force. A practitioner of *Satyagraha* – a *satyagrahi* – was not to harbor hate. It was a breach of the principle. A *satyagrahi* must not harass the opponent. He must conquer his opponent with Soul Force, with Love, and firmness, and by inviting suffering in his own person. The basis of his *satyagraha* – practiced against the authority in South Africa and India – was religion.

In his view – expressed before a literary society in South Africa – Christ and Socrates, among a few, represented Soul Force as opposed to Body Force. He considered Tolstoy the best exponent of the doctrine. Soul Force never causes suffering to others. There is no failure, he added, in this force. Hence Body Force was to be opposed with Soul Force. The idea was expressed, too, by the ancient Indian concept of *ahimsā* – literally, non-violence. Those who recognized the absolute power of Soul Force were

to accept physical suffering as their lot and when this was done, he said, the very suffering became a source of joy. The only condition for the successful employment of this force, he explained, was recognition of the existence of the soul, as apart from the body, and its permanence and superiority.

Apart from the Mahatma's faith in his God, in the existence of the soul, in Soul Force, its superiority over Body Force and in self-conquest – including the vow of celibacy – *satyagraha* was different from passive resistance because, he wrote, "Satyagraha may be offered to (against) one's nearest and dearest ... passive resistance can never be offered to them unless, of course, they have ceased to be dear and become an object of hatred to us. In passive resistance there is always present the idea of harassing the other party and there is a simultaneous readiness to undergo any hardship entailed upon us ... while in *satyagraha* there is not the remotest idea of injuring the opponent...."

In 1930, back in India, resistance to the salt tax was led by Gandhiji. It was called Salt Satyagraha. It was managed by a disciplined array of volunteers and the following rules were laid down and were to be observed strictly:

1. A *satyagrahi* would harbor no anger.
2. He would suffer the anger of the opponent.
3. In so doing, he would suffer assaults from the opponent and never retaliate. But he would not submit, from fear of punishment, to any order given in anger.
4. He would voluntarily submit to arrest. He would not resist confiscation or removal of his property.
5. He would, however, not surrender any property held by him in trust, though he may lose his life defending it. He would not retaliate.
6. Non-retaliation included no cursing or swearing.
7. A *satyagrahi* would never insult his opponent or take part in any shouts or cries contrary to the spirit of *ahimsā* (non-violence).
8. He would not salute the Union Jack (then the flag of the British Government of India) nor would he insult it or insult officials, British or Indian.
9. In the course of the struggle, if anyone insulted or assaulted an official, a *satyagrahi* would protect the official, even at the risk of his life.
10. As a prisoner, he would behave courteously to prison officials and would observe all prison discipline if not contrary to his personal dignity.
11. He would make no distinction between himself and a convict and not regard himself a superior prisoner. He may ask for such conveniences as might be required for his physical and spiritual well-being. He would, however, not ask for any conveniences that might not be (strictly) necessary for keeping his body in good health and condition.
12. He would not fast because he was deprived of any conveniences if such deprivation did not injure his self-respect.
13. He would happily obey all orders issued by the leader of the corps whether those pleased him or not.

14. He would carry out such orders even though they seemed insulting, inimical, or foolish, and later appeal to higher authority. Before joining, he was free to determine the fitness of the corps to satisfy him, but after he had joined it, it would be his duty to submit to its discipline. If the sum total of the energy of the corps appeared to a member to be improper or immoral, he had the right to sever his connection with it. But being within it, he had no right to commit a breach of its discipline.
15. No *satyagrahi* might expect any monetary compensation to maintain his dependents. He would entrust himself and his dependents (family) to God.
16. He would not intentionally become a cause of starting communal quarrels (between various Indian communities).
17. If there was such a quarrel, he would not take sides but would assist the part which was demonstrably in the right.
18. He would conscientiously avoid any possibility of communal disharmony.
19. A *satyagrahi* would do nothing to wound the religious susceptibilities of any community.

On March 18, 1922, before the district and sessions judge, Ahmadabad, then in the Bombay Presidency, the Mahatma pleaded guilty to all charges and – after courtesies with the advocate-general and the Court – he asked for “... the highest penalty.” The sentence passed on him was six years in prison and Gandhiji regarded it “as light as any judge would inflict on me.” Before reading his written statement in the Court, he made a few introductory remarks. Referring to the violence at Chauri Chaura (where a police station was set on fire by a mob and those trapped inside burnt alive) and to loot, arson and murder in Bombay, he said, “... I have come to the conclusion that it is impossible for me to disassociate myself from the diabolical crimes of Chauri Chaura and the mad outrages of Bombay. He (the Advocate-General) is quite right when he says that as a man of responsibility, having had a fair share of experience of this world, I should know the consequences of every one of my acts. I knew them. I know that I was playing with fire. I ran the risk and if I were set free I would still do the same. I would be failing in my duty if I did not do so. I wanted to avoid violence. Non-violence is the first article of my faith. I know that my people have sometimes gone mad. I am deeply sorry for it and I am therefore here to submit not to a light penalty. I do not plead any extenuating circumstances. I am here to invite and submit to the highest penalty that can be inflicted upon me for what in law is a deliberate crime and (for) what appears to me to be the highest duty of a citizen.”

Professor S. Radhakrishnan, subsequently president of India, paying tribute in the UNESCO House, Paris, on Feb. 13, 1948, after the Mahatma’s assassination in New Delhi, spoke in sorrow of Aug. 15, 1947, which date marks the end of the struggle for political freedom in India. Gandhiji had declined to join in the celebrations. Antagonism between the two major communities of India – the Hindus and the Muslims – resulting from the division of the country into Hindu and Muslim majority units, had led to fearful events. Prof. Radhakrishnan, referring to the refugees fleeing from Sind, the Punjab and Bengal to India, and those making from India to what became the new country of Pakistan, said, “... People wandered like waifs and strays.

More than that, spiritual degradations, fear, suspicions, loss of all hope, crept into their souls. These things made Mahatma Gandhi say that his work had failed ... though he had won political freedom." Most entries in the Delhi Diaries, kept by the Mahatma during those days, make very sad reading indeed.

Among the forms of 'non-violent' coercion practiced in India for centuries was sitting *dharna*. A money-lender, to press his demand, might place a heavy weight on his head to arouse sympathy, and sit at the debtor's doorstep to attract a crowd and make him lose face and so force him into paying up. The British East India Company had a law against sitting *dharna*. Fairly recent Indian history has horrifying accounts of the slaughter of girl children by parents to demonstrate against a ruler's injustice. Dr. Bhagwan Das's list of the methods described in the ancient Indian texts, to redress a wrong by means other than violence, including civil disobedience (*ajas bhanga*), exiling oneself (*dosa tyāga*), renouncing a ruler (*raja tyāga*), and fasting to death. Such fasts were undertaken by Gandhiji.ⁱ

The most cautious conclusion that might be drawn from this brief discussion of the subject is that for the Mahatma, allowing for much of the politician and the lawyer in him, Satyagraha – and 'Service' were both the end and the means to satisfy his religious needs and to reach his God. To most of the others who followed him, including the late Pandit Nehru, *satyagraha* was an expedient to attain social and political ends. The Government of India, headed by Mr. Nehru, later on by Mr. Shastri, and recently by Mrs. Indira Gandhi, has not relied upon *satyagraha* to resolve its disputes with Pakistan, Portugal and Communist China, and trusted in "Body Force" instead. The principle of *ahimsā* has been renounced.ⁱⁱ

Divorced from its theology, its faith in the entirely benevolent nature of God, truth, Love, firmness in Love, Soul Force, *ahimsā*, the reality, permanence and superiority of the Soul, renunciation of personal possessions, the rules prescribed for a *satyagrahi*, yielding to the inner voice and achieving joy through self-imposed physical suffering – or the straight philosophic certainty that in any dispute both the ends and the means must be chaste and ethically inspired, valid – considered as a method of asserting rights and succeeding in a social or political confrontation – *satyagraha* is a technique of gathering crowds by written and spoken words – by propaganda – by shouting, by demonstrating solidarity and strength, by using violent and effective slogans, by intimidation, and by practicing violence upon oneself, leading to the inevitable chain-reaction among the onlookers and the challenged authority and the executive – the police and sometimes the army.

The basis of such action, regardless of the words employed, is not 'religious' in the sense that the term has been used in this paper – as deduced from the words quoted from Gandhiji – nor is it non-violent. The inspiring emotion throughout is anger and hate. The defeat and humiliation of the opponent is the sought end and it is, manifestly, a clash of wills, in which the worth and the justice of a cause is likely to be lost sight of altogether. The appeal is not to reason but to emotion – allowing for the fact that there is no mass action without some emotion. This is a dangerous procedure

to follow and although no specific alternative – only pointers – are offered in this paper, and the cited opinions, beliefs, theories, judgments, are not this writer's; the history of the movement under Gandhiji's guidance in South Africa and India is as good a guide as any to reading its short- and long-range effects. To evaluate those, obviously, judgment should be based on ethical considerations. Situations and individuals vary: and one must necessarily – speaking anywhere, in India or England or Japan or the United States – speak in very, very general terms. However, the majesty of Law – allowing for the emotional connotation of the term and the concept – might be accepted as the agreed basis of all political opposition: and other possibilities might be explored – to change and refine the laws of the land rather than challenging the existing laws of the land – to detect and remedy wrongs and injustice. Their existence is not denied. ⁱⁱⁱ

ⁱ A recent case of fasting to death in India was Darshan Singh Pheruman who died at Amritsar on Oct. 27, 1968. He was fasting against the Central Indian government and claiming the model city of Chandigarh – planned by Le Corbusier – for the state of Punjab. Following him, Uday Singh Mann, claiming, with equal vehemence, the city for the neighboring state of Haryana (his state), began a 'counter-fast'. The Indian prime minister, Mrs. Gandhi, appealed to both to give up fasting, adding that no decision about the disputed capital could be taken under threats. Mr. Mann broke his fast after 43 days on Oct. 14, 1968. Pheruman died after fasting for 74 days. The government of Punjab ordered a state funeral and there was a charge by the police to disperse a violent crowd. The chief minister of the state and some of his cabinet colleagues, as they arrived to place wreaths on the pyre, were stoned. This was the third recent case of fasting to death for political purposes in India. The first was Jatin Das who was protesting against the British. He died on the 63rd day of the fast. The second was Potti Sreeramulu who fasted against the government led by Pandit Nehru for a separate Telugu-speaking state of Andhra. He died on the 58th day. The length of Pheruman's fast was matched by the Irish hunger-striker Terrance McSweeney, who died in Dublin on the 74th day. Pheruman spent nearly 30 years in prisons, protesting against authority. Following Pheruman, very recently, Sant Fateh Singh, the Sikh leader, started a fast, threatening self-immolation. As a consequence, trains were looted, government property and buses burned, railways attacked and mobs were fired upon. A general strike was observed in the Punjab. The army was called in to help the police. Following these events, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi awarded the city of Chadigarh to Punjab and – as a compromise – more than a 100 Punjab villages to the state of Haryana. A reaction to the award has been more violence. One would be a poor student of human nature and of India affairs if one believed these incidents to be the end of the matter.

ⁱⁱ This writer, returning to India from Australia in 1962, interviewed by A.S. Raman, the editor of the *Illustrated Weekly of India*, answering a question about the conflict with China on the Northern Frontier, suggested that Prime Minister Nehru and President Radhakrishnan should individually offer *satyagraha* and court arrest by the Chinese instead of exposing the admittedly poorly-equipped Indian armed personnel to the superior Chinese forces. Entirely satisfactory arguments in favor of such a course of action – from the ethical as well as the expediency view points – had been eloquently advanced by these gentlemen for years. The government of India, however, appealed for arms aid from the United States and Britain which was promptly provided. “Mahatma Gandhi showed us,” Pandit Nehru had said not long before (collected speeches), “that the human spirit is more powerful than the mightiest of armaments. He applied moral values to political action and pointed out that ends and means can never be separated....”

ⁱⁱⁱ REFERENCES (in order of quotation): Columbia Gramophone Co. recording, *My Experiments with Truth* (M.K. Gandhi), *Satyagraha in South Africa* (M.K. Gandhi), Preface, *The Atma Siddhi* (Shrimad Rajchandra, translated from Gujarati by J.L. Jaini), *Bulletin of News*, Indian High Commission, London (1948), *Gandhi Memorial Volume* (edited by S. Radhakrishnan), *Freedom's Battle: Collected Writings and Speeches* (Mahatma Gandhi) and recently Associated Press dispatches about the dispute between the states of Punjab and Haryana.

[Note: In addition to minor edits, the text now conforms to American English spelling and punctuation.]

G.V. Desani's writings and lectures are copyright © UNICEF. All rights reserved.