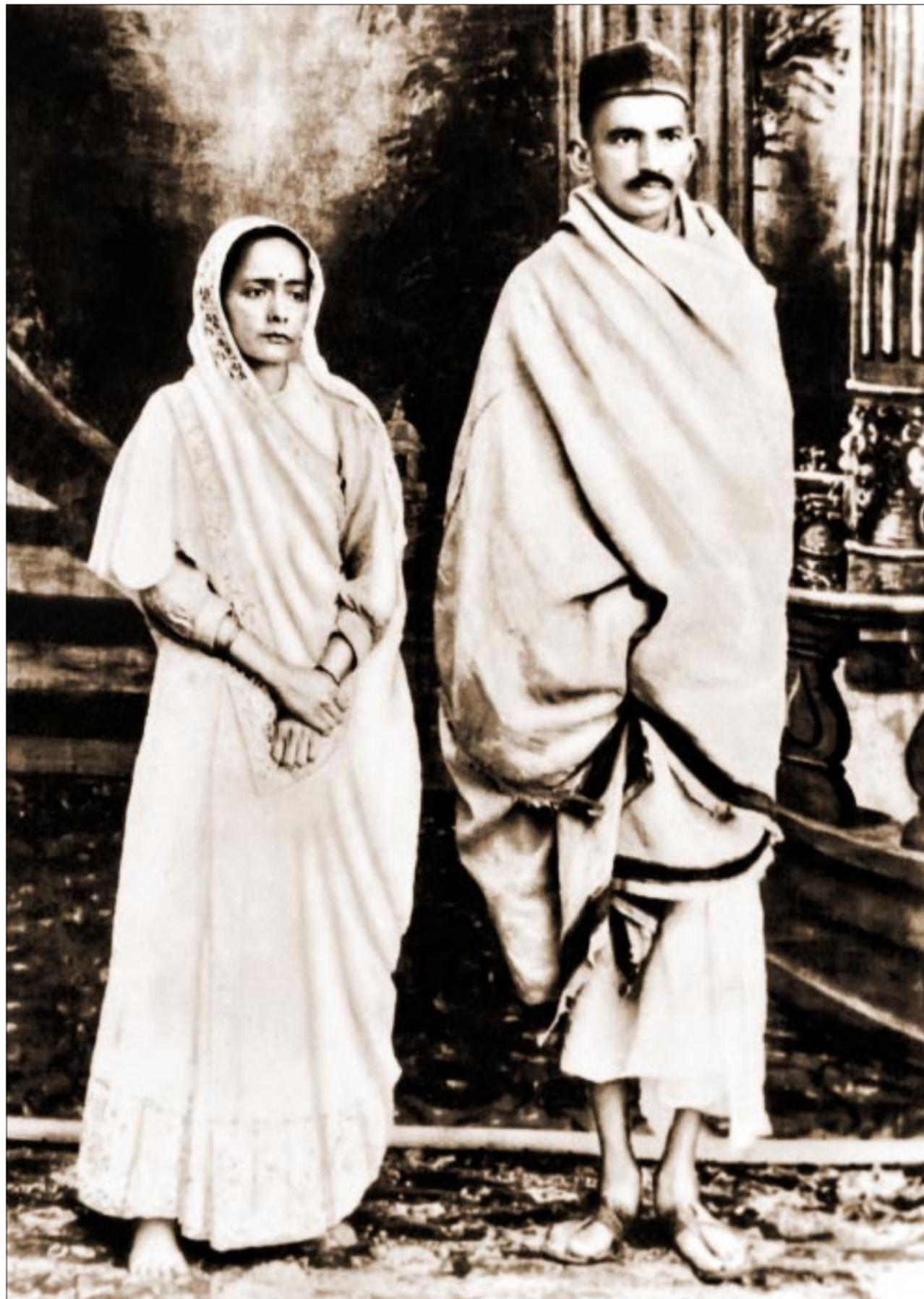


Satyagraha

GANDHI'S CONCEPT OF NON-VIOLENCE

SAVITA SINGH

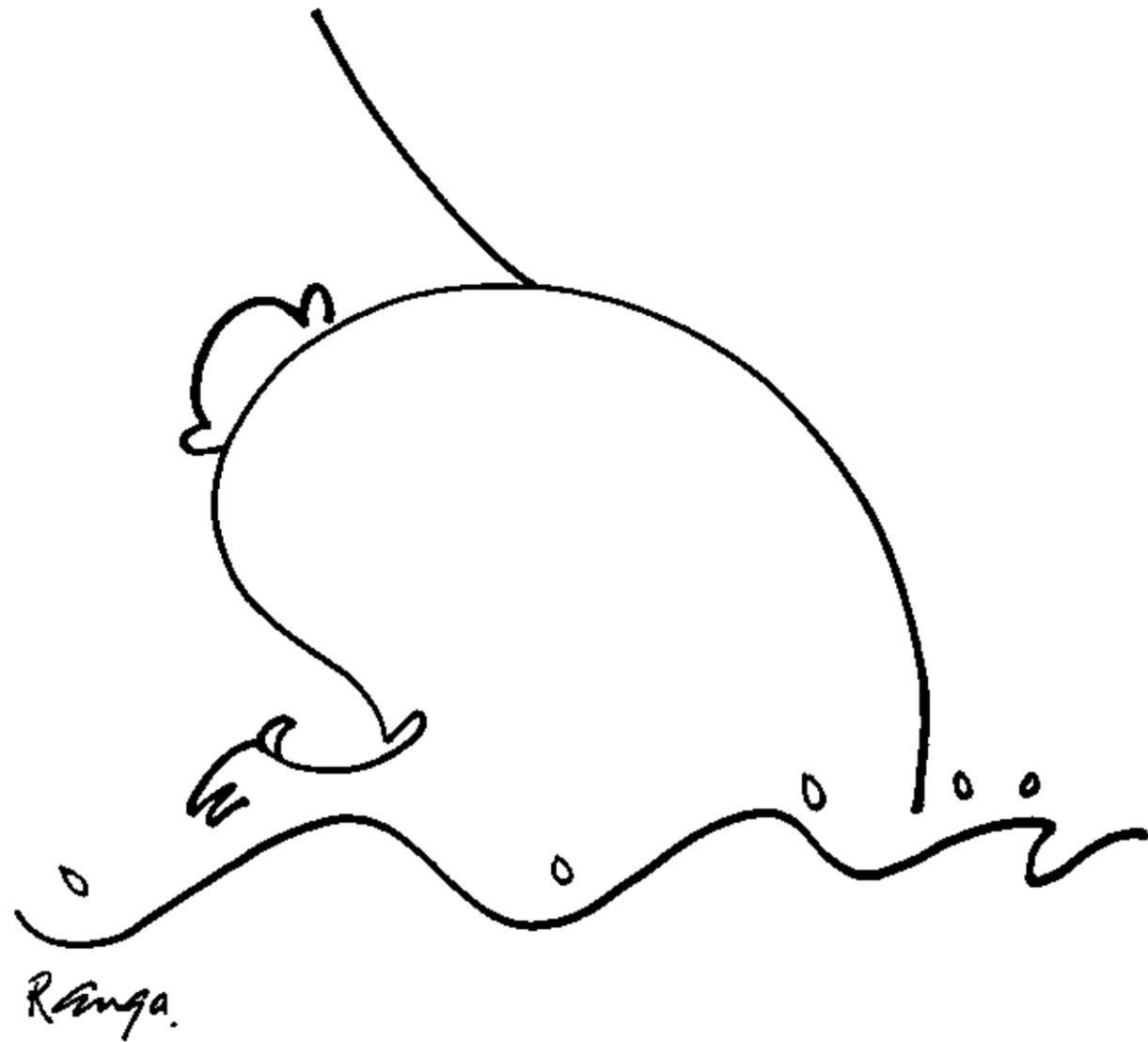




The year 1906 may rightly be described as a turning point in the life of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. It was in this year when he experienced a deep spiritual awakening within and dedicated himself to the service of humanity. He took the vow of celibacy and stepped out of the narrow confines of the biological family to embrace the entire humankind as his own. It was also in the year 1906, on 11th September to be precise, that he opened the path of emancipation for the suffering humanity with his firm adherence to truth and non-violence. Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi described this path as *Satyagraha*.

Gandhi with his wife Kasturba (facing page) and with Jawaharlal Nehru (below). The previous page shows Gandhi addressing a gathering at a mosque in Delhi in 1948.



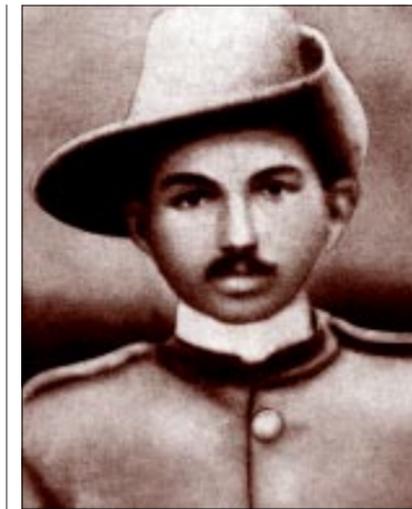


“
*Satyagraha means fighting injustice by voluntarily
submitting oneself to suffering.*
”

Mahatma Gandhi



The genesis of the birth of *Satyagraha* can be traced to an ordinance which the Apartheid regime in South Africa sought to impose upon the Indian immigrants. The proposed ordinance required all Indian men and women, and children over eight, to register with the authorities, submit to fingerprinting and accept a certificate which they were to carry with them at all times. Any Indian who failed to register and leave the fingerprints was liable to lose the right of residence and could be imprisoned, fined or deported from Transvaal. If apprehended on the street or anywhere without certificate, one could likewise be imprisoned, fined or deported,



Empire Theatre in Johannesburg where the historic meeting, chaired by Gandhi, to launch "Passive Resistance Movement" was held on 11 September 1906 (top), and Gandhi as a Group Leader of the Stretcher-bearer Corps in 1906 (above).

even though one owned valuable property or engaged in important commercial transactions.

More than two decades later, recalling that historic moment, Mahatma Gandhi gave a vivid description of the events of the day to his biographer Louis Fischer as if it was only yesterday: "On September 11, 1906, nearly three thousand persons filled the Empire Theatre in Johannesburg. The big hall throbbled with the din of voices which spoke the Tamil and Telugu, Gujarati and Hindi – the languages of India. A few women wore saris. Men wore European and Indian clothes; some had turbans and caps, some Moslem



Protest gathering at the Hamidia Mosque, Johannesburg (1908) against the Registration Act.

headgear. Among them were rich merchants, miners, lawyers, indentured labourers, waiters, rickshaw pullers, domestic servants, hucksters and poor shopkeepers. Many were delegates representing the eighteen thousand Indians of the Transvaal, now a British colony. They were meeting to decide what to do about pending discriminatory enactments against Indians. Abdul Ghani, Chairman of the Transvaal British-Indian Association and Manager of a big business firm, presided over the meeting and Sheth Haji Habib delivered the main address".

Prior to the developments of September 11, Gandhiji had rushed off to Johannesburg to

meet the Indian community. The Transvaal Government Gazette of August 22, 1906, had printed the draft of an Ordinance to be submitted to the legislature. If adopted, it would spell absolute ruin for the Indians of South Africa. Gandhiji decided, 'better die than submit to such a law'.

The meeting on September 11, 1906, was called precisely for the reason to discuss and debate the manner of protest. One thing was clear: it had to be in a spirit of 'do or die'. He was sure of one thing: the Ordinance must be resisted. "Nowhere in the world", he believed, "had free men been subjected to such humiliating, restrictive legislation".



Yet another protest march against ban on Asian immigrants and invalidation of Hindu, Muslim and Parsi marriages in Volksrust, South Africa (1913).

Gandhiji counselled the Indian community to consider coolly what they were doing. "Notwithstanding the differences of nomenclature in Hinduism and Islam," he declared, "we all believe in one and the same God. To pledge ourselves or to take oath in the name of God or with Him as a witness is not something to be trifled with. If having taken such an oath we violate our pledge, we are guilty before God and man. Personally, I hold that a man, who deliberately and knowingly takes a pledge and breaks it, forfeits his manhood... A man who lightly

pledges his word and then breaks it becomes a man of straw and fits himself for punishment here as well as hereafter."

Having warned them, he tried to stir them: "If ever a crisis in community affair warranted a vow, now was the time. Caution had its place but also its limits. The government has forsaken all sense of decency. We will be revealing our unworthiness and cowardice if we cannot stake our all in the face of such provocation."

The purpose of the resolution was not to impress the outside world. A vote in favour constituted a personal vow and each one of them had to decide whether he or she possessed the

inner strength to keep it. In consequences of the vow, they might be jailed; in prison they might be beaten and insulted. They might go hungry and be exposed to heat and cold. They might lose their jobs, their wealth. They might be deported. The struggle might last a long time, may be years. "But I can boldly declare and with certainty," Gandhi proclaimed, "that so long as there is even a handful of men true to their pledge, there can be only one end to the struggle – and that is victory".

The audience applauded. Gandhiji then lowered his voice and said, "Many in the hall, moved by the enthusiasm and indignation might pledge



Gandhi and Kasturba as Satyagrahis in South Africa.

themselves this evening and repent the next morning or the next month. Perhaps only a handful would be left to face the final contest with the powerful government". To him it would make no difference. "There is only one course open to me", Gandhi asserted, "to die but not to submit to the law."

The Indians were incensed. Orchestra, balcony and gallery were crowded long before the Chairman opened the proceedings. Angry speeches in four languages stirred the volatile audience to a high emotional pitch and then Sheth Haji Habib read a resolution, which Gandhiji had helped to prepare, demanding non-compliance with the registration provisions. Haji Habib called on the assembly to adopt it, but not in the usual manner. They must vote, he urged, 'with God as their witness'.

This Act was directed specifically against Indians and was, therefore, an affront to them and to India. If passed it would be the beginning of similar laws in other parts of South Africa; in the end, no Indian could remain in South Africa. Moreover, the Ordinance would permit a police officer to accost an Indian woman on the street or enter her home and ask for her registration document. In view of the complete or partial aloofness in which Indian women lived, this feature of the measure was highly offensive both to Moslems and Hindus. "If anyone came forward to demand a certificate from my wife,"

exclaimed an irate Indian at a preliminary committee meeting attended by Gandhiji, "I would shoot him on the spot and face the consequences."

That was the mood of the mass meeting in the Empire Theatre in Johannesburg in South Africa on September 11, 1906.

The Chairman added his sobering words. Then the vote was taken. Everyone present rose, raised his hand and swore to God not to obey the proposed anti-Indian Ordinance if it became law.

A sensitive ear and a keen intuition quickly told Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi that this was an extraordinary event. History was in the making. An action with God as witness. It was a religious vow which could not be broken. It was not the ordinary motion passed by a show of hands at a public function and immediately forgotten.

The next day, on September 12, the Empire Theatre was completely destroyed by fire. Many Indians regarded it as an omen that the Ordinance would meet a similar fate. To Gandhiji it was merely a coincidence. But Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi had, indeed, made history on September 11, 1906.

The next "urgency" before Gandhi was to find the right name for the mass protest. The name 'Passive Resistance' was creating misunderstanding even in the minds of his earnest supporters. As it happened in the course of a meeting where Mr. Hosken, one of the magnates

“
*The weak can never
 forgive. Forgiveness is the
 attribute of the strong.*
 ”

M.K. Gandhi

of Johannesburg, observed, "The Transvaal Indians have had recourse to passive resistance when all other means of securing redress proved to be of no avail. They do not enjoy the franchise. Numerically, they are only a few. They are weak and have no arms. Therefore they have taken to passive resistance which is a weapon of the weak."

"These observations", Gandhi writes, "took me by surprise, and the speech which I was going to make took an altogether different complexion in consequence. In contradicting Mr. Hosken, I defined our passive resistance as 'soul force'. I saw at this meeting that a use of the phrase "passive resistance" was apt to give rise to

terrible misunderstanding. I will try to distinguish between passive resistance and soul force by amplifying the argument which I made before that meeting so as to make things clearer".

There was nothing passive about the young Gandhi. He has explained in detail in his book 'Satyagraha in South Africa', how he disliked the term 'Passive Resistance'. Immediately after the collective vow at the Empire Theatre on September 11, an open contest inviting suggestions for a proper designation for the non-violent mass protest was held. He offered a prize for a better name for this new kind of mass yet individual opposition to government unfairness.

Maganlal Gandhi, a second cousin of Gandhi who lived at Phoenix Farm, suggested *Sadagraha* which meant 'firmness in a good cause'. Gandhi amended it to *Satyagraha* – *satya* is truth, which equals love, and *agraha* is firmness or force. *Satyagraha*, therefore, means truth force or love-force. Truth and love are attributes of the soul, hence *Satyagraha* is another word for Soul-force. The veteran Gandhian, Dr. R.R. Diwakar, explained: "*Satyagraha* is a new way of life. Moral strength was the major resource of the non-violent mode of

action. Moral purpose gave it an element of invincibility."

Satyagraha, Gandhiji said, is 'the vindication of truth not by infliction of suffering on the opponent but on one's self'. That requires self-control. The weapons of the Satyagraha are within him. Inspired by this conviction, Gandhiji stepped forward to take on the collective might of the state. He was arrested while leading a mass-movement against the Black Act. He thus became the first *Satyagrahi* in the world to go to jail for upholding human rights. This was amongst the most significant experiments which held out great hope for the world. It required the protagonist

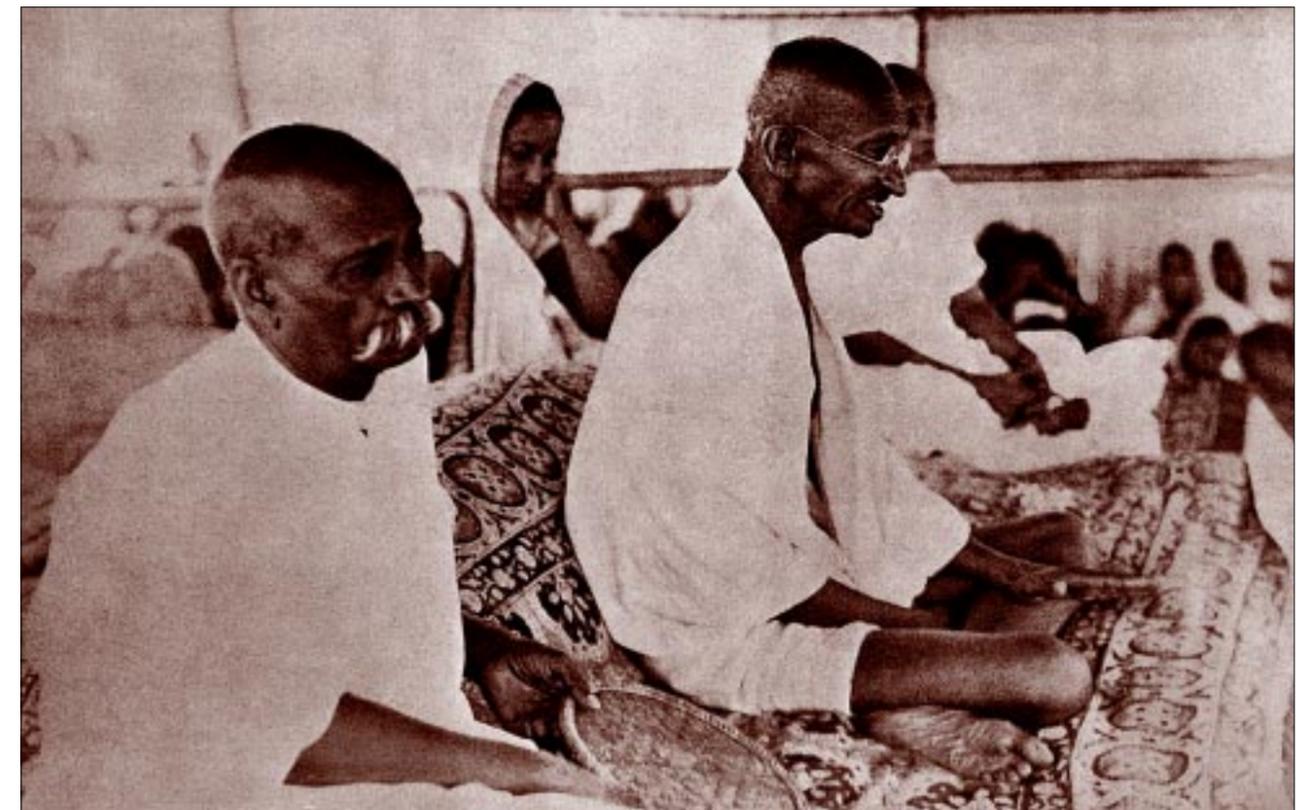
'to be strong not with the strength of the brute but with the strength of the spark of God'. Eventually, *Satyagraha* became his philosophy of life. It was the religion by which he lived and died.

A keen observer, Gandhiji could see the gradual transformation taking place even amongst the White populace in South Africa who showed signs of appreciation for the new technique, though they were only in a minority. He writes with certain degree of satisfaction, "As the movement advanced, Englishmen too began to watch it with interest. Although the English newspapers in the Transvaal generally wrote in

With Sardar Patel at a public meeting (1921).



Preparing Women Volunteers for Satyagraha in Segaoon, 1939.



support of the Europeans and the Black Act, they willingly published contributions from well-known Indians. They also published Indian representations to Government in full or at least a summary of these, sometimes sent their reporters to important meetings of the Indians, and when such was not the case, made room for the brief reports we sent them.”

Even before the informal launch of Satyagraha, we have evidence of Gandhiji's genius in organising an Indian Ambulance Corps of nearly 400 Indians during the Boer war, when he himself acted as the Sergeant-Major. Scrupulously trying to avoid getting drawn into the local politics, Gandhiji confined his activities to the Indian community. In 1906, he organised a stretcher-

bearing unit of nearly two dozen Indians in the course of the Zulu rebellion.

On October 28, 1913 Gandhiji led the historic march, from New Castle to Volksrust, of nearly three thousand people, as if anticipating the epic Dandi March. The protest was against £3 tax which Indian indentured labourers were made to pay.

Eventually General Smuts had to acquiesce to the *Satyagrahis'* resistance and on January 21, 1914, the *Satyagraha* was suspended when General Smuts accepted Gandhiji's proposals.

The *Satyagraha* movement in South Africa led by Gandhiji rendered great service to the cause of social equality. Right from the day Gandhiji arrived in

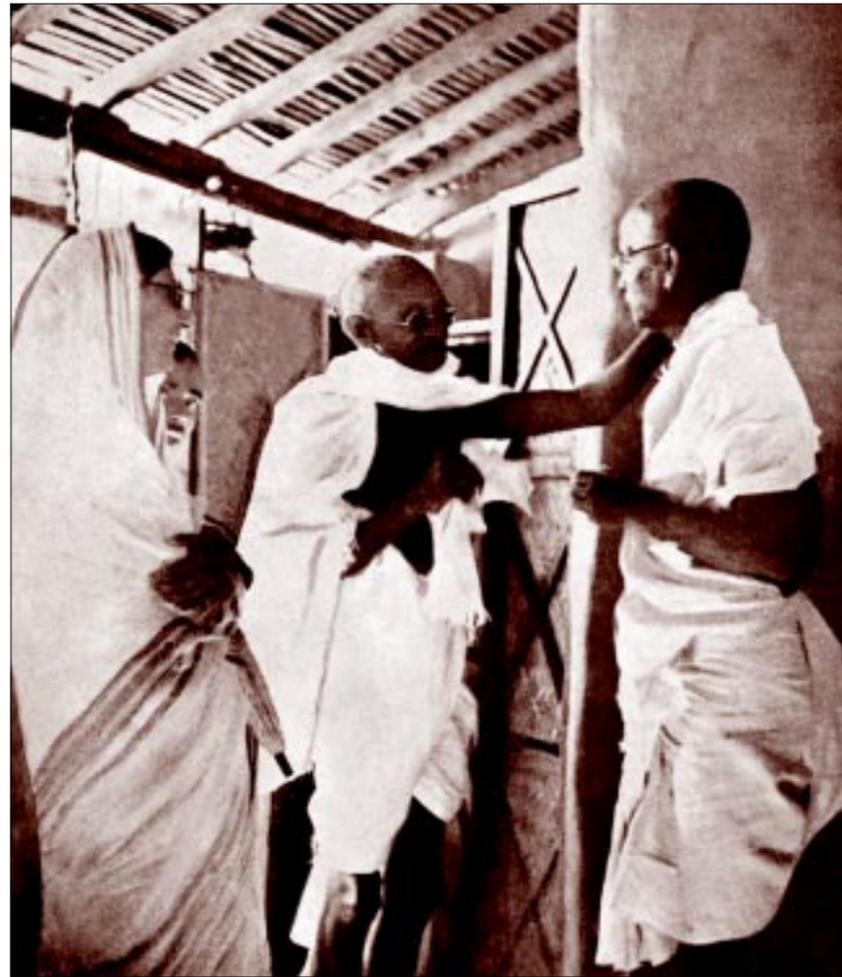
South Africa in 1893 to the time he departed in 1914, he worked for the restoration of justice to his fellow countrymen who were subjected to degrading and mortifying discrimination, ever since their arrival in Natal in the middle of the 19th Century. With his non-violent *Satyagraha* against social tyranny, Gandhiji soon became an acknowledged leader of the Indian community.

Gandhi trying out a new spinning device without a wheel (below) and at a "Harijan" colony (right).



“
*If cooperation is
 a duty, I hold that
 non-cooperation also,
 under certain conditions,
 is equally a duty.*
 ”

M.K. Gandhi

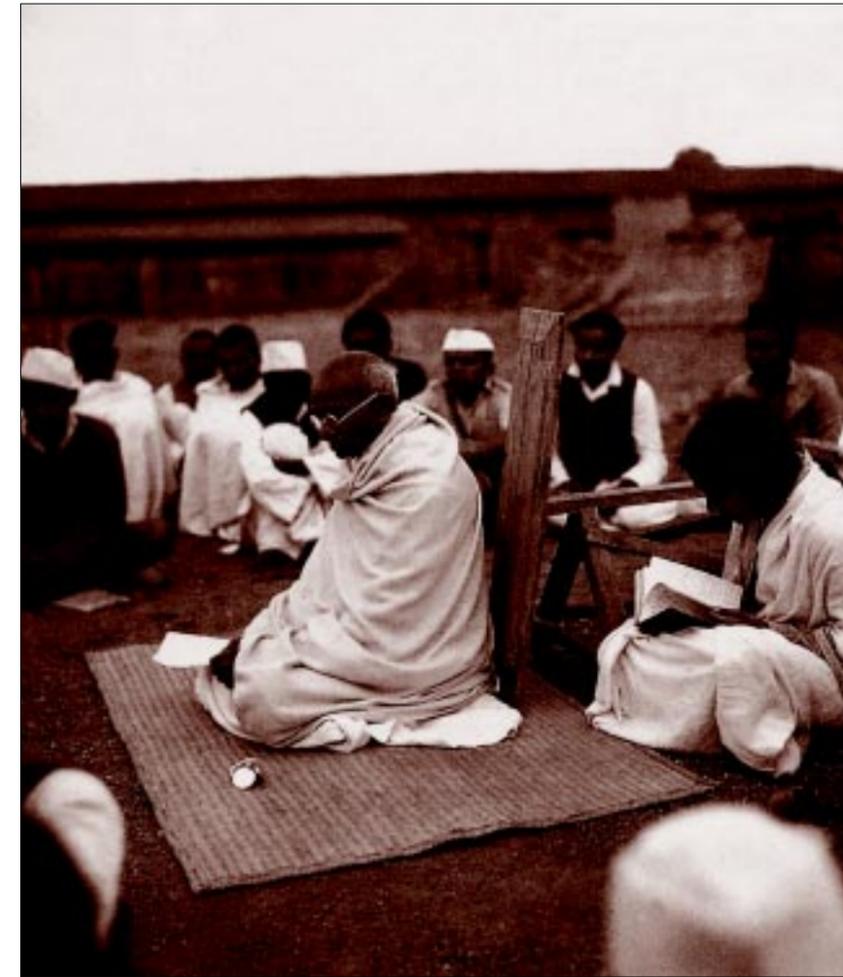


Gandhi with Vinoba Bhave at Sevagram (1940).

In South Africa, Gandhiji also came in contact with diverse streams of thoughts. It virtually turned out to be the nursery of his Experiments with Truth. His social, economic and political philosophy took concrete shape here. He read extensively John Ruskin's *'Unto This Last'*, Leo Tolstoy's *'The Kingdom of God is Within You'*, Henry David Thoreau's work on Civil Disobedience and several other works, which left a deep impression on his mind. His philosophy of *Sarvodaya* was

inspired by these enlightened readings.

For Mahatma Gandhi *Satyagraha* and *Sarvodaya* were the two sides of the same coin and rightly regarded as the most significant and revolutionary contributions to contemporary political and socio-economic thought. One is incomplete without the other. The fundamental concepts of *Satya* and *Ahimsa*, truth and non-violence, can be found in the world's major religious and philosophical traditions. Gandhi's



With his workers at Sevagram Ashram (1939).

originality lay in the way he fused them in both theory and practice. His doctrines of *Satyagraha* or non-violent resistance and *Sarvodaya* or universal welfare were at once the logical corollaries of his fundamental premise about human nature, and the mature fruit of his repeated experiments with political action and social reform.

Again, it was in South Africa, far away from his homeland, that he evolved a clear perspective and strategy for the regeneration

of his beloved country. He analysed the causes for the degeneration of the contemporary civilisation and suggested a way out of the impasse through a holistic perspective of development. He prepared a blueprint for an integrated philosophy of life and put them in a booklet which he called *'Hind Swaraj'* or the 'Indian Home Rule'. Written in 1908, *Hind Swaraj* is hailed as Gandhiji's seminal work and has become a Bible for all those people who are dedicated to

the cause of social regeneration across the globe.

By 1908 he had also experimented with civil disobedience and served jail terms. It was also during the *Satyagraha* that Gandhiji first saw the inner strength of the women through Kasturba and realised the potential of women power, which he called *Stri-Shakti*. These experiences in South Africa prepared him to plunge himself to the regeneration of India, and through India the whole World, weighed down by brute force of violence, hatred and greed.

Satyagraha marked its centenary on September 18, 2006. Perhaps the most appropriate way to commemorate the event would be to reflect on how a colossal revolution took place in India without the violence that occurred in other countries of Asia and Africa. How it proves that it is possible to bring about a revolution without a bloody war. *Satyagraha* is the sum-total of the Life Message of this revolutionary social scientist – Mahatma Gandhi. It shows the alternative to terrorism and war, which threatens to destroy the very fabric of a civilized existence.

◆
The author is Director, Gandhi Smriti & Darshan Samiti.

Instructions to Satyagrahis

Satyagraha Camp, Nadiad, April 17, 1918

1. *The volunteers must remember that, as this is a satyagraha campaign, they must abide by truth under all circumstances.*
2. *In satyagraha, there can be no room for rancour; which means that a satyagrahi should utter no harsh word about anyone...*
3. *Rudeness has no place in satyagraha. Perfect courtesy must be shown even to those who may look upon us as their enemies and the villagers must be taught to do the same. Rudeness may harm our cause and the struggle may be unduly prolonged...*
4. *The volunteers must remember that this is a holy war. We embarked upon it because, had we not, we would have failed in our dharma. And so all the rules which are essential for living a religious life must be observed here too.*
5. *We are opposing the intoxication of power, i.e. the blind application of law, and not authority as such. The difference must never be lost sight of. It is, therefore, our duty to help the officers in their other work.*
6. *We are to apply here the same principle that we follow in a domestic quarrel. We should think of the Government and the people as constituting a large family and act accordingly.*
7. *We are not to boycott or treat with scorn those who hold different views from ours. It must be our resolve to win them over by courteous behaviour.*
8. *We must not try to be clever. We must always be frank and straightforward.*
9. *When they stay in villages, the volunteers should demand the fewest services from the village-folk. Wherever it is possible to reach a place on foot, they should avoid using a vehicle. We must insist on being served the simplest food.*
10. *As they move about in villages, the volunteers should observe the economic condition of the people and the deficiencies in their education and try, in their spare time, to make them good.*

11. If they can, they should create opportunities when they may teach the village children.

12. If they notice any violation of the rules of good health, they should draw the villagers' attention to the fact.

13. If, at any place, they find people engaged in quarrelling among themselves, the volunteers should prevent them from their quarrelling.

14. They should read out to the people, when the latter are free, books which promote satyagraha...

15. At no time and under no circumstances is the use of arms permitted in satyagraha. It should never be forgotten that in this struggle the highest type of non-violence is to be maintained. Satyagraha means fighting oppression through voluntary suffering. There can be no question here of making anyone else suffer. Satyagraha is always successful; it can never meet with defeat: let every volunteer understand this himself and then explain it to the people.

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi

Instructions to volunteers' (G.) Kheda Satyagraha



“
The difference between what we do and what we are capable of doing would suffice to solve most of the world's problems.
”

M.K. Gandhi