

Gandhi as Satyagrahi

Introduction: Mohandas Gandhi spent much of his life fighting injustice, often through what he called *satyagraha*. In Sanskrit, *satya* means “truth” and *graha* means “to attain.” Thus, *satyagraha*, often translated as “reaching for the truth,” is civil disobedience characterized by non-violent non-cooperation. For Gandhi this tactic was tied closely to the concept of *ahimsa*—non-violence (more specifically for Gandhi, the love that remains once all violence has ended within oneself).

As Gandhi explained, “‘*Satyagraha*’ means ‘holding to this truth’ in every situation, no matter how fierce the storm. Because he wants nothing for himself, the true *satyagrahi* is not afraid of entering any conflict for the sake of those around him, without hostility, without resentment, without resorting even to violent words. Even in the face of the fiercest provocation, he never lets himself forget that he and the attacker are one. This is *ahimsa*, which is more than just the absence of violence; it is intense love.”

Read the selections below, then with your group answer the questions on page 16.

Document 1: “A Bonfire of Certificates” by M. K. Gandhi (1928)

In 1908, as a young lawyer in South Africa, Gandhi opposed the Asiatic Law Amendment Act, which required the Indian community to register with the government and carry a certificate at all times on penalty of imprisonment or deportation. Gandhi began a *satyagraha* campaign to protest this law (known as the Black Act). On August 16, as an act of defiance, Gandhi held a bonfire to burn the certificates. According to Gandhi, thirty thousand Indians attended. As he reported:

“The Committee had already received upwards of 2,000 certificates to be burnt. These were all thrown into a cauldron, saturated with paraffin and set ablaze by Mr. Essop Mian. The whole assembly rose to their feet and made the place resound with the echoes

of their continuous cheers during the burning process. Some of those who had still withheld their certificates brought them in numbers to the platform, and these too were consigned to the flames.”

The *satyagraha* campaign continued until January 12, 1914, when Gandhi and the South African government reached a compromise agreement ending some of the harshest provisions of the Black Act.

Document 2: *The Great Trial* by K.P.K. Menon (1922)

In India, Gandhi was arrested for writing seditious articles (sedition means likely to start a rebellion), a charge to which he pled guilty. During the *satyagraha* campaign he had recently led, some Indian protestors had engaged in violent acts, including the burning and hacking to death of twenty-three policemen in the village of Chauri Chaura. When the British government blamed Gandhi for this, he replied,

“Thinking over these [acts of violence] deeply and sleeping over them night after night, it is impossible for me to dissociate myself from the diabolical crimes of Chauri Chaura.... He [the British Advocate General] is quite right when he says that as a man of responsibility, a man having had a fair share of experience of this world, I should have known the consequences of every one of my acts. I knew that I was playing with fire. I ran the risk, and if I was set free, I would still do the same....

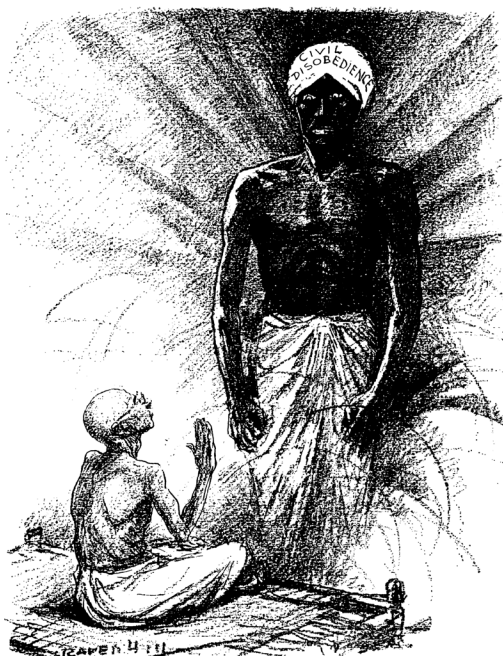
“I wanted to avoid violence.... But I had to make my choice. I had either to submit to a system which I considered had done an irreparable harm to my country, or incur the risk of the mad fury of my people bursting forth, when they understood the truth from my lips. I know that my people have sometimes gone mad. I am deeply sorry for it and I am therefore here to submit not to a light penalty but to the highest penalty. I do not ask for mercy.”

**Document 3: "Dharasana Salt Raid"
by Webb Miller (1936)**

Gandhi was once again arrested on May 5, 1930. On May 20, as part of the campaign against the salt tax, 2,500 *satyagrahi* followers planned to raid the salt works at Dharasana, 150 miles north of Bombay (Gandhi had intended to lead the march himself). Their leader, Madame Naidu, warned, "You must not use violence under any circumstances." Webb Miller, an American reporter, wrote an eyewitness account. As the "Gandhi men" walked toward the salt works...

"... at a word of command, scores of native police rushed upon the advancing marchers and rained blows on their heads with their steel-shod *lathis* [long bamboo sticks]. Not one of the marchers even raised an arm to fend off the blows. They went down like tenpins. From where I stood I heard sickening whacks of the clubs on unprotected skulls. The waiting crowd of watchers groaned and sucked in their breaths in sympathetic pain at every blow. ...

"At times the spectacle of unresisting men being methodically bashed into a bloody pulp



A FRANKENSTEIN OF THE EAST.
GANDHI. "REMEMBER—NO VIOLENCE; JUST DISOBEDIENCE."
GENTLE. "AND WHAT IF I DISOBEY 100?"

A 1930 cartoon from the British magazine *Punch*.

sickened me so much that I had to turn away. The western mind finds it difficult to grasp the idea of nonresistance."

Document 4: "Zionism and Anti-Semitism" by M.K. Gandhi (November 26, 1938)

By the end of November 1938, Nazi Germany had passed a series of discriminatory laws against Germany's Jews. In addition, newspapers had reported Nazi persecution of Jews. Gandhi wrote an article in his newspaper, *Harijan*, which in part contained this advice:

"Can the Jew resist this organized and shameless persecution? Is there a way to preserve their self-respect, and not to feel helpless, neglected and forlorn? I submit there is.... If I were a Jew born in Germany and earned my livelihood there, I would claim Germany as my home even as the tallest Gentile (non-Jew) might, and challenge him to shoot me or cast me in the dungeon; I would refuse to be expelled or to submit to discriminating treatment. And for doing this I should not wait for the fellow Jews to join me in civil resistance, but would have confidence that in the end the rest were bound to follow my example....

"But even if the Jewish mind could be prepared for voluntary suffering, even the massacre I have imagined could be turned into a day of thanksgiving and joy that Jehovah [God] had wrought deliverance of the race even at the hands of the tyrant. For to the God-fearing, death has no terror. It is a joyful sleep to be followed by a waking that would be all the more refreshing for the long sleep....

"The German Jew will score a lasting victory over the German gentiles in the sense that they will have converted the latter to an appreciation of human dignity."

Questions

1. Gandhi often stated that it took great courage to be a *satyagrahi*. Where in the documents do you find evidence to support his view?

2. Besides the personal danger that a *satyagrahi* might face, are there other concerns one should have while conducting a *satyagraha* campaign?

3. What did Gandhi mean by this statement, that the *satyagrahi* “...never forgets that he and the attacker are one”?

4. Why do you think that so many Indians supported Gandhi’s *satyagraha* movement?

5. Which of the following statements is closest to your view of *satyagraha*?
 - a. I believe whole-heartedly in *satyagraha*. This type of civil disobedience based on moral force not only shows great courage, but it truly has the power to change the world for the better.
 - b. The effectiveness of *satyagraha* is relative, depending on the type of opponent you’re facing. In some circumstances this tactic would be effective. In others it would be unwise and ineffective.
 - c. *Satyagraha* not only is foolish, it can be extremely dangerous. Trying to fight bullets with non-violence is only asking for trouble. The enemy won’t be impressed but rather will think you a fool.

Explain your choice (for support, use information from this lesson, as well as other examples from history and/or current events).