

Peace is *not* Elusive: Mahatma Gandhi's *Satyagraha*

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Abstract

In this paper, I argue that Mahatma Gandhi's *Satyagraha*, does not simply mean protests, civil disobedience, hunger strikes and other modes of resistance that seek to overcome injustices, violence and oppression. On the contrary, as a *concept* and *method*, it is very far from being a movement whose only goal is to overthrow a corrupt regime. Rather, it is a movement geared at achieving peace and unity and restoring social harmony. This article aims to elucidate this key concept, which is one of the central themes in Gandhi's teachings, and underscores its intrinsic democratic principles. I further elaborate this line of thought by applying it in the Mindanao context where peace sometimes remains elusive especially against the backdrop of political dynasties.

KEYWORDS: Gandhi, Satyagraha, Democracy, Peace, Political Dynasties

Conflict is a fact. It is a direct and inevitable consequence of man's differences in relation to others. Burton (1988) describes it as a type of "relationship in which each party perceives the other's goals, values, interests, or behavior as antithetical to its own." It may occur in the different levels of the society since each individual, despite the intrinsic desire for social harmony and cohesion, would inevitably find one's ideas, interests, religion and worldview clash, collide and counterpoise with others. "Conflict embraces, first, the relationships between parties to a dispute, their perceptions and misperceptions, their shared and separate values, and their goals and motivations; and second, the political, social, economic, and institutional environment in which the dispute takes place (Burton, 1988)."

Prasad (1957) notes that all conflicts that take place between individuals and groups may have been due to the fact that the wants of one group come in conflict with those of others. In any case, however, a real problem arising from conflict starts when one party begins to insist on its authority, consequently demanding the submission of the other. This becomes worse when the former begins to step on the latter's rights, entitlements and ultimately, dignity. Lederach (1997) observes that "one of the complexities found in many conflict settings is the multiplicity of groups and collectivities vying for recognition and power, often in the form of armed movements." Oftentimes, social conflicts, especially when wealth is at stake, become a survival of the fittest scenario – a power struggle. The powerful party, particularly in terms of having authority and arms, wins, while the weak loses. Furthermore, "where there is a deep, long-term fear and direct experiences of violence that sustain an image of the enemy, people are extremely vulnerable and easily manipulated" (Lederach, 1997).

Mohandas K. Gandhi, better known as Mahatma Gandhi, an eminent figure in India, grew up in an environment where social stratification was common and escalating. His country had been under the claws of the British Empire, and due to this, oppression was rampant. Gandhi revived and transformed traditional methods of solving conflicts that embrace nonviolence. He showed the world that peace, justice and political independence can be attained through these techniques. And through his various experiments of his ideas, he came up with the technique he called *Satyagraha*.

Satyagraha and its Fundamental Principles

The Gandhian Political Thought centers upon the “necessity of reconciling ends and means through Satyagraha, a philosophy of action” (Grover, 1968). Just like any other philosophical treatise, it has basic foundations upon which it is intimately rooted. These are *Satya*, *Ahimsa*, and *Tapasya* which translate as Truth, Nonviolence, and Self-suffering, respectively. These three fundamental principles are so vital that failure to grasp them results to confusing the entire *Satyagraha* with those ordinary modes of rebellion like strikes, demonstrations, boycott and fasting. In other words, what makes *Satyagraha* a unique concept and method is its adherence to these fundamental principles which are not always present in other traditional forms of subversion.

Satya or Truth. Gandhi’s concept of truth plays an essential part in his entire philosophy and, in fact, his entire life. His book, *An Autobiography or The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, underscores his love for Truth. It is this concept that *Ahimsa*, *Satyagraha*, *Swaraj* and his other key ideas were derived. This notion, however, did not remain merely as an insight stored in his mind. Rather, it became the motivating factor which propelled him to put his ideas into concrete actions. Gandhi never claimed to have fully comprehended the Truth, nor did he pretend to have grasped it with his own hands. Rather, what he was fully conscious of was that he was always in search for it. And while searching for it, his basic presumption was that, “the Absolute Truth is unattainable in this life” (Gandhi, 1927). What men can possibly know are the countless manifestations of this Truth, which may at times vary from one another. This Absolute Truth is:

The Eternal Principle, which is God. There are innumerable definitions of God because His manifestations are innumerable... But as long as I have not realized this Absolute Truth, so long must I hold by the relative truth as I have conceived it. That relative truth must, meanwhile, be my beacon, my shield and buckler (Gandhi, 1967).

Careful understanding, however, must be done in interpreting Gandhi's idea of relative truth. It must be noted that Gandhi neither implied ethical relativism nor subjectivism. He did not imply that men must act according to *whatever* they believe as true. Even though Gandhi holds on to relative truth due to the unintelligibility of the Absolute Truth, this relative truth must nevertheless follow a certain criterion. And such is the criterion of love denoted by the principle of *Ahimsa*. Gandhi's God has neither a name nor religion. He conceived God as life, for life exists in the midst of death. He also considered God as Light, for in the midst of darkness, light persists. And above all, he believed God as Truth, for in the midst of untruth, truth exists. For Gandhi, these are the characteristics of God which only suggest that He is purely good, and such goodness never changes, ceases and ends. Moreover, he conceived God as the Absolute Truth Himself which is unchangeable and whose power is incomprehensible. Accordingly, Truth is not just a mere attribute of God, but He Himself is. That's why Gandhi believed that Truth and God are convertible terms. In fact, he deemed it more appropriate to say that Truth is God, rather than God is Truth.

Meanwhile, Gandhi adopted the term *Satya* which, in Jain tradition, means Truth. *Satya* is derived from the Sanskrit word *Sat* that signifies 'being.' And since 'being' is that which exists and is real, *Satya* or Truth therefore is that which exists and is real. By understanding Truth as God, which is a principle of *Satyagraha*, Gandhi breaks off the wall which divides religions. "With his changed creed, he could easily accommodate as fellow-seekers those who looked on humanity or any other object as their god, and for which they were prepared to sacrifice their all (Bondurant, 1958)." Hence, *Satyagraha* may be imbibed by anybody irrespective of his/her religion or belief systems. Furthermore, Gandhi acknowledged an inner voice which he called the "still-small-voice-within," that tells a person the right thing to do when confronted with doubts and confusions. Such inner voice, for him, is tantamount to the voice of conscience, or the voice of God.

For Gandhi, realization of the Truth cannot be possessed by anyone who is filled with pride, anger and hatred, nor can such a man hear the "inner voice" within him. Gandhi emphasized the

virtue of humility as the only way to Truth, side-by-side with *Ahimsa*. The search is obviously not only an intellectual endeavor but most importantly it must pervade one's daily conduct. Only those who have an abundant sense of humility can obtain a glimpse of the Truth. The basic presumption of Gandhi is that the Absolute truth cannot be fully known except through its countless manifestations. It takes humility not to reject any person or religion which claims to have known the Truth, nor to devote and narrow down his beliefs in a single religion. Gandhi even went further in saying that due to man's incapacity to know the Absolute Truth, he has, therefore, no authority to punish other men. "No one has the right to coerce others to act according to his own views of truth (Gandhi, 1967)." Accordingly, humility leads to mutual toleration which should have become the golden conduct. Gandhi accepted the fact that what is true for one may not be true for another. However, Gandhi assured that the different and sometimes conflicting notions of Truth must not worry its seeker, for the varied interpretations of Truth are like countless leaves of the same tree.

***Ahimsa* or Nonviolence.** Etymologically, *Ahimsa* is a negatively stated word, which literally means "not to do harm." *Himsa*, without the negative prefix "a", traces its roots from the word *han* that means "to kill or to inflict harm." In a deeper sense, *himsa* connotes "to wish to kill." Thus, *Ahimsa* is not just a word denoting the act of refusing to do harm, but in a deeper level, it also means "not to wish to kill or inflict harm." In the same vein, Gandhi believed that *Ahimsa* is not only the refusal to do harm on the level of the physical, but also on the level of the mind. This means to say that *Ahimsa* prohibits the harboring of ill-will against one's oppressor and the wishing to take revenge on them.

Moreover, in practicing *Ahimsa*, as Gandhi taught, one is not in the negative state of inoffensiveness. In other words, one is neither passive nor indifferent when renouncing violence. On the contrary, he/she is in the positive state of doing good and of showing love to his/her enemy. Thus, *Ahimsa* is an "active force of the highest order" (Gandhi, 1967). Cowardice is the running away from a perceived fear or refusing to do harm for fear of being harmed in return. *Ahimsa*, conversely, is not an act of turning away from danger but a brave act of confronting the danger with the pure intention of standing for the sake of Truth.

Ahimsa, therefore, implies that, due to the love for Truth, one must speak and act according to it, no matter what it will cost him. The adherent of *Satya* and the lover of *Ahimsa* must not be swayed from his conviction by any threat of harm that may arise due to his steadfast reliance on Truth and Nonviolence. In fact, between violence and cowardly fight, Gandhi preferred violence than cowardice. As Gandhi himself declared,

We do not call a mouse a coward because he is made by nature no better than he is... But a man who, when faced by danger, behaves like a mouse, is rightly called a coward. He harbors violence and hatred in his heart and would kill his enemy if he could, without being hurt himself. He is a stranger to nonviolence (Gandhi, 1967).

Gandhi believed that fearlessness is not a quality of the body but of the soul. A physically well-built person is not always fearless and a physically weak one is not always cowardly. Fearlessness is an interior quality which implies freedom from any attachment to mundane desires and external fears. Human passions and the attachment to earthly wealth are one of the reasons behind why people fear of not satisfying their desires, illnesses, death, and losing their properties and fame. In fact, fear of insecurity is what, oftentimes, drives people to impose violence to others. Hence, nonviolence entails the absence of any form of fear that only affects the body.

Tapasya or Self-suffering. The word *Tapasya* has a close affinity with the word *tapas* which connotes asceticism. In *Satyagraha*, it means a lot more than that – it denotes self-suffering. Deliberate suffering in one's own self has a profound objective. It is not meant just to arouse pity on the side of the oppressor, but it is intended towards the “*moral persuasion*” of the one to whom the act of self-suffering is directed (Bondurant, 1958). In other words, self-suffering is meant to blatantly remind the oppressor about his acts which undermine the people's fundamental rights and dignity. Thus, “by fighting evil non-violently, self-suffering goodwill should wean the perpetrators of evil to do better ways (Starosta & Chaudhary, 1993).”

Careful understanding must be made, however, when

speaking of self-suffering. It must be made clear that self-suffering is not the least and the last option because all other means of redress are exhausted. On the contrary, it is the most difficult and the most offensive attack in *Satyagraha*. “However, if this kind of force is used in a cause that is unjust, the person using it suffers (Fischer, 1962).” An example of such is fasting or hunger-strike. Self-suffering, just like *Ahimsa*, leaves no room for cowardice. A true *Satyagrahi*, when faced with an imminent danger due to his faithful adherence to Truth and Nonviolence, is supposed to courageously confront the danger without any intention to use violence. This is to say that, even when the *Satyagrahi* has all the might to retaliate using the force of violence, he willfully suspends it and faces the oppressor using the force of nonviolence. Hence, “self-suffering is not a weapon of the weak” (Bondurant, 1958). This willful act of putting one’s self in a state of affliction is beyond the normal tendencies of human beings. In the brink of danger, when one’s life and dignity is threatened, a person normally fights back or flees away. Yet, Gandhi strived to transcend from what is normal. He believed that it is not easy to cultivate such an attitude, that is, to withstand danger for the sake of Truth and Nonviolence. That’s why “*Satyagraha* is the new name for the law of suffering” (Starosta & Chaudhary, 1993). At the outset, *Satyagraha* requires its adherents to be purified from the normal tendency of man to succumb to violence. A *Satyagrahi*, through self-suffering, must willfully eradicate his inclinations to act violently towards the persons whom *Satyagraha* is offered. “Just as one must learn the act of killing in the training of violence, so one must learn the act of dying in the training for nonviolence (Bondurant, 1958).”

The Reality of Political Dynasties

Democracy, whose leaders are chosen by the majority of the constituents, is one of the best forms of government. This guarantees that the helm of the state is not controlled by an individual who has assumed leadership by means of coercion. Democracy allows for a delegation of political functionaries whose purpose is to bestow to the right people the authority to do the state’s ‘household chores’. The tasks of executing, legislating and adjudicating are conferred



upon individuals who think they possess the capacity to fulfill the positions in the business of public service.

While good governance is one thing, the exercise of choosing who will govern is another thing. The latter is always beyond the extent of the quality of the governing body. No matter how mature a government is with regard to political matters, the quality of the people's political involvement (say, during elections) always remains an unpredictable variable in the entire equation. There are two political factors that must be taken into consideration if we were to determine why elections done through majority vote do not necessarily translate into a well-governed state. One is the political consciousness of the people and second, the perennial problem of *political dynasties*.

It is not difficult to infer that even if elections were free from fraud, the choice of the majority in terms of *who governs or legislates best* is always a contentious point. The political awareness and critical aptitude (or lack thereof) of the general populace is not a given fact. This is where the usual argument against democracy gravitates. Good government is a result of a good governing body, and a good governing body is a result of an intelligent choice by the majority. Hence, if the people (i.e. the electorate) lack even at least the level of political consciousness required of an average citizen, chances are, they would end up blindly supporting traditional politicians, and hence, traditional policies.

Justice Antonio Carpio defines political dynasties as a “phenomenon that concentrates political power and public resources within the control of a few families whose members alternately hold elective offices, deftly skirting term limits.”¹ What this practically refers to is the rule of oligarchic families, which are prevalent in many countries including the Philippines, especially in Mindanao. Such has been a perennial political tactic of securing a family's economic interests. Access to politics is much open to those families whose members had held public

1 This is a quotation from the decision passed by the Supreme Court of the Republic of the Philippines (GR No. 180050) on April 12, 2011 (http://www.lawphil.net/judjuris/juri2011/apr2011/gr_180050_2011.html).

positions. Also, families who own businesses with national and international proportions are likely to get involved in politics with the apparent intention to serve the public, but most importantly, with the covert goal to secure the political conditions favorable to the interests of their economic endeavors. This practice of patronage politics perpetuates the systemic equation whereby economic power is oftentimes translated to political power.

In the Mindanao context, the phenomenon of political dynasties is a symptom of a political problem which traces its root from the lack of seriousness in implementing enabling laws in accordance to the highest law of the land: the constitution. What really happens in the political arena is nothing but a complex political skirmish where each participant seeks to secure interests, whether of one's own family or constituents. At a larger scale, this is manifest in the existence of different political parties in a republican democratic state. Each political party represents a minority group who seek to lobby laws in the Congress in accordance to its interests. In a more inconspicuous manner but equally extensive and problematic as the system of political parties political dynasties, in effect, seek to build family empires which operate on the basis of popularity, economic control and most importantly, name-recall. Murray (2004) notes, "the reason that political progeny are so plentiful is simple: a famous last name confers instant recognition among voters, and very often Mom's or Dad's network of donors, too." Simply by having the surname that evokes an idea of honor or suitability can potentially keep competitors at bay.

Satyagraha and its Anti-Political Dynasty and Democratic Principles

The Constitution of the Philippines states that: “The State shall guarantee equal access to opportunities for public service and prohibit political dynasties as may be defined by law (Philippine Constitution, Article 2, Sec. 26)”. Though it is clear that political dynasties are “prohibited” by the constitution, a law has never been passed to actually stop this phenomenon from continuing. Hence, there is a need to constantly reform our basic conception of justice and realign our political processes to the democratic ideals enshrined in the constitution.

Democracy, from the Greek words “*demos*” and “*kratos*” which mean “people” and “rule” respectively, literally stands for a government that is ruled by the people. Democracy may come in a form of direct democracy, representative democracy or constitutional democracy. The sovereignty of such political system resides in the people, manifested in every citizen’s right to elect representatives to govern the society, as in the case of representative democracy. Democracy acknowledges *liberty* and *freedom* as inviolable endowments in each and every person. It upholds the principle that each citizen is free and that he/she possesses inalienable rights, such as the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Such rights and freedoms however, are not absolute. No one, in the name of freedom, can do anything he/she wants that will, directly or indirectly, cause harm to others and destroy social order. On the contrary, citizens are expected to act in freedom but regulated by reason, and not just by one’s whims.

In a democratic society, in order to facilitate the people to express their freedom without undermining the common good, certain laws are established. Nevertheless, no one is above the law. Even the persons who serve the highest position in the society are subjected to the prescriptions of the law. Such laws, in part, define the boundaries of the freedom of each citizen in order to maintain social order. The Constitution articulates the various rights, privileges and freedoms of the people, and at the same time, gives corresponding duties and obligation that must be faithfully followed. The freedoms assured in a Constitution include the freedom of speech, assembly, religion and freedom from fear and want. Accordingly, citizens must

always be watchful of these rights and freedoms they are supposed to enjoy for these are susceptible to violations and abuses.

Another fundamental truth upheld by democracy is the principle that *all persons are created equal*. Such, of course, does not mean that all persons are equal in all aspects in life, for always, there are undeniable differences in each person. Equality entails that every citizen must be given equal opportunities to realize one's potentials and achieve one's goals in life. Consequently, there must be equal access to opportunities rendered to every citizen regardless of his/her status in life, beliefs and religion. More than that, the government has the duty to equally redistribute the country's wealth so that the basic needs of the citizens, e.g. education, medical care, safety and protection are attended to. Going further, democracy upholds *social justice*. It preserves and maintains an orderly and just society. Certain traditions and cultures, therefore, ought to be protected, so long as these do not encroach on the freedom and the rights of others and do not pose any serious threat to the common good. Most importantly, justice is always rendered to each citizen. Thus, laws are promulgated with the purview of safeguarding the people from injustices and of providing every citizen due process.

Democratic principles are implicitly contained in *Satyagraha* in various points. First, the unintelligibility of the Absolute Truth signifies that one cannot insist on a certain idea to be absolutely true for it is possible that such idea does not conform to nonviolence. More so, he/she cannot coerce others to follow his/her views of truth. In other words, a 'truth' for one may be detrimental to others for the reason that it is not aligned with the principle of nonviolence. For always, a genuine truth is salubrious, that is, always geared at uplifting the conditions of others and preserving the inviolability of human life without any recourse to violence.

Second, freedom, particularly freedom from fear and want, is the immunity of the people from any possibility of oppression and exploitation. Racial discrimination, on the other hand, which was then prevalent in South Africa, is always a form of oppression. It implies that there is a certain "standard" under which the people are classified. Gandhi, however, believed that no one has the monopoly of the truth; thus, no one has the authority to create arbitrary standards that classify people accordingly. Further, racial discrimination does

not only persecute physically but also emotionally and psychologically. Inasmuch as racial or color prejudice is oppression, it is therefore an infringement of democracy's basic principle on freedom. Thus, *Satyagraha's* thrust on purging out racial discrimination or color prejudice contains the democratic principle of freedom.

Third, *Satyagraha* does not only aim primarily at overthrowing a corrupt and unjust regime. Essentially, *Satyagraha* includes constructive programs that would replace the despotic government which oftentimes stem from a public tolerance towards political dynasties, eliminate oppression and discrimination, uproot injustice and eventually bring about genuine reconciliation and transformation in the society. Accordingly, *Satyagraha* is not an end in itself, but rather a means towards creating a just society.

Conclusion

The prevalence of Political dynasties, not only in Mindanao but practically in all democratic states, poses a threat to the democratic ideals that ensure equality and social justice. Change processes must not only promote short-term solutions, but also build platforms capable of promoting long-term social change (Lederach, 1997). *Satyagraha* as a means in creating a peaceful, just and nonviolent society inevitably includes a thrust against inequality brought about by an indifference towards the reality of political dynasties. In Mindanao, "violence" does not only refer to physical attacks, degradation and public humiliation, but also to the unequal distribution of resources which directly creates hunger and poverty. Such reality often stems from the consequences of political dynasties which inevitably creates a breed of oligarchs. This is to say that an oligarchic government that sustains economic inequality essentially promotes violence. Therefore, equality, particularly economic equality, is one of the primary keys in achieving the goals of *Satyagraha*. So long as there is a wide gap between the wealthy and the destitute, equality and ultimately a nonviolent society are beyond reach. This means replacing patterns of violence and coercion with respect, creative problem-solving, increased dialogue, and nonviolent mechanisms of social change. To accomplish this, a complex web of change

processes undergirded by a transformational understanding of life and relationship is needed (Lederach, 1997). *Satyagraha* is an assertive action. It is not synonymous with “passive resistance” which connotes less direct participation and assertion from the people. In other words, it encourages the people to stand on what they believe as reasonable and true granted that their actions are accompanied with responsibility to the consequences. In such case, *Satyagraha* contains democracy’s essence which is “a government of the people.”

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