

# Satyagraha: An Understanding of Two Stalwarts Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. Ambedkar

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## Abstract

The concept of Satyagraha was first widely used in India by Mahatma Gandhi. However, the concept was not alien to the Indians. Later this term was used by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar for the first time during the organization of Mahad Choudar Tank Satyagraha in 1927. An attempt has been made to understand the meaning of the term Satyagraha from their point of view.

Mahatma Gandhi used this term for the first time when he was in South Africa. Since then, Gandhi considered 'Satyagraha' as a royal road to reach any goal. It was a road where he and his believers could say "we shall not kill but shall be killed: (Maarish nahi pan marish)." <sup>1</sup> Therefore, the moral thought behind this concept according to Mahatma Gandhi was, we shall do our best to gain our object by fair means by following the path of Satyagraha. A person can attack the wicked thing, but the person has no right to do it by means except that of Satyagraha.

In a meeting on 10<sup>th</sup> May 1919 at Jamal Hall, Falkland road, Mahatma Gandhi while addressing the Muslim community on the idea of unity between Hindus and Muslims emphasized the Satyagraha movement. This meeting was called against the Rowlett Act that was passed in 1919. According to him Satyagraha meant "to faithfully follow the truth and refrain from violence to life, person or property." It was the best weapon one can manage when one wants to oppose anything without violence. <sup>2</sup>

Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar used the same term Satyagraha during his first movement i.e., 'Mahad Choudar Tank Satyagraha'. Initially the term Satyagraha was not used for the struggle developing at Mahad. It was only referred to as the 'Kolaba District Bahishkrut Parishad' when it was held on 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> March 1927. On 20<sup>th</sup> March 1927, the touchable victimized the untouchables on their way back home. Dr. Ambedkar after two months, in May 1927 decided to launch a Satyagraha at Mahad on 25-27 December 1927. This was the first time he used the word Satyagraha for the Mahad struggle.

## Introduction:

The concept of Satyagraha was first widely used in India by Mahatma Gandhi. However, the concept was not alien to the Indians. Later this term was used by Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar for the first time during the organization of Mahad Choudar Tank Satyagraha in 1927. An attempt has been made to understand the meaning of the term Satyagraha from their point of view.

<sup>1</sup> N. R. Phatak, *Source Material for a History of the Freedom Movement in India*, Volume III, Part I, 1915-1922, Maharashtra State, Mumbai (Bombay), 2008, pp. 128-129.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* p. 129.

**Concept of Satyagraha According to Mahatma Gandhi:**

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**Concept of Satyagraha According to Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar:**

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Dr. Ambedkar explains his views on Satyagraha in his own quarterly newspaper *Bahishkrut Bharat* dated 25<sup>th</sup> November 1927, under the heading *Asprushayata Va Satyagraha chi Siddhi* meaning Untouchability and Enlightenment of Truth. In this Dr. Ambedkar has tried to explain the then position of the untouchables in the Hindu religion. It was both the touchable and the untouchables considered the untouchables as a part of Hindu religion. Although untouchability was practiced both by touchable and untouchables yet when the question aroused about whether the untouchables were Hindus or non-Hindus they both claimed that the untouchables were Hindus. He explains this by giving the example of the census record survey of 1910. <sup>5</sup> At this time the Muslims claimed that the untouchables should not be counted under the category of Hindus because the upper caste Hindus do not treat them equally like other Hindus. After the reaction and stand taken by the Muslims both the touchable and the untouchables claimed that the untouchables should be counted as Hindus. The feeling that the untouchables belonged to Hindu religion existed since ancient times. But now the untouchables had started asking the questions to themselves, that if they are the part of Hindu religion then why they were not treated equally with other upper caste Hindus? Why were they not allowed to drink water from public water resources? Why did they not enjoy the same rights that the other Hindus enjoyed? These were the questions of equality with other Hindus. As per these questions, their *Aagraha* (persistence) was right. Further it was now necessary to find whether their *Aagraha* was right or wrong. To have a doubt about the *Aagraha* is human nature. Because as per the custom whatever is followed need not necessarily be right. It may be

<sup>3</sup> N. R. Phatak, *Source Material for a History of the Freedom Movement in India*, Volume III, Part I, 1915-1922, Maharashtra State, Mumbai (Bombay), 2008, pp. 128-129.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* p. 129.

<sup>5</sup> Vasant Moon, (edited), *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Yanche Bahishkrut Bharat Aani Muknayak*, (Marathi), Published by Main Sachiv, Higher and Technical Education Department, Maharashtra Government, Mantralay, Mumbai, 2008, p.127(1).

wrong too. However, the *Aagraha* for truth is *Satyagraha*. And truth always wins. Therefore Dr. Ambedkar wanted the untouchables to realize whatever action taken by them was the action of truth. He wanted the untouchables to learn to differentiate between the truth and the untruth. The structure of *Satyagraha* is based on truth. If any structure is based on untruth then *Satyagraha* would collapse or fall. And then the person would not be able to perform *Satyagraha*. The person should be self-conscious of truth. If the person is not sure about the truth then his feelings would be doubtful about *Satyagraha*, and he will lose self-confidence. Therefore, the person must know the truth first. Dr. Ambedkar defines *Satyagraha* as “the work that organizes the people is a good deed, and *Aagraha* (persistence) for that work is *Satyagraha*.”<sup>6</sup> He further explains that there may be different view in organizing people. Therefore, where there is equality, there is organization of people and where people are organized there is good deed, and one who does *Aagraha* (persists) for such work is *Satyagraha*.

Dr. Ambedkar admits that the idea of *Satyagraha* was not his own. He had taken it from the holy book of Hindu religion i.e., *Geeta*. He assumed that some people may not believe in what he was saying. Dr. Ambedkar explains the dialogues between Lord Krishna and Arjuna wherein Arjuna is asked by Lord Krishna to fight for the truth.<sup>7</sup> Arjuna was asked to fight against his own people but the fight was for the truth, therefore the root cause of his work was truth and hence it was *Aagraha* for truth and therefore it was *Satyagraha*. It is to be noted that Dr. Ambedkar gave the example from *Geeta* because both the touchable and the untouchables believed in *Geeta*.

Dr. Ambedkar believed that organizing the people in right sense was necessary. Struggle for equality on the path of *Satyagraha* was not an easy task. The other way to achieve equality was the shorter way and that was adopting any other religion. The upper caste Hindus treated the Christians and the Muslims equally, but not the untouchables. The untouchables would have thought of the shorter way that could have been done by them quite earlier. But they wanted to remain in Hindu religion and wanted the touchable to accept their equality without changing their religion. The untouchables followed the path of *Satyagraha* on the grounds of brotherhood.<sup>8</sup>

It is to be notified that the untouchables were not demanding for any extra rights, they were just demanding equal rights. They were fighting for the truth and hence can be called *Satyagraha*. This view would further lead to the progress of the untouchables and entire Hindu religion in general. Dr. Ambedkar while explaining the sense of equality to the orthodox Hindus gives the example of the then railways that was started by the British in India. When the British started the railways in India they had kept separate compartments for the British officers to travel. The Indians realized this inequality and argued with the British on the question of separate compartment facility for the British officers. The British counter reacted that when the train is carrying all the compartments to the same destination then why the people should feel bad about it. On this the Indians said that it was the question of equality. Considering the above example Dr. Ambedkar argued that the untouchables were demanding for the similar kind of equality with the touchable in the matter of temple entry or drinking water at public places.

Dr. Ambedkar analyzed that in modern times it was Gandhi who preached *Satyagraha*. Therefore, people in India believed *Satyagraha* could be only performed the way Gandhi has shown the nature of its performance. Dr. Ambedkar feels that it is not the only way of performing the *Satyagraha*. Gandhiji's

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* p. 128 (2).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

path of performing Satyagraha is non-violence. Dr. Ambedkar believed that *Satyagraha* could be performed on the path of non-violence true but when or where where if needed, even violence could be the weapon of *Satyagraha*. Dr. Ambedkar believes that *Aagraha* (persistence) for truth or non-truth does not depend on the weapon used by the person. It depends on the nature of his morality. And non-violence is one such weapon. To explain the above thought Dr. Ambedkar gives different examples. First in *Mahabharata* Lord Krishna encourages Arjuna to pick his bow and arrow to fight against his brothers for truth? Therefore, if this is violence then the question is what about the morality behind that violence. Can we say that Lord Krishna was wrong? The Brahmins and the Jain Tirthankaras claim that they do not kill the living organism. However, if the research work of Dr. Jadish Chandra Bose is taken into consideration that plants are living organism then even the Brahmins and the Jain Tirthankaras kill the living organism as they consume vegetables. Dr. Ambedkar had a very practical approach towards *Satyagraha*. Therefore, he gives examples of practical worlds also. The other examples he gives of self-protection, protecting owns wife or daughter from the person who rapes them before him, someone is burning house. All these examples show that the person needs to change the weapon depending on the nature of situation that occurs. A person cannot remain quite pleading and following the path of non-violence in such situations. The person is forced to be violent in such situations. Another point is the root cause of his fight is truth.

Dr. Ambedkar also expresses his views about whom the *Satyagraha* should take place? The untouchables demand for equality. The touchable were not treating the untouchables equally. The untouchables were prepared for anything when they prepared themselves for *Satyagraha*. Dr. Ambedkar explains that when the untouchables go to drink water from any public water resource, it is assumed that the touchable will oppose them, which may disturb the peace in the city, to avoid disturbance the government will have to interfere in it. This is their duty to maintain peace. Therefore, the Satyagrahis must also understand what the stand of the Government will be and against whom the *Satyagraha* should be taking place. If the Government decide to take the side of untouchables than the question would be solved immediately and if the government decides to take the side of touchable pointing the untouchables that they were the ones who were disturbing the peace of the city. That means the actual *Satyagraha* although seemed to be against the touchable, but it would be against the government. Therefore, the untouchables should know what their responsibility towards Satyagraha should be. The untouchables should assume that if they want to drink water at any public water resource it meant breaking the law and going against the government. And if the law breaks the government imprisons the person who is a law breaker. Therefore, the untouchables should be prepared to go to prison. The result would be for how many days the Government will imprison the untouchables, one day they will have to listen to the demands of the untouchables. If the government is shameless of the people than it is the duty of the Satyagrahis to make the government feel shameful. It is noted here that Dr. Ambedkar had thought about the *Satyagraha* and its consequences deeply, because he mentions that if our government fails to understand our problem, than we (untouchables) can go to the League of Nations and knock the door of international court of justice.<sup>9</sup>

Dr. Ambedkar explains about who should launch the *Satyagraha*? He feels that *Satyagraha* is the path to achieve the human rights of the untouchables. Therefore, maximum number of untouchable's men, women and children should participate in *Satyagraha*. Now the question comes that any *Satyagraha* can

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* p. 130 (4).

be successful only if there is mass participation. But further these masses should also be supported financially because *Satyagraha* also needs financial support. Such kind of *Satyagraha* also needs enough time span. Therefore, people should be allowed to spend some time to get set with it. Therefore, meantime the untouchables should also continue to perform the small *Satyagrahis* at different places.

**Conclusion:**

Analyzing the thoughts of Dr. Ambedkar regarding the *Satyagraha*, he believed that the early generation should have not accepted untouchability. They accepted it because till then it had become customary. But they remained ignorant about it, which can be forgiven because they were not educated. However, he believed that his generation was not facing the problem of education. Therefore, it was their duty to not accept untouchability and launch *Satyagraha* to fight against it.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* p. 132 (6).