



## 6. gandhi as a political organiser

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The meeting on 1 May 1995 discussed a presentation by Bob Overy based on the final chapter of his PhD thesis, *Gandhi's Method as a Political Organiser*. The text of the chapter, entitled 'From Local to National Organising' is reprinted below together with extracts from the discussion.

Present at the meeting were Christina Arber, John Brierley, Howard Clark, Bob Overy, Lindis Percy, Michael Randle, Carol Rank, Andrew Rigby, Walter Stein.

**Text by** [Bob Overy](#) [2]

### from local to national organising

In most of the years reviewed in this study, Gandhi was not yet the established national leader who could command automatic attention and veneration. This makes his activities particularly interesting because, for this short period, he was more nearly in the position of other nonviolent political activists who do not command the allegiance of masses of people and a political machine, but who are at the margins of political life looking for a way in.

As a newcomer to Indian politics with a distinctive political philosophy Gandhi found his place in the nationalist movement at a time of economic and political turmoil. The consequent uncertainty made it possible for a novel political doctrine like satyagraha to be taken to the centre of Indian political life. But this impact for Gandhi's 'experiments' with nonviolence was not achieved without much effort and skill. Practical choices faced him as an organiser about what issues to take up, which groups to involve, what methods to pursue and to what lengths he should go in order to achieve the results he was seeking. These questions for the organiser of nonviolent action have been the subject of this study.

Many Indian nationalists were to be captivated by Gandhi's ideas and proposals; many more adopted some aspects of the satyagraha programme while it was the policy of the national movement or while it was fashionable to do so. As a result Gandhi became a pre-eminent national figure with unprecedented authority. From this position, Gandhi continued with his satyagraha 'experiments' apparently no more afraid to take personal risks than before. His unusual position at the centre of political life, however, gave him the opportunity to experiment increasingly with methods of nonviolent action which only someone in his place could have attempted. The remarkable fasts to influence his fellow countrymen on questions of Hindu-Muslim unity and the abolition of untouchability can be repeated in most situations only by national political leaders of similar prominence. Quite probably a symbolic march, like the Salt March which Gandhi led in 1930, would require a personality of his renown at its head to command the attention and precipitate the mass imitative action which that demonstration did. Thus the years in India before Gandhi had achieved his position as 'Father of the Nation' are particularly worthy of attention for students of nonviolent action who want to know how a nonviolent movement which had a major impact was planned and organised by someone on the edge of that political mainstream.

The case material presented in this thesis can be grouped broadly into three periods. The first period, up to 1918 and including the Champaran, Ahmedabad and Kheda satyagrahas, was the period when he was searching for ways to introduce his ideas and methods into Indian politics. The actions he attempted were principally local in their scope and focussed on particular issues or grievances prominent in Gujarat. His successes brought him and his movement to prominence in Gujarat. The second period sees Gandhi in transition to national leadership and is pivotal to this study. Gandhi attempted in 1919 from his base of support in Gujarat and Bombay City to initiate a national campaign on the particular issue of the Rowlatt Bills. As a mass action this lasted for less than a month



and as an ongoing campaign it survived only six months before petering out. Shaken by the rioting and repression which Rowlatt catalysed, Gandhi rethought his approach and began casting around for other ways to launch nonviolent action on a mass scale. In the summer of 1920 the third period begins with Gandhi's decision to initiate a second national satyagraha campaign, combining two particular grievances, the Khilafat and Punjab issues, and quickly taking on the general issue of swaraj. A key contention of this thesis is that Gandhi's principal response to the Rowlatt debacle was to devise an additional method of mobilising civilians on a mass scale which fell far short of civil disobedience and other methods of civil resistance. This was to initiate a co-ordinated programme of constructive work, the Triple Boycott and then the Bezwada Programme, which can be seen to have evolved later into the constructive programme.

In addition to this fundamental question of the balance between civil resistance and constructive work in Gandhi's method, a number of other related themes have been explored. These include how his methods as an organiser changed as he moved from local to national campaigns ? and back again. Also, how he adapted his method of organising on particular issues to the problem of launching a mass movement on the general issue of swaraj. Again, how he adapted his approach when he came to lead coalitions of political activists most of whom were not convinced upholders of his satyagraha ideology.

Two other features of Gandhi's method have been noted. In the early campaigns in Ahmedabad we saw the fundamental importance to his campaigning of the religious vow ? this was one of the principal techniques he employed for introducing the religious spirit into politics. The other is the distinction he made in 1921 between aggressive and defensive civil disobedience. Gandhi clearly favoured defensive action in the 18 months of slowly built-up mobilisation which constituted the bulk of non-cooperation.

For followers of Gandhi in India, most of these points are familiar. In particular, the contention that Gandhi's method employed a careful balance between negative and positive ? between campaigns of civil resistance and constructive programme ? with the priority given to constructive work is wholly unexceptionable. Several of the other points are also widely reported in works by Dhawan, Diwakar, Bose, and so on.<sup>1</sup> However, in the West, the principal authorities on nonviolent action have neglected practically all these aspects ? with the partial exception of the vow. In particular, the fundamental point that nonviolent action as a method and technique focussed just as much on constructive work as campaigns of civil resistance is virtually ignored. Yet Gandhi's success as an organiser cannot be understood unless it is recognised that at the base of every campaign of civil resistance ? especially at the national level - was a programme of constructive work.

Faced with the problems we have indicated, Gandhi turned to a programme of constructive work almost as a panacea.<sup>2</sup> Constructive work was designed to discipline the people prior to civil disobedience. It was to provide tasks which could be taken up by the poorest peasants and give them a place in the national movement. It was designed to provide a link between the national political elite and the peasantry and to take active nationalists out of legislatures to the 'rural' politics of India, tackling poverty and injustice in the villages. It was used, too, not only as a preparation for civil disobedience but also as a delaying tactic: until the targets were reached and the 'capacity' of the nation demonstrated, civil disobedience could not be launched.

Again, promotion of constructive work helped Gandhi to deal with the problem of scale, moving from a local level where he could preserve face-to-face contact to a national level where he could not. If it was impossible to rely on inexperienced satyagraha leaders to launch civil resistance campaigns across the subcontinent, what he could do with much less risk was to invite them to introduce the nation to campaigns of constructive work. Constructive work too helped Gandhi to deal with the problem of campaigning on a general issue rather than a particular issue. Before Quit India in 1942, he insisted on launching 'do-or-die' struggles on limited, particular issues capable of achievement. Swaraj, full political self-government, was a general goal not likely to be achieved in 1920. However, re-interpreted in Gandhi's concept as the development of a nation organised, united, self-reliant and capable of solving its own economic and social problems, swaraj could be approached as a general issue by a programme of constructive work. Again, moving solidly into the political arena when he entered political organisations like the Congress and the Home Rule League, he knew he would be unable to find unity at the highest levels behind his distinctive satyagraha ideology. Accommodation with the nationalist elite was buttressed therefore by mass constructive campaigns which (after the Triple Boycott) were in significant respects politically uncontentious or innocuous and designed to develop unity in the mass movement at the base. They served in effect to undercut opposition to Gandhi at the top.

Satyagraha as a method has been the subject of a number of scholarly studies published in the West. The best known of these ? Richard Gregg's *The Power of Nonviolence*, Krishnalal Shridharani's *War Without Violence*, and



Joan Bondurant's *Conquest of Violence: The Gandhian Philosophy of Conflict*<sup>3</sup> ? have developed a common theme expressed by the subtitle of Bondurant's work. This is that in satyagraha Gandhi demonstrated a method and a philosophy of engaging in conflict which can be developed as an effective substitute for political violence. Shridharani and Gregg go further and urge that nonviolent conflict can replace war as a method of settling disputes between nations, a theme which has been taken up subsequently by Gene Sharp and a number of other scholars.

When scholars are making such claims for their interpretations of Gandhi's method it is extremely important that they present the method in a way which makes it possible for political activists influenced by them to understand how he used and developed the technique in practice. Bondurant comes very close to the explanation of Gandhi's method developed in this thesis when she defines satyagraha as 'a technique for social and political change'; or again 'an instrument of struggle for positive objectives and for fundamental change'. Clearly this is more than a conflict technique in her eyes.<sup>4</sup> She states too in one section:

The constructive program was an essential component of the Gandhian revolutionary struggle for Indian independence. It was the constructive program which gave content to the satyagraha framework and applied Gandhian principles to the Indian circumstance.<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless the balance of her especially valuable study of satyagraha is overwhelmingly on the conflict side. 'I have tried only', she writes, 'to attack a problem inadequately explored in political theory by abstracting from the Gandhian experiment a theoretical key to the problem of social and political conflict.'<sup>6</sup> The place of constructive programme within her analysis is understated and ambiguous. She tends to see it as an ideal goal or a prescription for moral conduct, rather than as a method of mobilising people for social change. Primarily it is presented as a subsidiary discipline and necessary demonstration of social rectitude to be taken up for the duration of a direct action campaign, rather than as an autonomous part of the satyagraha method, to be followed and organised for its own sake.

Gregg, as we have seen, was personally a satyagrahi in the full Gandhian sense ? one who believed that the essence of the technique is to apply a number of disciplines in one's own life and to build out from there a political movement. In *The Power of Nonviolence* he devotes the final portion of the book to the type of 'training' needed to engage in nonviolent resistance. He also repeats his prescription for taking up manual work and social service projects.<sup>7</sup> There is though a complete divorce between the idealised proposals in this concluding argument and the powerfully presented case studies of nonviolent resistance with which the book begins. His abstract presentation, unrelated to the historical examples, fails to show how the constructive programme was an integral part of the method of satyagraha developed by Gandhi. Also, constructive work is seen as a personal discipline for individuals and small groups rather than a programme of campaigns to be waged on social issues as part of a larger political struggle.

Shridharani took part personally in the Salt March in 1930 and his book, *War Without Violence*, first published in 1939, remains an inspiring and persuasive argument for learning from Gandhi's campaigning methods.<sup>8</sup> His work includes a chapter on 'organisation' which describes in outline the Congress machinery for conducting satyagraha campaigns. But the dynamic process of Gandhi actually organising satyagraha, that is, making decisions as an organiser, is still missing from his account. Gene Sharp has rightly claimed Shridharani as a pioneer of the 'technique approach' to nonviolent struggle ? by which Sharp means nonviolence as a technique for engaging in conflict divorced from any necessary connection with Gandhi's philosophy of life.<sup>9</sup>

Sharp himself is today overwhelmingly the most important theoretician of nonviolent action in the West and he has made it a life's work to establish the technique on a body of case material and theoretical argument which separates it from Gandhi's particular philosophy and beliefs. He is not however in any way hostile to Gandhi but remains profoundly respectful of him. He has recently published a collection of essays in which he demonstrates successfully that Gandhi himself was willing to make a distinction between nonviolence as a philosophy and nonviolence as a policy or expedient, and that Gandhi organised his satyagraha campaigns fully understanding that most of those who supported him did so as a temporary and often unwilling discipline for the period of the struggle only.<sup>10</sup> In *Gandhi As a Political Strategist* Sharp publishes an excellent short summary of Gandhi's satyagraha method and a brief, accurate representation of the importance of constructive programme in Gandhian theory.<sup>11</sup>

What Sharp has signally failed to do, however, in his enormous compendium of theory and case?material, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*, published in 1973, is to describe adequately how Gandhi's method of action worked in practice.<sup>12</sup> The reason is that Sharp does not look at Gandhi as an organiser, a politician making strategic choices



and tactical decisions about how to shape the campaigns he is directing. Where he considers strategy and tactics it is in the context of a preexisting nonviolent struggle. How Gandhi found himself as leader of mass campaigns of non-cooperation or civil disobedience is outside Sharp's brief which is simply to analyse how nonviolent struggles were conducted once they started. In particular, the place and role of constructive programme in Gandhi's method is almost entirely missing.

Each of these major theoreticians of nonviolent action has understood Gandhi's method fully and has chosen to tailor their presentation of it to what they think is most significant in his achievement. They have also followed Gandhi's broad principle of 'swadeshi' (cultivating that which is local) by attempting to translate satyagraha into terms which are assimilable for readers whose background is in the political and social culture of the West. Bondurant explains the basis on which she selected from his method as follows:

'It is essential rigorously to differentiate satyagraha as technique of action from those specific considerations of right?living with which Gandhi also concerned himself.'<sup>13</sup>

Sharp draws attention to the personal battles he has had to endure with 'dogmatic' Gandhians and pacifists over many years as he has maintained his revisionist attitude to the Gandhian method.<sup>14</sup>

The studies of these scholars are in my opinion as important historically as their authors claim because they do demonstrate that there is another way of fighting and of exercising power not based in violence, a perspective which is not readily recognised in political theory and practice. However, by presenting Gandhi's method for a Western audience with such a single-minded emphasis on conflict, they have narrowed the focus of their analysis in such a way that unfortunately it is difficult to understand how Gandhi's campaigns were built up and sustained. Methods of engaging in conflict have been separated from methods of mobilising the social and political movement equipped to engage in conflict. This is not an argument for taking over Gandhi's beliefs wholesale before engaging in nonviolent struggle. But Bondurant is mistaken when she says that it is necessary rigorously to differentiate satyagraha as a technique of action from Gandhi's hobby-horses regarding 'right?living'. It helps us to understand Gandhi's technique if we see it as a method of social struggle informed by strongly held positive values, virtually all of which may have relevance for us. What I am saying is that the attempt to separate the technique of action from the background of beliefs which prompted it has diminished our understanding of the technique. To sum up. Gandhian satyagraha should be seen as a method of organising a movement for positive social change. Second, an integral part of this technique ? as important to its successful development as the use of civil resistance - is the constructive programme.

Unfortunately, in a study which draws its case material almost entirely from only eight years of Gandhi's career in India (from 1915 to 1922) it is not possible to draw final conclusions about Gandhi's methods throughout his career. More particularly, it is not possible to attempt detailed analysis of the place of constructive work in his method on the evidence of this early period. Nonetheless, the case outlined above can be generally supported from the evidence contained in this thesis. Moreover, if we add to this the assessments of theoreticians of Gandhi's methods who have explored the whole canon of his career, we may infer that a strong case has been made out.

### *Local and National Organising*

In local struggles Gandhi was able to play a highly visible part in the action, directing many matters personally and taking much of the burden of civil resistance onto his own shoulders. When he moved onto a national scale and tried to repeat this pattern, the level of organisation proved to be inadequate and discipline broke down.

As a result, Gandhi adapted his methods in several respects. First, instead of relying on individuals who broadly accepted his satyagraha principles and would loyally follow his lead, he joined national organisations (the Khilafat movement and the Indian National Congress) not committed to satyagraha as a creed. Second, having joined the Congress he was instrumental in devising for it a membership structure which enabled it to be representative of nationalist activists throughout India. Congress was a machinery for bringing most of the elements of Indian nationalism into one organisation (Gandhi likened it to a 'Parliament' rather than a 'Party'), and followers of Gandhi were one faction only within it. Gandhi's principal innovation was the disinterested one of extending the Congress organisation into the villages rather than extending his own following. Third, because of the problem of mass all-India civil resistance campaigns getting out of hand if the leaders moved too quickly to aggressive



confrontation, he devised a programme for diverting the energies of the nation's political elite out into constructive work and out into rural areas. There they could consolidate the membership of the vastly expanded Congress organisation and prepare it for disciplined nonviolent struggle. Fourth, having moved to construct a national mass organisation within which his own following was a faction only, Gandhi experimented with ways of developing forms of action over which he could have personal control which would then constitute the leading edge of the movement. His followers in one district of rural Gujarat were selected to launch aggressive civil disobedience. As a personal action to promote the use of swadeshi cloth among the poorest peasantry, he vowed publicly to reduce his own clothing needs to a loin?cloth only.

In this way, by working with people with different, political viewpoints, by developing disciplined organisation, by pitching the struggle as far as possible at the level of constructive work rather than confrontation and by devising new symbolic ways of exerting personal leadership, Gandhi adapted from local to national struggles.

Gandhi himself has drawn attention to the differences between his organising methods at a local and a national level in his pamphlet on Constructive Programme which provided the framework of discussion in Chapter 4. There he states categorically 'no elaborate constructive programme was or could be necessary' in local struggles but insists that to organise civil disobedience at a national level without securing 'the co?operation of the millions by way of constructive effort is mere bravado and worse than useless'.<sup>15</sup> The same passage has been quoted approvingly by Bose in his excellent *Studies in Gandhism* and restated by Sharp as Gandhi's viewpoint.<sup>16</sup> But neither writer has attempted to analyze this perspective further. Dhawan also notes Gandhi's conclusion which was maintained over many years.<sup>17</sup>

### *Working as Part of a Coalition*

Having failed to develop an all?India organization of his own supporters, Gandhi was drawn into political coalitions with other nationalist leaders and factions. Expediency was the only basis on which he could win consent at the highest levels of nationalist politics for his judgments, campaigns and methods. His fellow politicians backed Gandhi when his proposals seemed to be the most feasible to follow at that particular moment. None of this prevented him, however, on the public platform and in his newspapers from arguing his full political position based in satyagraha principles. As a result, within a coalition of divergent views, Gandhi was still able to recruit popular support for his fundamental beliefs.

On many issues, Gandhi's judgment of what it was possible to achieve and right to aim for was closer to the nationalist 'Moderates' than to the 'Extremists'. What distinguished him from the 'Moderates' was, first, his belief that real politics lay outside the legislatures in the villages of India and, second, once he had set himself a limited aim, his determination to pit his body and soul to the struggle to achieve it. His links with the 'Moderates', on the one hand, and his commitment to populism and radical action on the other, gave him a special leverage in nationalist politics. He could outmanoeuvre the 'Extremists' because he appeared just as committed to radical action as they and more committed to practical objectives.

The fact that Gandhi became leader of all?India political coalitions pursuing limited objectives on the basis of expediency does not mean that he compromised his satyagraha principles. He insisted, for example, on nonviolent discipline in the Khilafat and Congress movements while he led them. He insisted too on the particular campaigning issues of the Khilafat and Punjab being kept separate until all avenues of compromise with the Raj had been gone down fully on both questions. He fervently opposed the boycott of British goods, rather than foreign goods. Furthermore, strategies for achieving the limited aims of the coalition were always designed to advance the cause of satyagraha. The Triple Boycott, for example, had the startling effect of persuading thousands of members of the nationalist elite to make contact with village India. While 'Swaraj in One Year' ? a dubious slogan ? convinced some nationalists that they need make sacrifices for one year only,<sup>18</sup> it was neatly turned by Gandhi into a mass programme of constructive work which would build the movement's organisational strength and tackle the 'real' problems of India as he saw them.

Lacking a national organisation committed to satyagraha, Gandhi recognised that within the nationalist coalition there were different levels of commitment to his ideas. At the base Congress was a very fluid organisation with considerable freedom and uncertain discipline. But at the top Gandhi created a tight Working Committee of a few individuals. While he retained authority from the Congress to act as leader, he insisted that the working committee follow a policy of collective responsibility like the British cabinet ? thus speaking with one voice. In this way unity



was achieved at the top behind his policy. At a local and regional level, a nationwide organisation of volunteers was created within the Congress. These volunteers were obliged as a condition of membership to take a vow committing them to nonviolent discipline.<sup>19</sup> Some of them received training in Gandhian ashrams and established new ashrams from which to carry out constructive and other work. The programme of constructive work was promoted by Gandhi as an uncontentious movement of national self-improvement which should be supported by all factions in Congress. Through this he aimed for unity at the base of the movement.

Thus considerations of expediency prompted other nationalist politicians to support Gandhi's leadership of Congress ? a position which was helped by his novel balance of commitment to 'moderate' views with determination to fight by radical methods. This, together with a combination of tight discipline at the top, support for his policies at the base, and the development of a network of volunteer groups broadly accepting his direction alongside ashrams of committed workers, enabled Gandhi to enter political coalitions without sacrificing his satyagraha principles.

The principal discussion of Gandhi's acceptance of expediency as a basis for political coalition is in Gene Sharp, *Gandhi As A Political Strategist*, though he concentrates solely on the issue of nonviolent discipline in conflict.<sup>20</sup> Where Sharp is particularly illuminating, too, is in contrasting Gandhi's view of political power with the conventional one. What further differentiated Gandhi from the Moderate was his outstanding insight that power lies outside the centres of government in the activity or inactivity of the people.<sup>21></sup>

### *Building Campaigns Around Particular Issues*

We have laid considerable stress on Gandhi's consistent strategy of working for general goals by way of campaigns with particular, limited objectives.

During his early struggles back in India, as a less than typical Loyalist who nonetheless was intending no immediate or general assault on the legitimacy of British rule, Gandhi concentrated on trying to eradicate particular 'blots' on the Raj's record. Even then, however, his positive aims of strengthening the Indian nation by developing self-reliance, social responsibility and moral awareness were general in scope. We can recognise, therefore, two well-known features of the Gandhian method. First, the selection of a series of particular measures, 'one step at a time', to advance a general goal. Second, the concentration on means as containing within them the essence of whatever end will emerge ? hence satyagraha being a doctrine of means as much as ends. Through pursuing a means as general and all-embracing in its scope as satyagraha, unforeseen general benefits will result, even though the nominal aim is limited to a specific issue.

Of course, a much more pragmatic case can be made for concentrating, as Gandhi did, on the single issue. It assumes, among other things, that rationality and fairness can be brought to bear in politics, that both sides in a dispute can learn to understand and even respect the other's position if no side issues are brought in, and that by limiting demands to the minimum short of sacrificing principles, practical gains can be achieved. Using this method, Gandhi was able to control the pace and development of struggle precisely because it was limited in scope and objective, and also to restrain retaliatory opportunities open to his opponent.<sup>22</sup>

When Gandhi did move to the general issue of Swaraj in 1920 we have seen that this was with great reluctance even though by that time it had become logical to combine campaigns on two 'particular' issues which had reached the same stage of breakdown with the Raj. Gandhi's ingenious solution to this was to interpret Swaraj in terms of a number of particular objectives for constructive work ? such as a Congress organisation capable of assuming the running of the country or a nation capable of throwing off dependency on imports and supplying all its own clothing needs by the efforts of the largest number of its citizens.

Thus his 'particularist' method survived Gandhi's translation to national leadership committed to the goal of independence for India. It facilitated control of the action and restraint on the activities of both sides. Within campaigns on the issues selected, general advances could be achieved 'one step at a time', while the nonviolent means served to bring forward a philosophy of 'right-living'. These three related questions, of keeping issues separate, being satisfied with limited gains as long as the principle is won, and emphasising means as much as ends, have been widely discussed in the literature on Gandhi.



### *Truth?Force and the Importance of the Religious Vow*

There is a fourth question, however, which must be introduced as well if we are to understand the impact of a method which employed nonviolent means for limited objectives on particular issues. This is the determination to gain a victory once a struggle has been launched without even contemplating the possibility of defeat. Gandhi continually insisted on the infallibility of his satyagraha method.

In order to understand this in secular terms, it is tempting to notice how strong is the emphasis on will in Gandhi's method. Starving mill workers vow not to return to work until they have won a victory; farmers vow to forfeit their ancestral lands if necessary. When the workers in Ahmedabad weakened, Gandhi himself took a vow that he would share their conditions by starving himself until their sacrifice was recognised.

Such an explanation goes only half-way to explaining Gandhi's method, however, Gandhi's absolute determination not to give in on a campaign once launched was allied to a belief that the strength to maintain the fight comes from God. Taking a religious vow to struggle until some amelioration or advantage was won was not, as cynics argue, simply an opportunist move to bind ignorant people to a course of action which otherwise they would think better of and slide out of. In the vow, and in the successful outcome of struggles where people had vowed that they would not give in, Gandhi saw the means of enabling people to bring their most profound sense of spiritual rectitude into politics. In victory, not only would their self-confidence soar, but also their belief in the power of the spirit, or, as Gandhi came to express it more and more, truth.

Here then we come to the core of satyagraha ? which has often been translated as 'truth?force' or 'soul?force'. Gandhi tried hard in practice not to overemphasise the power of the human soul to force change in the political world. But (i) on a specific, carefully?defined issue, (ii) where the objectives of the campaigners had been limited to the least they could reasonably demand, (iii) if the struggle was conducted scrupulously in a nonviolent spirit without recourse to trickery or manipulation and (iv) with a willingness to suffer to the limit without compromise, then (v) the human soul could exercise power and force changes in the world of politics.

This was Gandhi's 'truth?force' or 'soul?force', conceived and organised as a novel experiment in political action. It was a fragile technique because it was so poorly understood and so little tried as a conscious method. Gandhi remained fascinated by this experiment throughout his life, convinced that if it was applied with enough skill it could never fail. However, as we have argued in this study, he came to realise that he had been overconfident in promoting it as a method on the conflict side in campaigns of civil resistance. Increasingly he placed stress on campaigns of satyagraha which were constructive in nature, designed to change social conditions directly, rather than competing in the fraught arena of politics.

Numerous writers have defined truth?force before. In particular, Iver has stressed the importance of the vow in satyagraha.<sup>23</sup> But perhaps no?one has emphasised in quite this way how fundamental was the combination of a limited issue and absolute determination to its success. These first conscious experiments by Gandhi were expressly limited in their scope in order to match their chances of success to the moral strength of the satyagrahis. If this is accepted, then the problems of organising satyagraha on a national scale, particularly in its more contentious form of civil disobedience, become obvious. Where the spirit of the people cannot be concentrated on a particular issue and their struggle conducted in something approximate to the rules developed by Gandhi, then the 'truth?force' method cannot work.

### *The Slow?Build?Up and Defensive Action*

This points to a final feature of Gandhi's method which has been explored in this study, namely the change of approach he adopted to initiating satyagraha on a national scale. Whereas with the Rowlatt Satyagraha the campaign was launched with plans for widespread individual civil disobedience, during Non-cooperation the launch of aggressive civil disobedience was delayed and delayed and then finally abandoned altogether.

My belief is that the restriction order placed on Gandhi during the Rowlatt Satyagraha caused him (probably consciously) to try to repeat the defiance which had worked so well for him two years earlier in Champaran. The disastrous results of this symbolic resistance, however, caused him to rethink his approach. The slow development and build?up of the Non-cooperation movement should be seen as a more mature example of Gandhi's method of



organising at a national level. This was the approach he adopted in the first sustained all-India campaign which established his leadership of the nationalist movement. What it involved was a progressive series of steps for, first, mobilising the nationalist elite and directing them to the villages where real issues for the future of India lay; second, consolidating the links achieved between full-time idealistic workers and villagers in a programme to develop organisation and expand constructive work; third, moving onto defensive civil disobedience when the Raj tried to restrict the activities of Congress volunteers; and fourth preparing to launch aggressive civil disobedience in a limited area when the nation was ready. Thus the essence of the revised method was a long-drawn-out period of mobilisation and preparation, building up enthusiasm, unity and constructive achievement until the right 'atmosphere' for civil disobedience had been achieved. It was no longer assumed – as Gandhi had in 1919 – that satyagraha would take the people by storm. Defensive disobedience, the defiance of government restrictions on their 'legitimate' activity, was permitted on an individual rather than mass basis by Gandhi.<sup>24</sup> Aggressive civil disobedience, the deliberate breaking of a law chosen by Gandhi at the right moment to escalate the confrontation, was held back as a last resort for when the movement was thoroughly prepared to support and sustain nonviolent discipline.

Case examples selected by Bondurant in her authoritative study of the satyagraha method give the impression that Gandhi favoured exemplary civil disobedience as his method of mobilising a mass nonviolent movement. This was the technique employed in the only two national struggles she describes, the Rowlatt Satyagraha and the Salt Satyagraha in 1930.<sup>25</sup> Gene Sharp in his valuable study of the 1930-1932 movement in *Gandhi Wields The Weapon of Moral Power* also implies by his selection and treatment that Gandhi favoured aggressive civil disobedience.<sup>26</sup> In Sharp's *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* almost all his references to all-India actions organised by Gandhi are to this period, which Sharp had studied in depth.<sup>27</sup> This means that two of the most influential authorities on nonviolent action in the West, do not take account explicitly of the principal national struggle by which Gandhi established his position in India.

Rowlatt and the Salt Satyagraha are the best known examples of Gandhi's method in the West. Their reputation has, however, in my view, helped give nonviolent activists in the West a misleading impression of how Gandhi's satyagraha campaigns were constructed.

The crucial point is that Rowlatt was a failure and that the Salt Satyagraha followed ten years of preparation led by Gandhi, including principally the major initial mobilisation achieved by Non-cooperation from 1920-1922. It is beyond the scope of this study to develop this contention further – but the argument that the Gandhian method places much less emphasis on dramatic civil disobedience than is usually supposed, is well supported in this thesis.

### *Satyagraha in Action*

In only four pages of her book *Conquest of Violence*, Joan Bondurant has summarised what she calls 'The Essentials of Satyagraha in Action'. Derived from earlier Gandhian scholars, this summary first published nearly thirty years ago is still generally accepted as the best practical description of Gandhi's method.<sup>28></sup>

Bondurant herself makes no great claims for this section of her work. She writes:

If one were to lay out a handbook for the conduct of a mass satyagraha campaign based upon the experience with satyagraha in India, the three first chapters might well deal with (1) fundamental rules governing the campaign, (2) the code of discipline, and (3) the steps through which the campaign is to be pursued. Among the points which should enter into such a guide are those outlined below.<sup>29</sup>

It is perhaps surprising that such a modest and, as the author herself suggests, incomplete presentation of Gandhi's method has not been re-evaluated and tested subsequently.

It is not intended to examine here the nine points of her proposed 'chapter 2', the code of discipline, which Bondurant has taken from a document which Gandhi prepared for those taking part in civil disobedience in 1930. Even so, a code of discipline prepared specifically for Congress volunteers from differing political backgrounds who were taking part in a campaign of nonviolent direct action is bound to be different from that suggested for 'life-satyagrahis' living in the ashrams and going out to engage in constructive work. Also, the discipline for this



type of aggressive civil disobedience will not be the same as for conducting a hartal or a procession or a public meeting. Thus Bondurant's summary of the discipline for satyagraha is incomplete and deserves further investigation and amplification.

The other two 'chapters' of Bondurant's imaginary handbook do fall more squarely within the framework of this thesis and demand closer examination. Possibly a real handbook would adopt a slightly different structure. Sharp's *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* is divided into three broad sections ? the first on political premises, the second on methods, and the third on dynamics. We will follow Bondurant's framework, however, and see how well it encompasses the general conclusions of our study.

Bondurant's first 'handbook chapter' on 'fundamental rules' contains nine points. Adapted and elaborated from N.K. Bose in his *Studies in Gandhism*, these rules can be grouped under three broad headings.<sup>30</sup>

First, those concerned with preparation for and sustaining a struggle:

- (1) Self-reliance at all times.
- (2) Initiative in the hands of the satyagrahis.
- (3) Propagation of the objectives, strategy and tactics of the campaign.
- (4) Reduction of demands to a minimum consistent with truth.

Second, there is the conduct of the struggle:

- (5) Progressive advancement of the movement.
- (6) Examination of weaknesses within the satyagraha group.
- (7) Persistent search for avenues of cooperation with the adversary on honourable terms.

Third, the basis for a settlement:

- (8) Refusal to surrender essentials in negotiation.
- (9) Insistence upon full agreement on fundamentals before accepting a settlement.

If we examine each of these in turn, we will see that indeed a number of important 'rules' as demonstrated in this thesis are either under-emphasised or omitted.

First, there is the question of the basic orientation of those taking part in satyagraha. For Gandhi the first question often was 'Are you prepared to die?' or 'Are you prepared to go to jail?' There was also the insistence that those taking part in the campaign should give up their privileges and identify with the peasantry by some form of practical action. Thus our first additional rule might be: *Reorientation of satyagrahis to face hardship and to identify with the poor.*

Second, Bondurant is certainly right to emphasise self-reliance ? that is, for example, strikers supporting themselves from their own resources, rather than launching a strike fund. But in a list of Gandhian rules there should surely be a greater emphasis on constructive work ? that is, a daily discipline which is not only a symbolic act of identification with the poor and with the national struggle itself but also an occasion for meditation and quiet. This rule can be stated as: *A daily discipline of constructive work.*

Third, the demands of the campaign should indeed be reduced to a minimum consistent with truth, but the issue itself should be specific and practical rather than general and remote. Also, the campaign should remain focussed on the specific issue and not combine with other campaigns for the sake of political advantage. This can be stated: *The issue should be specific and practical and should not be combined with other issues for the sake of gaining wider campaigning support.* Finally, once the issue is defined and the demands set, satyagrahis should pledge themselves never to give in, whatever the penalty, until the principle expressed in the demand is met. This fundamental determination to act without fear of the consequences to oneself is absolutely basic to 'truth-force' and must be underlined. This rule may read: *Circulate a solemn pledge which will commit the satyagrahis to maintain the struggle whatever the consequences for themselves.*



The second set of rules relate to the conduct of a campaign. We may add, first, to the rule about progressive advancement of the movement, a corollary that where the movement has not reached the requisite level of awareness and discipline for the next stage, then ways of extending the campaign at its present level must be found. Thus: *Delay advancement to next stage if movement is not prepared*. A further corollary is that where it proves impossible to hold the movement to the requisite level of discipline and concentration for applying the satyagraha technique, but on the other hand the movement appears to be slipping out of control, then there should be a willingness to suspend the next stage of the campaign or even to call off the campaign. Thus: *Willingness to suspend the campaign if no further advancement can be made*. Again, as a further rule, all actions of the satyagrahi are symbolic in the sense that they represent the movement and affect ultimately the reputation and fortune of the whole movement ? so they must be polite and civil, by which Gandhi meant that they should represent the highest ideals of citizenship. Thus: *All action by satyagrahis is symbolic and must represent the highest ideals of the movement*.

When we come to the basis for a settlement, one aspect of cooperation with the opponent should be further emphasised: that is the willingness to surrender the campaign to third-party arbitration where this will enable the opponent to recognise the principle in the satyagrahis' case with the least loss of face. Thus: *Willingness to seek third-party arbitration*.

The third proposed 'chapter' in Bondurant's handbook is derived from Shridharani's *War Without Violence* and lists nine 'Steps in A Satyagraha Campaign'.<sup>31</sup> It is a descriptive classification of the stages in a satyagraha struggle to which the rules we have just discussed apply. Bondurant says that these steps are for a movement 'against an established political order' but they could be adapted to 'other conflict situations'.

They are:

- (1) Negotiation and arbitration.
- (2) Preparation of the group for direct action
- (3) Agitation.
- (4) Issuing of an ultimatum.
- (5) Economic boycott and forms of strike.
- (6) Non-cooperation.
- (7) Civil disobedience.
- (8) Usurping of the functions of government.
- (9) Parallel government.

Perhaps the most important point in addressing this schema is to observe that is unlikely to fit any satyagraha campaign in its entirety. To take two examples, the Champaran satyagraha began with stage (7), civil disobedience, when Gandhi refused to be expelled from the area. Once Gandhi was permitted to stay and conduct an investigation, the agitational stage (3) was entered; followed by stage (1), negotiation and arbitration; then in some respects stage (8), usurping of the functions of government, and stage (1) again, negotiation and arbitration. A settlement was reached and no further action was necessary.

Non-cooperation (1920-1922) was different, however. The first four stages were gone through over a period of months in 1920 up to the ultimatum in July. Then stages (6) and (5), non-cooperation and economic boycott were begun and were sustained for many months as the main body of the campaign. Stage (7), civil disobedience, took place only defensively in defiance of restrictions on picketing, the selling of literature and rights of assembly ? and the campaign was suspended without taking up aggressive civil disobedience

In some respects, Shridharani's schema can best be applied to the three all-India campaigns of 1920-1922, 1930-33 and 1940-42 considered as three stages in one struggle. How useful it is in its entirety for analysing more limited campaigns on a smaller scale is debatable. For example, Champaran, Kheda and Ahmedabad all ended in arbitration, that is, stage (1)!

Omitted from the Shridharani-Bondurant list is the underlying bedrock of preparation for civil resistance in a programme of constructive work. There is also insufficient emphasis on conscientious and comprehensive investigation to prepare a cast-iron case, building links between different sections of the movement and mobilising support. Missing too is the vitally important step of the pledge. Also missing is the important distinction we have found between defensive and aggressive civil disobedience as distinct stages in the development of a satyagraha



movement. And to repeat again, in a campaign which falls short of a revolutionary objective, the most likely outcome of a satyagraha will be arbitration, rather than parallel government.

There are further qualifying issues which could be explored as further 'chapters' of a satyagraha handbook. One is the question of scale. First, whether the action is local, regional or national in scope. Second, if national, whether it is conducted simultaneously across the nation or concentrated symbolically in a particular region or one locality. Third, whether it is a mass action (either dispersed or concentrated); or a small group action; or action taken by individuals; or by a leader or leaders personally.

Another key dimension concerns the question of the political orientation or sophistication of the participants. Are they full-time satyagrahis who may be living in Gandhian ashrams or are they political nationalists who have accepted nonviolent discipline for the duration of the struggle only? On similar lines, is the campaign based around a coalition of 'pure' satyagrahis and 'tactical' satyagrahis; or is it made up exclusively of one group or the other? Again, have different tactics been selected for different sections of the movement? For example, are particular actions being asked of leading members of the nationalist elite, or of the educated classes generally? Are particular expectations placed on self-employed shopkeepers, or industrial owners, or millworkers? Some caste groups, some provincial or language groups, some classes owning land or some who are landless, some religious groups? Are different tactics and programmes designed to mobilise these different elements? All these gradations give a sense of a movement which has to be planned and organised in the real world? and which does not therefore have anything like a uniform programme or strategy, but must be flexible and adaptable to circumstances. The point is that Gandhi was not afraid to make distinctions according to capacity or position when developing strategy and tactics for campaigns

Other issues for the organiser of satyagraha which might form part of 'chapters' in a handbook include questions of timing: that is, how is an organiser of Gandhi's stature able to 'know' when is the right moment to propose an all-India hartal or to launch a Triple Boycott? Such questions of judgement and intuition are notoriously difficult to pin down? but Gandhi developed a method of 'testing' by observing the conduct of public demonstrations, especially hartals, or the take-up of his campaigns of constructive work, or the number of signatures to a pledge, or contributors to a fund.

Yet again, how are the issues to be taken up selected? Gandhi, as we have seen, concentrated on limited issues rather than taking up the main issue, gearing 'truth-force' to the practical capacity of the satyagrahis. Fundamental seem to have been questions of local initiative, organisation and self-reliance. Thus he fought hard for the boycott of foreign cloth only, rather than all goods. Clothing was selected as the item for boycott and home production, rather than sugar or other goods. Mobilising the peasantry to national self-consciousness and developing effective organisation was a major consideration. Production of clothing was chosen as the key to mobilising on a national scale, rather than housing or improvement of food production or land redistribution or labour organising. There is then much subtlety and flexibility in Gandhi's use of the satyagraha method. My purpose in comparing some of the issues raised by this study with the outline of satyagraha provided by Bondurant has been to demonstrate a principal argument of the thesis. That is, that by studying Gandhi as an organiser (dynamically, in his context) we can gain fresh insights into his method and a deeper understanding of it. Also, we have seen how the move from local to national organising faced Gandhi with a number of problems which forced him to adapt and clarify his methods. A third argument has been that the principal authorities on nonviolent action in the West have largely ignored the importance of constructive work in Gandhi's method. It is to this that we shall finally turn.

### *The Place of Constructive Programme in Satyagraha*

Satyagraha has been neatly described by Shridharani as 'Gandhi's method of fighting the British'.<sup>32</sup> This is the way in which the term is normally used, to describe a nonviolent fight, so that to talk of 'a satyagraha' is to refer to a battle with a beginning and an end fought by nonviolent means; or more rarely a campaign encompassing a number of such battles. The term has spread into general usage in India where many campaigns which do not involve the use of violence have come to be called 'satyagrahas'. Bondurant, however, following Gandhi, has distinguished strictly between 'satyagrahas' which follow the scrupulous rules for the conduct of these struggles laid down by the Mahatma and 'duragrahas' or 'passive resistance' where the activists do not resort to violence but the campaign is not shaped by Gandhi's philosophy and guidelines.<sup>33</sup> Against this, the general tendency of Western scholars, most notably Sharp, has been to ease the study of nonviolent action out of the limits and some



of the philosophical biases established by Gandhi. Nonviolent action, as defined by Sharp, promotes change as a result of persuasion, accommodation or coercion. Satyagraha, on the other hand, when conducted according to Gandhi's rules, relies principally on persuasion, is reluctant to settle for accommodation, and seeks always to avoid coercion.<sup>34</sup>

What is common to both approaches ? those looking at satyagraha in its 'pure' form, and those taking a wider view of nonviolent action ? is that in focussing on the question of conflict they have neglected a large area of the technique of nonviolent action as developed by Gandhi. 'Satyagraha', in its second widely accepted usage, refers to the broad philosophy of truth-force developed by Gandhi, a philosophy which was adapted by 'life-satyagrahis' who went to live in ashrams, engaged in personal religious and other disciplines, and accepted a public role as social and community workers.<sup>35</sup> Bondurant says we should 'rigorously' distinguish satyagraha as a technique of action from 'those specific considerations of right living with which Gandhi also concerned himself'.<sup>36</sup> It is my contention that not only does this distinction diminish Bondurant's presentation of the satyagraha method, it makes it hard to understand how it worked. Also, it seems to me, the theorists of nonviolent action who treat satyagraha as an approach unsuited to Western conditions have distorted our understanding of the technique by presenting Gandhi's experiments selectively. It is not necessary to hold to Gandhi's full philosophy of satyagraha to recognise that programmes of constructive work are essential to the method of nonviolent action developed by Gandhi. Gandhi's campaigns of civil resistance, certainly at a national scale, would have been impossible without complementary campaigns of constructive work. The two were completely interlinked in his method of satyagraha, which should be seen as a method of making social and political change beyond its significance as a conflict technique. Thus one important conclusion of this study, from a careful examination of Gandhi's method, is that the technique approach to nonviolent action should be broadened to include consideration of methods and campaigns which had little directly to do with conflict. More narrowly, another conclusion is that Gandhi's method and practice of satyagraha should be recognised in a wide range of campaigns which he launched in India, including the swadeshi campaign in 1919, its re-emergence in the campaign of Non-cooperation just over a year later, and the development of these early initiatives into the mature constructive programme.

By studying Gandhi as an organiser we have been able to step back from one common approach which is to look at him as a nonviolent general or warrior. The other conventional view is to see him as a philosopher of right-living, training followers in ashram disciplines and projecting for the wider society a vision of a decentralised politics based in a rural and craft-based economy. In between these views, Gandhi stands in this study as a consummate political activist and organiser who had an original perspective on how to build and direct a movement for nonviolent social and political change.

Gandhi's method of organising satyagraha can be presented in the following table:<sup>37</sup> What the table illustrates is the balance between constructive work and civil resistance in Gandhi's satyagraha method, each complementing the other. The presence of three integral parts of the programme of Non-cooperation ? promotion of swadeshi cloth, national schools and the Congress membership drive ? on the 'constructive' side indicates the important place of constructive work in a major all-India satyagraha campaign.

**Some Examples of Gandhi's Method of Organising Satyagraha**

|                                   | Mass Action<br>(dispersed or concentrated)          | Representative or<br>Individual action                                                      | Personal Action<br>by the Leader                                                                                   |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Constructive<br/>Programme</b> | Spinning, weaving, wearing<br>swadeshi cloth        | Key leaders take up<br>spinning or wearing khadi;<br>ashrams founded to spread<br>campaigns | Gandhi makes speeches,<br>writes articles; sets targets;<br>opens swadeshi stores;<br>vows to wear only loin cloth |
|                                   | National Schools founded                            | Gujarat leads national<br>schools campaign                                                  | Presidency of Gujarat<br>National University                                                                       |
|                                   | Drive to build Congress,<br>membership, raise funds | Establishment of local and<br>provincial Congress<br>organisations                          | Speeches setting targets<br>and target dates, coining<br>slogans, etc                                              |
| <b>Civil<br/>Resistance</b>       | Strike of mill hands in<br>Ahmedabad                | Daily meetings and bulletins                                                                | Fast until arbitration                                                                                             |
|                                   | Rowlatt hartal and<br>processions                   | Individual civil disobedience<br>selling banned literature                                  | Gandhi resists order<br>restricting him to Bombay                                                                  |
|                                   | Boycott of elections, law                           | Politicians withdraw from                                                                   | Ultimatum launches                                                                                                 |



## 6. gandhi as a political organiser

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|  |                                                |                                                                                                                 |                                                         |
|--|------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|
|  | courts, governments<br>schools; cloth bonfires | elections, lawyers from<br>courts, resignation of<br>honours, teachers resign,<br>etc                           | campaign; Gandhi returns<br>medal; lights bonfires, etc |
|  | Processions; boycott<br>of royal visit         | Defiance of ban on<br>Congress volunteer<br>organisation; selection of<br>Bardoli to launch mass tax<br>refusal | Talks with moderate<br>politicians and Viceroy          |

What the table also demonstrates is that Gandhi used broadly the same strategy and tactics in organising the two sides of satyagraha. He was able to make an enormous personal contribution as leader by virtue of unconventional as well as conventional initiatives and he sought mass participation in both constructive and 'obstructive' or civil resistance campaigns. But especially important to his method was the range of exemplary activities taken up by selected individuals, groups, districts or even regions. This differentiation between the lesser expectations placed on a mass movement and the much greater requirements made on a smaller 'representative' or select grouping is fundamental to his method.

In his *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*, Sharp describes with great perception a key element in nonviolent strategy and tactics which he calls 'the indirect approach to the opponents' power'.

In nonviolent action there is no attempt to combat (the government's troops, police, prisons and the like) by using the same type of instruments, as would be the case if both sides were using violence. Instead, in strategic terms, the nonviolent groups counter this expression of the opponent's power indirectly, in various ways ...

Nonviolent struggle carries indirect strategy ... to the point where the military opponent is confronted not only with differing strategies but with a contrasting technique of struggle and non-military 'weapons system'. Nonviolent action involves opposing the opponent's power, including his police and military capacity, not with the weapons chosen by him, but by quite different means.<sup>38</sup>

Yet Sharp makes no mention of one of the most obvious and brilliant examples of this in the strategy which Gandhi pursued in India, the programmes of constructive work. These were an integral part of Gandhi's 'indirect' method.

In many respects it would be interesting to compare Gandhi's organising methods with those of socialist or Marxist organisers of revolution by guerrilla warfare. There is the same concern to choose the ground carefully and to avoid major set-piece confrontations which the movement will lose. There is too the same insistence on integrating the political with the 'conflict' sides of the struggle, seeing in the political mobilisation of the peasantry a crucial weapon and a basis for managing and reordering society once the immediate conflict is over.

If we could learn to study Gandhi as a practical strategist immersed in the immediate political issues of his society, then we might see ways of filling some of the glaring gaps in the development of nonviolent action in the West. Gandhi didn't set out to abolish war or to find a substitute for it. Such projects would be altogether too grandiose for him. His object was to offer a practical method and a vision to the people of his country so that they could improve their society and the tenor of their political activity. He saw no limits in theory to the application of this method and philosophy ? but where it began and ended in practice was in the capacity of ordinary people to believe in themselves and practise self-reliance. This gave him his main task as an organiser. And his achievement suggests that if we want nonviolent action to fill the great role as substitute for violence which has been claimed for it, then the most important starting point is to develop a perspective and a programme which links it to the most pressing, immediate concerns of ordinary people. The social programme of nonviolence precedes, complements and continues on from its use as a conflict technique.

[End]

### **NARP Discussion**



### *Introduction by Bob Overy*

Introducing the discussion, Bob said one of the most instructive things his thesis investigated was the progressive development of nonviolent non-cooperation from 1920 to 1922. This process was geared to utilising the capabilities of people at all levels of society, of the active as well as the inactive, of those who could make big sacrifices and of those who could make only much smaller ones. Gandhi took the view that the role of people who could make only a small contribution was just as important as that of everybody else.

He had concluded from his research that the Gandhian method involved three essential components which needed to work together: personal discipline; a programme for transforming society; and a method for engaging in conflict. However, you could either imbue the method with the Gandhian ideology, or you could take the Gandhian ideology out of it and look at it as a method. The method wasn't just a conflict technique; the other elements were also necessary. To focus on the conflict technique without looking at the other two was to neglect a large part of the method. though the personal discipline and the social programme didn't necessarily need to have a specifically Gandhian complexion.

### *Relevance to the anti-nuclear movement and other campaigns*

Lindis asked whether Bob felt the elements of personal discipline and the social programme were missing from the peace movement of the 1960s. Bob said that would be an interesting point to develop. His sense of the Committee of 100 - though it was not fresh any more - was that nonviolence was something that you did at weekends when you sat in the road, and when you were confronted by the judge. That might be a bit of a travesty, but essentially it described the problem. We did this very radical thing in a very small area of our lives when we confronted the state. The rest of the time it didn't make any difference. The confrontation with the state, and being taken to court, did transform your life. But the Gandhian method worked the other way. You looked at how you could transform society and transform yourself at the same time.

Michael said that in the campaigns then, as in all those types of campaign, including Gandhi's, there were people who had various levels of commitment to and understanding of, what was going on. Back in the 1950s and 1960s, people like Hugh Brock, a pioneer of nonviolent direct action and editor of Peace News, or indeed Gene Sharp, saw nonviolence as involving a whole way of life. Tom Wardle, an activist with 'Operation Gandhi' and the Non Violent Resistance Group, had come fresh from South Africa where he had been involved in some of the campaigns there, and attempted to establish a 'Congress of England' which included a commitment to developing a constructive programme. Hugh Brock also appreciated the need to find some simple act of resistance in which everyone could participate. So those kind of ideas that Bob was expounding in relation to Gandhi's approach did have an important influence. The notion of nonviolence as involving a very broad commitment was still strong within the Direct Action Committee Against Nuclear War in the late 1950s-early 1960s. However, once you got a mass movement in the 1960s with the formation of the Committee of 100, you had people coming in from many directions and those committed to nonviolence in a wider sense represented only one of a number of different tendencies. However, this was true also, as Bob had acknowledged, of the Indian independence movement where the Gandhian wing in the Congress Party had to compete with other tendencies.

Christina commented that probably in India the ordinary people would have understood much more what was going on, and responded more to it and to the language that Gandhi was using. Bondurant, Sharp and others were writing in the context of a secular culture and for a Western audience, and this limited how much could be taken on board from Gandhi. However, on closer examination it was apparent that some aspects of Gandhi's broader method were not after all so alien to the Western approach as these writers supposed. Thus, the writer Vincent Sheehan had said that ordinary people could not be concerned with obscure notions about vows, but if you thought of a vow as a promise or statement of intent, you could see that it often had an equivalent in many Western campaigns in the form of pledges or declarations.

### *Applying Gandhi's ideas in a Western secular setting*

Walter asked Bob whether he thought the attempt to separate the pragmatic element in Gandhi's campaigns from values developed in an Indian context was misguided, or was a valid and viable way of trying to utilise Gandhi's



experience for Western purposes. Bob said he did not know. He did feel, however, that the reduction of the method to a conflict technique was not satisfactory. Gandhi believed that he had discovered a way of moving the religious principle into politics. He stirred in people their sense of what was most holy and powerful and truthful in themselves and gave them the opportunity to express it and use it in the political arena. Then - because to do so was clearly dangerous - he added a nonviolent discipline. Indira Rothermund's book, *The Philosophy of Restraint* dealt with the development of this discipline. Gandhi outmanoeuvred his opponents by focussing on a single issue at a time, and pitching the demands at a level where no reasonable person could disagree with them. As long as the point of principle was not conceded, it didn't matter if the objective gain was small. Winning the point of principle enabled you to move forward. To reduce the risk of violence, Gandhi also developed programmes in which people could express their commitment in a different way - such as by spinning, signing up to join the organisation, or giving money. This reduced the element of conflict yet still mobilised people in what Gandhi saw as an essentially spiritual way.

Walter said the technique of restraint developed by Gandhi was presumably itself dependent on the same spiritual appeal as had nourished the resistance campaigns in the first place. How far, he wondered, did Gandhi explicitly appeal to the spirituality of his own culture. Bob replied that he did so explicitly and all the time, using religious symbols and religious parables. If this was so, Walter said, it had important implications for the viability of the Gandhian approach in our secular society. It also raised a secondary question: if one nevertheless tried to salvage some connections with Gandhi's method, what kind of analogues were there in Western society to the appeals Gandhi was able to make to Indian spirituality?

Christina responded that she thought there were symbols which retained their force even after people gave up their religious beliefs, and some values that had almost a sacred significance, even if the people concerned would not use that term. In the case of nuclear power stations, it might be the passionately held conviction that these were threatening the future of our children. Bob said we did not need to find the equivalent of the religious symbol and religious motivation. We needed to look at the method more fully, taking on board more areas than just that of conflict. We had to look at the way in which the individual because of certain values began to engage in struggle, and how those values were reflected in their lives. People engaged in nonviolent struggles not out of an interest in nonviolence as such but because of other concerns about their society which led them to a point where they decided that nonviolence was appropriate. The Indian Gandhian Devi Prasad argued that the most important thing about civil disobedience wasn't the notion of 'disobedience' but the notion of 'civil'. The civil concept was about the values you held and it was here that the heart of the activism resided. The disobedience only came at the edge, at the point where you could not continue to promote and develop the values. It was that idea that one could understand as a method.

Walter found Bob's use of the word method in this context problematic. On the one hand you had methods which could be described as techniques; on the other hand you had beliefs and associated values of a very deep-seated kind which were not necessarily directly connected with the issues involved at any particular time. The values and beliefs that Gandhi used pre-existed his campaigns. These were not methods but rather resources - cultural, social or whatever. The problem was how to get from one to the other. How could you express the basic values of your system in the form of social action and resistance if those basic belief systems were themselves eroded in a way that was not true in India during the independence struggle.

Bob said he could not answer Walter fully. However, a distinction Gandhi drew which might help to illuminate the problem was that between defensive and aggressive civil disobedience. Gandhi understood that the movement was more likely to be successful when it was being defensive. This meant that the movement went innocently about its business of building civil society up to the point that the opponent - the state or whatever - intervened to try to stop it. If the opponent made an innocent activity - such as distributing leaflets or producing cloth - illegal and people carried on doing it anyway, that was defensive civil disobedience. The issue became one of civil liberties and the movement was likely to find support among the wider public. You wrong-footed the opponent by appealing to a value which was universal. Aggressive civil disobedience was something very different: there you went out of your way to challenge and confront the opponent. Gandhi was careful about doing that. He tried to set up situations in which the state moved against him rather than him moving against the state. This again was something not widely understood in the West because we all took the model of the Salt March and the other instances of aggressive civil disobedience as the key examples.

Walter said he presumed that people like Sharp and Bondurant wrote in the way they did because they sensed this was necessary to present the Gandhian approach as a methodology rather than something directly related to values and beliefs beyond the immediate action. Bob said that this was where he himself had come in with a lot of



his aggression against that particular point of view. People like Shridharani, Richard Gregg, Adam Roberts, Sharp himself, took the notion of satyagraha - which Gandhi himself didn't use in any way in relation to war - and presented it as a conflict method and an alternative to war. He questioned whether you could take that particular bit of the method and separate it from the context that made it a realistic option.

Walter said he was very much in sympathy with this view. He agreed with Bob's criticism of what people like Sharp tried to do. But could Gandhi's beliefs and commitments themselves be labelled as part of a method? Was the line to be drawn between beliefs and methods, or did it come somewhere in the middle of methods of various kinds. Bob seemed to be saying that what was wrong with the naturalised Gandhianism that we have in these writers in the West was that it did not take over enough of Gandhi's method. He was stretching the word 'method' so as to place it within their own field.

Christina said that whilst Bob was right that Gandhi regarded satyagraha as a method of organising a movement for positive social change, he saw it as a conflict technique and one that ultimately could deal with the problem of war. That was always on his agenda. Bob said his point was that that Gandhi didn't set out to abolish war or find a substitute for it but he agreed that he did also recommend his method as an alternative to war.

### *Belief in satyagraha as an invincible force*

Howard said one thing which was fundamentally unacceptable in the West about Gandhi's method was his belief that if your satyagraha failed it was because you had not practised it properly. You were required to have an absolute belief in a method which was in fact completely unprovable. Gandhi was trying to propagate not a Hindu belief system but a belief in satyagraha. We were sceptics in our societies and that part of Gandhi's approach posed a fundamental problem for us.

Walter asked in what sense Gandhi claimed that satyagraha could not fail. Did he mean that it couldn't fail on the political level, or did he mean it couldn't fail in terms of the practitioners own personal life aim? Christina said Gandhi believed that it couldn't fail even politically and thereby dug himself into a hole. In a sense he misunderstood his own methods. He always thought it was the method of nonviolence as he'd outlined it that would succeed, and he didn't perhaps realise that a lot of the emotional impetus that sustained the movement came from the injustice of colonialism. Thus he always maintained that if the British were not in India, the communities would get along fine. When that proved not to be the case, he concluded that his method had failed, and that it must be him that was wrong.

Andrew said that people like Vinoba Bhave seemed to be operating on a completely different time scale to what we in the West were accustomed to - they were thinking in terms of generations rather than an individual lifetime. Their conviction was that ultimately, in the scheme of things, a world would be created in which satyagraha and nonviolence would triumph. He personally found that difficult to comprehend. Bob, if he understood him correctly, was suggesting that the Gandhian method could be stripped of the spiritual dimension and that what would be left would still be this threefold method. He was not yet convinced of that argument, and wondered how far the timescale was relevant.

Bob thought it was. The notion that satyagraha could not fail was based on the proposition that if there were enough people prepared to go to the gallows, and that if this and that other condition were satisfied, satyagraha could not fail. In short if enough people were sufficiently strongly committed, then the movement could not be broken and there would be a certain response. If we didn't get a response, it was because there were not enough of us with that degree of strength. It was a proposition that could neither be proved nor disproved. It was also dangerous. Erikson said that Gandhi was a tyrant against himself. What you were doing was using your will to demand that your body delivered things that perhaps it was not capable of delivering.

Walter said that all this underlined the fact that the system which Gandhi developed was rooted in Hindu religion. There was a kind of Western analogue but it had largely disappeared from Western consciousness, namely the concept of the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God would always be served if you behaved in accordance with your values. There was a phrase of Middleton Murray, probably in his pacifist phase, in which he said that the Kingdom of God on Earth cannot be established: the Kingdom of God on Earth must be established. The Kingdom of God was not with us yet, except in some incipient form at best, and if you identified yourself with that aim, then you could not be defeated. Both Christian and Hindu philosophies in the last resort were sacrificial. Unless one



adhered not merely to a moral commitment, but to the rationale behind this commitment, the thing had no soil in which to establish itself. Probably Sharp, Bondurant and others were attempting to face this difficulty, being aware that you simply couldn't get a sufficient degree of political support for something rooted in so ultimate a concept. You had, therefore, to find ways of persuading people to accept your alternative to war by saying it was not dependant on that.

Discussing the metaphysical dimension of Gandhi's of Gandhi's thinking, Christina said Gandhi believed felt that, to quote him, 'each person embodies a portion of that Truth'. Truth here was linked to the notion of Brahma who pervades the universe and provides us with 'Dharma', this rock of value which is in everyone whether they are aware of it or not. Gandhi would say that every person is underpinned by that Truth, is in touch with it, and is part of it. Even people who acted violently were also in some sense seeking values. There was, in the Hindu system, the notion of vidia which was knowledge and seeing truly, and there was avidia which was ignorance and seeing in a twisted way. In Gandhi's view, therefore, everyone on earth could link into the method of satyagraha.

Andrew said Bob too in a sense, was trying to secularise Gandhi. Bob said this was absolutely right. He would call himself a non-believer; he was not really interested in religious or spiritual questions, but he did respond to the spiritual dimension without knowing what it was. There were values, he felt, which bound us, and when Walter talked about the Kingdom of God he thought of Tolstoy's wonderful essay 'The Kingdom of God is Within You'. He accepted the notion that everyone had a partial awareness of the truth - everyone could find some value in their lives which one would have to say was sound and worth supporting and nurturing. So nonviolence could be looked at as a method which appealed to certain bedrock principles.

Walter wondered how Gandhi would feel about his name and legend being used in a way that cut it off from the things that were most central to him. Bob said the pat answer which he used and which he thought justified Sharp and Bondurant, and in a sense made them Gandhians, was that Gandhi himself said you should develop nonviolence in terms of the religion of your own culture. So if the religion of your own culture was a secular one, then it was appropriate to adapt it in that direction. Gandhi was extremely 'catholic' in that he argued that there were many different roads to truth, and that truth was to be found under all systems of belief. In the Ashram you would have a Hindu prayer, a Muslim prayer, a Christian prayer and so on. The result was that he offended the orthodox - and, on the other hand, had a particularly strong friendship with the atheist Gora.

Michael said that the willingness of many people to make sacrifices for what they believed in showed that we were not living in a society devoid of firm beliefs and commitments. Walter said there was no question about the fact that there were groups within our society who had this degree of commitment, but he did not think the resonance was there in a sufficient degree in the wider society in the way in which there perhaps was in India. Luther King's success in the United States raised interesting questions about how it was possible to shift that society to the degree that it had shifted. The same conjunction of groups was never able to shift our society on nuclear weapons. Michael said that nobody could have shifted American society either on the issue of nuclear weapons; much depended on what the objective was in a campaign. Bob said that one of his criticism of the Committee of 100 was that it had gone straight for the very heart of the state's power and this was perhaps not the best way to build a movement to disable it; possibly a more 'indirect strategy' was required. Walter commented that you did not necessarily have a choice about that.

Howard said this point related to what Bob had written in his paper about reducing the level of demands in accordance with the principle of truth. That proposition, and others in the same section of his paper, such as not combining issues, and trusting to third party arbitration, were highly problematic when you were dealing with major life and death issues. Thus there was little scope for reducing your demands when the issue was that of getting rid of nuclear weapons or the destruction of the rainforest. The principle of not combining issues was also dubious. In the campaign Lindis was involved in, how could you avoid combining the issue of maintaining a public right of way with that of opposing the attempt by the Ministry of Defence to usurp land? How could you fail to combine the issues of disarmament and hunger? Until nuclear weapons were actually used, their main immorality lay in the fact that they were a waste of resources. Finally, trusting to Third Party arbitration might mean conceding points that ought not to be conceded.

Bob said these were interesting points, and that he had never previously had the opportunity to argue them out with anyone; it would be good to start afresh and really tackle them. But to take the question of single issue campaigns, these were effective because they enabled everyone involved to focus on that issue and learn all the arguments about it. Once you began to spread yourself by taking up other issues you found that people hived off into different areas and the movement ceased to be effective. Selecting the right issue could also be crucial, and here Gandhi as



a strategist was brilliant.

### *Problems of applying the Constructive Programme in Britain*

Bob noted that one of the problems we faced in this country was that we'd already had our constructive programme in the 19th century in the form of the Labour movement and the institutions it built around the struggle to humanise capitalism and give people a decent life. The building up of trade unions, co-operatives, a political organisation, was a marvellous example of a constructive programme. It was much harder now to conceive how it could be done again.

### Notes:

1. Dhawan, G. *The Political Philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi*, Ahmedabad: Navajivan, 1957; Diwakar, R.R., *Satyagraha: Its Technique and History*, Bombay, Hind Kitabs, 1946; Bose, N K, *Studies in Gandhism*, Indian Association Publishing Company, 1947.
2. For a useful discussion of constructive programme, see Dhawan. *op. cit.*, pp 190-208.
3. Gregg, R.B., *The Power of Nonviolence*, London: James Clarke and Co Ltd. 1960 (1st published 1935); Shridharani, K., *War Without Violence*, Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1962 (First published, 1939); and Bondurant, J.V., *Conquest of Violence: The Gandhian Philosophy of Conflict*, University of California Press, 1965.
4. Bondurant, *op. cit.*, pp 3-4.
5. *Ibid*, p 180.
6. *Ibid*, p xiv.
7. Gregg, *op. cit.*, see chapter 10 'The Need for Training' and chapter 11, 'Training'.
8. Shridharani, *op. cit.*
9. See Appendix A, 'Shridharani's contribution to the Study of Gandhi's technique' in Sharp, Gene, *Gandhi as a Political Strategist*, Boston: Porter Sargent, 1979.
10. *Ibid*.
11. *Ibid*, pp 219-221.
12. Sharp, Gene, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*, Boston: Porter Sargent, 1973.
13. Bondurant, *op. cit.*, p.12.
14. Sharp, *Gandhi as a Political Strategist*, pp 251-252fn
15. Gandhi, M.K., *Constructive Programme: Its Meaning and Place*, Ahmedabad, Navajivan, 1945, pp 35-36.
16. Bose, *op. cit.* Sharp, *Gandhi as a Political Strategist*, p 86.
17. Dhawan, *op. cit.*, p 193. Dhawan quotes Gandhi as holding this view in 1930.
18. Gordon, R., 'Non-cooperation and Council Entry, 1919 to 1920,' in Gallacher, Jackson and Seal (Eds), *Locality. Province and Nation, 1870-1940*, Cambridge University Press, 1973.
19. The text of the Congress Volunteers' pledge drawn up by Gandhi in 1921 is in Dhawan, *op. cit.*, p 211
20. Sharp, *op. cit.*
21. *Ibid*, pp 43-59.
22. For an effective presentation of this view see Rothermund, I, *The Philosophy of Restraint*, Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1963.
23. Iver, R., *The Moral and Political Thought of Mahatma Gandhi*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1973
24. For a discussion of individual and mass civil disobedience, both defensive and aggressive, see Dhawan, *op. cit.*, pp 242-247.
25. Bondurant, *op. cit.*, pp 73-102.
26. Sharp, *Gandhi Wields the Weapon of Moral Power*, Ahmedabad: Navajivan, 1960.
27. Sharp, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*
28. Bondurant, *op. cit.*, pp 38-41.
29. *Ibid*, p.38.
30. See *Ibid*, p 237 fn 4.
31. See *ibid*, p 237 fn 6.
32. Shridharani, *op. cit.*, p 15.
33. Bondurant, *op. cit.*, pp viii-ix, 41-45.
34. Sharp, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*, pp 705-776.



[35.](#) See Kumarappa, B., 'Editor's Note' in Gandhi, M.K., *Satyagraha (Nonviolent Resistance)*, Ahmedabad: Navajivan, 1951, p iii.

[36.](#) Bondurant, *op. cit.*, p 12.

[37.](#) Rothermund. *op. cit.*, pp 66 et seq, attempts a more complex breakdown of all?India satyagraha. Within this, she distinguished the same three types as I have, which she terms 'mass satyagraha', 'representative satyagraha' and 'individual satyagraha'. But I find confusing her use of the term 'individual' to describe Gandhi's personal satyagrahas as leader: the 1940?1941 satyagraha was indeed a representative form of satyagraha, but is known as Individual Satyagraha.

[38.](#) Sharp, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*, p 452.

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