

Principles of Satyagraha



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1. Introduction

Purpose of this chapter

- Satyagraha was mentioned earlier in this course
 - In *The Bell Curve Insights into Satyagraha* chapter
- In that earlier chapter, you learned that:
 - Satyagraha is the technique Gandhi used to fight oppression
 - From Sanskrit. *Satya* means truth; *Graha* means firmness or force
 - Satyagraha made Gandhi one of the most effective activists of all time
 - Gandhi's explained Satyagraha in spiritual terms
 - Unfortunately, many people find his explanation difficult to understand
 - The bell-curve model explains Satyagraha's effectiveness more easily
- This chapter discusses the principles of Satyagraha in depth:
 - Satyagraha has subtleties you should understand before attempting to use it

Recap: bell-curve model's insight

■ Satyagraha technique:

- Lead peaceful demonstrations and refuse to obey unjust laws
- Do not resist arrest. Do not defend yourself against attack
- Do not try to destroy, hurt or humiliate your oppressors
- The oppressors respond with:
 - Mass imprisonment of protestors
 - Beatings and even murder of the protestors

■ The bell-curve model explains why the technique works:

- The asymmetrical conflict is *widely reported* in the news
- The *apathetic majority* become sympathetic and take action
 - “I don’t like X people much but they don’t deserve *that* treatment”
 - They put *peer pressure* on anti-X extremists to stop
- The international, apathetic community also becomes sympathetic
 - Puts political peer pressure on government to stop anti-X extremists

Recap: importance of mass communication

- Gandhi did not discuss mass communication (to generate peer pressure) as being a part of Satyagraha
 - Perhaps he thought this was obvious & therefore not worth mentioning
 - Or perhaps he was so focused on spiritual issues that he discarded non-spiritual aspects of Satyagraha
- Mass communication is important because:
 - It enables the apathetic majority to see the horrifying truth of oppression
 - Many anti-X extremists believe they are carrying out the will of the majority
 - When the majority express horror at the actions of the anti-X extremists:
 - The extremists' pride turns to shame
 - The extremists no longer feel safe from prosecution by the majority

Structure of this chapter

- This chapter is split into many sections. Each section:
 - Focuses on one aspect of Satyagraha
 - Illustrates some subtle, but important, principles about Satyagraha

2. Importance of love

Importance of non-violence

- Love is an important ingredient of Satyagraha
 - For Satyagraha, *love* means non-violence and forgiveness
- Non-violence is important in the short term:
 - It creates an asymmetrical conflict:
 - Violent oppression versus peaceful protest
 - This is newsworthy, so it is likely to be reported widely by the media
 - It wins the sympathy and support of the apathetic majority
 - It also eases the apathetic majority's fears of X people
- Non-violence is important in the longer term:
 - Avoids future generations of non-X people being hostile towards X people
("Your ancestors killed my ancestors so I hate you")

Importance of forgiveness

Forgiveness is important for several reasons...

- It *might* cause some anti-X extremists to rethink their anti-X beliefs
- It eases the apathetic majority's fear of X people
- It avoids future generations of X people holding a grudge against non-X people
 - “Your ancestors oppressed my ancestors so I hate you”

3. Importance of self-restraint

Self-restraint is required for Satyagraha

- Forms of self-restraint required for Satyagraha include:
 - Self-restraint to *not* defend yourself against attack
 - Self-restraint to *not* resist arrest
 - If arrested then obey all the rules while in prison
- A Satyagraha protest will fail if *any* protestors defend themselves against attack:
 - Because then the protest looks like a riot and this will not get sympathy of the apathetic majority
 - Likewise, resisting arrest or being a bad prisoner loses you sympathy of the apathetic majority

Self-restraint training

- Martin Luther King organized training for protesters:
 - See Chapter 28 (“Chicago Campaign”) of his autobiography
 - “[W]e had trained a group of about two thousand disciplined devotees of nonviolence who were willing to take blows without retaliating.”
- Unfortunately, his autobiography does not describe the training:
 - His widow’s autobiography briefly mentions the use of role play-based training at the end of the Montgomery bus boycott
 - See Chapter 7 (“Don’t you get weary”) of *My Life with Martin Luther King, Jr.* by Coretta Scott King

Practicing self-restraint in your daily life

■ Gandhi took a different approach:

- He felt people should practice self-restraint in *every* aspect of their lives
- For example, he advocated:
 - Celibacy, eating a bland diet, abstinence from alcohol and drugs
 - Lots of manual labour and living in poverty
 - Honesty and living fully in accord with your religious beliefs
- Most religions associate self-restraint with spiritual well-being
- So it was natural for Gandhi to think all forms of self-restraint were good

■ Perhaps self-restraint is a transferable skill:

- If it is then practising self-restraint in your daily life will provide you with the self-restraint required for Satyagraha
- But it is unlikely that you need to practise self-restraint in every aspect of your life to have sufficient self-restraint for Satyagraha

If self-restraint fails then stop the protest

- Chapter 8 (“Murder”) in Part Two of Louis Fischer’s biography of Gandhi:
 - Gandhi organized a Satyagraha-based campaign in India
 - Unfortunately, some Indians used violence
 - Gandhi immediately stopped the campaign
 - “His miscalculation, Gandhi explained, was in overlooking the fact that a person must be trained in civil obedience before civil disobedience against some laws could succeed.”

- Chapter 16 (“Drama at the Seashore”) in Part Two:
 - Gandhi organized another Satyagraha-based campaign, this time to protest the British monopoly on making salt
 - British rulers used mass arrests and violence against the protestors
 - Indians did *not* use violence. “Because they treasured the movement Gandhi had conjured into being, and lest he cancel it, they abstained from force.”

4. Resist the urge to destroy your opponent

Resist the urge to destroy your opponent

- Satyagraha does *not* attempt to:
 - Hurt your opponent
 - Humiliate your opponent
 - Destroy your opponent
- Religious explanation for this:
 - Satyagraha rejects violence
 - Hurting, humiliating and destroying are forms of violence
- A non-religious explanation for this:
 - Acting in a gentle manner creates newsworthy opportunities
 - Which in turn cause the apathetic majority to apply peer pressure on your opponent

Example

- From Chapter 15 (“The Victory”) of “The Life of Mahatma Gandhi” by Louis Fisher
 - Gandhi was fighting against anti-Indian oppression in South Africa
 - He was organizing a massive protest march against the government
 - Then the white employees of all railways went on strike
 - Gandhi postponed the march until the strike was over
 - He did not want to “destroy, hurt, humble or embitter the adversary, or to win a victory by weakening him”
- Gandhi’s sympathy for the plight of his opponent :
 - Greatly impressed the apathetic majority and increased their support
 - Put more pressure on the government to negotiate rather than fight

Long-term benefit of avoiding violence

- Gandhi had another reason for not destroying his opponent
 - He wanted the oppressor and oppressed to become friends

- Which is better?
 - You make your oppressors powerless to oppress you anymore?
(Perhaps by killing them or putting them in prison)
 - You turn your oppressors into friends so they do not want to oppress you any more?

5. Importance of communication

Importance of communication in Satyagraha

- The strategy of Satyagraha:
 - Is *not* to combat the anti-X extremists directly
 - *Is* to win the support of the apathetic majority so *they* will use peer pressure to stop the extremists
- To win the support of the apathetic majority, you need to arouse their sympathy enough so they apply peer pressure
- You can do this by:
 - Arranging events (protests, strikes, a trial...) that exposes the injustice and requires sympathy and action to rectify the injustice
 - Communicating this “sympathy and peer pressure required” to the apathetic majority

Importance of communication in Satyagraha (cont')

■ Likely causes of failure:

- Protesting without communicating “sympathy and peer pressure required”
- Communicating that message, but to the *wrong* audience

■ Gandhi's autobiography provides an example of the latter:

- Chapter 30 (“That Wonderful Spectacle!”) in Part V
- Gandhi had recruited Indians to fight for England in the First World War
- The expectation was that after the war, England would give Indians more civil rights
- During the war, many civil liberties were suspended for Indians
- After the war, England decided to *not* restore civil liberties
- Gandhi did not seem to realize why his **appeals to the English rulers** failed
- “I earnestly pleaded with the Viceroy. I addressed him private letters as also public letters [...] But it was all in vain.”

Importance of communication in Satyagraha (cont')

- Example from “The Autobiography of Martin Luther King”...
- Read what King wrote about Gandhi’s teachings:
 - Tip: look up “Gandhi” in the index to obtain page numbers
 - King understood the importance of love in Satyagraha
 - But he does not mention anything about the importance of using widespread communication to generate peer pressure
- Chapter 8 (“The Violence of Desperate Men”):
 - King organized a peaceful boycott of segregated buses in Montgomery
 - Bus boycotters met with representatives of the bus company
 - King naively thought the bus company would give in once they understand the viewpoint of the boycotters
 - “I had believed that the privileged would give up their privileges on request. This experience, however, taught me a lesson. I came to see that no one gives up his privileges without strong resistance.”

The right audience for the communication

- The right audience for your communication:
 - Is an audience that can apply peer pressure on the oppressor
 - Often, this is the general public — particularly for a large-scale protest
 - Sometimes, the right audience might be more selective
- For an oppressive company, the right audience might be:
 - Shareholders
 - Customers
 - Members of a relevant professional trade organization
- For an oppressive individual, the right audience might be:
 - That individual's friends or extended family
 - Another non-X person who is nearby

The right audience for the communication (cont')

■ Examples from Gandhi's autobiography

- Chapter 9 ("More Hardships") of Part II
- Gandhi was travelling by a horse-drawn coach
- He sat beside the driver (was not allowed to sit inside with passengers)
- The leader of the coach sat with the passengers
- Later the leader wanted to sit beside the driver to smoke a cigarette
- Gandhi refused the leader's instruction to move to the footboard
- The leader started beating Gandhi
- Gandhi's cries got the passengers to put peer pressure on the leader to stop the beating
- Gandhi bought a first-class ticket for a train journey
- The ticket inspector ordered him to move to the third-class carriage
- An English passenger in the carriage put peer pressure on the inspector to allow Gandhi to stay in first class

Ways to communicate a large-scale protest

- Through the traditional media (TV, radio, papers):
 - Press releases
 - Interviews
- Also explore non-traditional media. Examples:
 - Document the protest on a website or blog
 - Create a video and put it on www.youtube.com
 - Create a PowerPoint presentation and put it on www.slideshare.net
- Also letter-writing campaigns
 - This is a tactic employed by Amnesty International

Communicating with the oppressor

- Gandhi informed his opponents about upcoming Satyagraha-based actions
- There are several benefits of *avoiding* the element of surprise:
 - Forewarning your opponent of your actions is unusual
 - So you can also communicate the forewarning to the media to increase the newsworthiness of your actions
 - Opponents will *not* mistakenly think a peaceful protest is a riot
 - This avoids *accidental* violent reaction of oppressors
 - Could save lives
 - Opponents might *deliberately choose* to respond with violence
 - This makes the campaign more newsworthy, leading to more peer pressure from the apathetic majority

6. Using Satyagraha when oppressors
do not use violence

Recap: how Gandhi faced job discrimination

■ Example:

- Chapter 18 (“Colour Bar”) in Part II of Gandhi’s autobiography
- Gandhi had a law degree
- Gandhi applied for a license to present cases in the Supreme Court in South Africa
 - This would make him the first non-white person to have such a license
- Existing barristers invented silly reasons to deny him his request
- Gandhi was enraged by this, “but I restrained my feelings”
- Gandhi’s autobiography does not mention him communicating the issue to newspapers. But he must have done so because...
 - “Most of the newspapers condemned the opposition and accused the Law Society of jealousy.”
 - In this way, peer pressure was applied
- Result: Gandhi obtained his license

Using Satyagraha to tackle job discrimination

■ Hypothetical example:

- Fred is gay but in the closet
- He gets a job working with a company
- He is a valued employee
- Eventually, he comes out; and is fired

■ Usual course of action:

- Fred sues his former employer for unfair dismissal
- At most, this gets a tiny mention in a newspaper
- If Fred wins the court case, a huge compensation payment might hurt the company

Using Satyagraha to tackle job discrimination (cont')

- Fred decides to use Satyagraha-based tactics:
 - He always behaves politely with the company
 - He communicates the job discrimination widely
- Individuals and other organizations put peer pressure on the company
- Fred lets the company (and public) know he wants his job back rather than to sue for compensation
- If that does not work then Fred takes the case to court:
 - If he wins, he *unconditionally* rejects compensation and asks for his job back
 - Fred's unexpected generosity generates widespread news coverage

Using Satyagraha to tackle job discrimination (cont')

Benefits...

- The company is not harmed by a huge compensation payment
- People are impressed by Fred by not suing for money:
 - This puts peer pressure on the company to end its discrimination
 - If he gets his job back, colleagues are likely to treat him well
 - If he does not get his job back, his display of integrity increases his chances of getting other job offers

Using Satyagraha to tackle job discrimination (cont')

- Perhaps you can think of many reasons why Satyagraha might fail in the job discrimination example
- There are only a few reasons why it might succeed:
 - The unusual nature of a Satyagraha-based action is newsworthy (unlike most job discrimination cases)
 - The newsworthiness raises awareness in the population
 - And helps to create peer pressure
- The point of the example:
 - The bell curve model provides an insight into Satyagraha
 - This insight provides us with more options for tackling discrimination

7. Summary

Summary

■ Cynical quote:

- “The secret of success is sincerity. Once you can fake that you’ve got it made.”
- Jean Giraudoux, French diplomat, dramatist, & novelist (1882–1944)

■ You cannot fake Satyagraha and hope to succeed

- Satyagraha has too many subtleties for an insincere person to fake it successfully
- This chapter has discussed some of those subtleties

■ Suggested exercises:

- Read *The Life of Mahatma Gandhi* by Louis Fischer
- Watch *Gandhi*, the 1982 movie, directed by Richard Attenborough and starring Ben Kingsley
- Read *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King*