



## **Mahatma Gandhi's Search for Truth: The Context of The Champaran Satyagraha**

**Dr. Abhijit Chakraborty**

*Assistant Professor, Department of Bengali, Karimganj College, Karimganj, Assam, India*

### **Abstract**

*Mahatma Gandhi was a devoted fighter in India's freedom movement. Throughout his life, the central strength of his struggle was non-violence and satyagraha. He was not only a worshipper of non-violence, but also of truth and satyagraha. Satyagraha was the driving force of his life. This idea of satyagraha did not emerge within him in a single day; it came through a long process of quest. In his indistinct childhood, the seed of curiosity toward truth was sown, and it gradually grew. In this dissertation, we shall highlight the long process of Gandhi's journey from 'truth' to 'satyagraha', and one of the greatest realizations of his life – the Champaran Satyagraha.*

**Keywords:** Mahatma Gandhi, Truth, Non-violence, Satyagraha, Champaran

### **Introduction:**

Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy of Satyagraha stands as one of the most influential moral and political doctrines of the twentieth century. Rooted in the Sanskrit words satya (truth) and agraha (firmness or insistence), Satyagraha represents a unique fusion of ethical conviction and non-violent resistance. Scholars such as Jayantanuja Bandyopadhyay have emphasized that Satyagraha is not merely a political strategy but a profound commitment to truth, justice, and inner moral strength. Gandhi viewed truth as the ultimate reality and believed that adherence to truth through non-violence could transform individuals as well as society. This paper explores the conceptual foundation of Satyagraha, its ethical dimensions, and Gandhi's interpretation of truth as the guiding principle for social and political change.

1

The highest embodiment of Truth is Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, also known as 'Mahatma Gandhi.' Among the pioneers of India's independence movement, Gandhi occupies a place of great importance. Not only has the freedom struggled – had He made incomparable contributions to various social movements in twentieth-century India. His concern was the holistic upliftment of both individuals and society. He was determined to eradicate untouchability and impurity from society and gave priority to social justice and moral values. He made tireless efforts to establish truth.

To spread the light of hope in a colonized and darkened society, his greatest tools were truth, non-violence, and satyagraha. He believed,

"Even if the radiance of the sun that we perceive every day were multiplied millions of times, it would still remain pale compared to the indescribable divine glow of Truth." <sup>1</sup>

And he held that the best way to reach truth was through non-violence:

“Until one becomes perfectly successful in the practice of non-violence, it is impossible to attain the full vision of truth.” <sup>2</sup>

This understanding of truth, non-violence, and satyagraha did not arise spontaneously within Gandhi. Through a continuous process of search, the ideas of truth and satyagraha took root in his mind. His pursuit of truth began in childhood. He found the foundation of his ideals and truth within Indian culture and tradition. In two characters of Indian mythology – Shravan Kumar and King Harishchandra – he discovered in his boyhood the ideals of truth. These characters deeply influenced him. Shravan Kumar's devotion inspired him to form his own life's ideals:

“I happened to notice a book my father had bought. It was a drama titled ‘Shravan's Filial Devotion’. I read it with deep interest. At that time a group of travelling picture-showmen came to Rajkot. One picture showed Shravan carrying his blind parents on his shoulders for a pilgrimage. The book and the picture left a deep impression on me. I resolved to model myself after Shravan.” <sup>3</sup>

He was similarly influenced by the folk drama of King Harishchandra. His childhood mind was strongly moved by Harishchandra's story:

“I remained absorbed in Harishchandra's story for days together. I acted his role in my imagination many times. Night after night, day after day, I wondered why everyone did not emulate Harishchandra's devotion to truth. I believed the story of Harishchandra was true in every detail. The ideal of walking the path of truth and sacrificing everything for it inspired me deeply.” <sup>4</sup>

Thus, the seed of truth-seeking was sown in Gandhi's pure childhood. Childhood is perhaps the best soil of life, and in Gandhi's childhood soil the seeds of his future ideals, ethics, and truth were planted. He believed that the entire universe is built upon one principle, and truth is the foundation of all principles.

From childhood, the search for truth became his life's central aim. As he grew, this idea of truth strengthened further. “If someone harms you, repay it with kindness”; “If someone slaps you on one cheek, offer the other” – these notions of non-violence took shape in his early years. A Gujarati moral poem inspired him throughout his life:

Give water to one who gives you thirst,  
Give food to one who gives you hunger.  
If someone pleases you with sweet words,  
Offer him respect.  
If someone gives you a coin,  
Return it to him freely.  
If someone saves your life,  
Give your life in return.  
Those whose actions and words are in harmony  
Are wise people.  
Whatever they receive, they give back tenfold –  
Such are the great souls.  
They see all humans as brothers –

Truly great are those  
Who repay evil with good.<sup>5</sup>

Later, from these ideals of truth and non-violence, the idea of satyagraha emerged in Gandhi. Satyagraha was the greatest realization of his life. Before naming the concept, its principle was born in his mind. Jayantanuja Bandyopadhyaya wrote:

“Etymologically, the term Satyagraha means passion for, or firmness in Truth— Sanskrit Satya (Truth) + Agraha (Passion or firmness) ... Satyagraha means firm adherence to justice.”<sup>6</sup>

In explaining satyagraha to Europeans in South Africa, Gandhi initially used the English term passive resistance. But he felt it failed to express his idea. Bandyopadhyaya again notes:

“The term was coined by Gandhi because the English term ‘Passive resistance’, largely derived from the Christian concept of non-resistance to evil, failed to adequately express the active, non-violent resistance developed by him.”<sup>7</sup>

To give a proper name to the movement of Indians in South Africa, Gandhi announced a small prize in the Indian Opinion newspaper inviting suggestions. Maganlal Gandhi suggested the term Sadagraha (‘Sat’ + ‘Agraha’), and won. Later, Gandhi modified it: “To make the meaning broader, I changed the word to ‘Satyagraha’.”<sup>8</sup> This Gujarati term Satyagraha later transcended the boundaries of South Africa and became Gandhi’s main instrument of struggle in India.

## 2

After returning from South Africa, Gandhi founded the Satyagraha Ashram on 25 May 1915. Among his notable satyagrahas was the Champaran Satyagraha. Using pure non-violence to resist injustice – Champaran became the best example of this.

Champaran, a remote region on the border of Bihar and Nepal, was backward on all fronts. The British forced farmers to grow indigo on three-twentieths of their land – the Tinkathia system. Apart from this, the indigo planters oppressed the peasants in many ways. Dinabandhu Mitra’s play ‘Nil Darpan’ recorded such atrocities. The situation worsened. Gandhi had never heard of Champaran before. He wrote:

“To tell the truth, I did not even know the name of Champaran, let alone its geographical location. The matter of indigo cultivation was also almost unknown to me.”<sup>9</sup>

A farmer named Rajkumar Shukla informed Gandhi about Champaran. At the 1916 Congress session in Lucknow, he repeatedly begged Gandhi to visit Champaran. Finally, Gandhi agreed.

In early 1917 Gandhi reached Bihar, first visiting Rajendra Babu’s house, then Acharya Kripalani’s. The lawyers persuaded Gandhi to take up peasants’ cases in court, but he explained such legal battles would not help. Instead, peasants must first gain self-confidence.

He decided to visit Champaran villages. As soon as he started, the administration ordered him to leave Champaran. Gandhi refused and was summoned to court. Calmly, he accepted the notice without protest. His attitude showed clearly, he held no hatred toward officials. He wrote:

"I only wished to resist their unjust order non-violently. This made them feel somewhat safe. They were pleased to accept my assistance in restraining the crowd and understood that their authority was shaking because of the people's behavior." <sup>10</sup>

The government had to withdraw the case against him. They agreed to cooperate with his proposed inquiry into the peasants' distress. Gandhi wrote:

"Standing before these peasants, I felt I had seen God face to face. There I found truth and non-violence." <sup>11</sup>

Support for Gandhi increased massively. As complaints of peasants were being recorded, their confidence grew – while the planters grew restless. The government again asked Gandhi to leave. Gandhi wrote back that he would leave only after completing the inquiry. He also urged the government to set up an official inquiry committee. The government agreed. A committee was formed under Sir Frank Sly, and Gandhi was made a member. The committee recommended abolishing the Tinkathia system and refunding illegal dues collected from peasants. Based on this report, a new law was passed. Thus,

"The Tinkathia system that had existed for nearly a hundred years came to an end. The oppressed peasants regained their consciousness and became aware of their rights." <sup>12</sup>

This victory in a purely nonviolent struggle strengthened Gandhi's confidence even more. But Champaran Satyagraha was not only about indigo oppression. Gandhi found that the region's biggest problems were illiteracy, uncleanness, and superstition. He immediately opened six primary schools. Many educators joined voluntarily. Kasturba Gandhi engaged actively in social service. Along with education, Gandhi launched a cleanliness movement. Villages were dirty; people were careless about hygiene. Gandhi's group swept roads, cleaned courtyards, repaired wells, and taught villagers the meaning of cleanliness. Gandhi gave India its first lesson in 'cleanliness as satyagraha'. At the end, we can say that Gandhi practiced the three mantras – truth, non-violence, and satyagraha – in letter and spirit. His non-violence influenced the world – from Nelson Mandela to Aung San Suu Kyi. His satyagraha shook the foundations of the British Empire.

Gandhi said:

"Satyagraha is a weapon in the hands of a seeker of truth. A satyagrahi must pledge to remain non-violent under all circumstances." <sup>13</sup>

To spread the message of satyagraha to all levels of society, Gandhi edited *The Chronicle*, *Young India*, and the Gujarati journal *Navjivan*. Rabindranath Tagore wrote of him:

"I can worship this Mahatma who practises truth. He never denied the universal moral law of truth by compromising with falsehood. This is a great blessing in India's spiritual history – that there is one person who accepted truth in all conditions." <sup>14</sup>

Thus, it is clear that Gandhi's vast personality was shaped by truth, non-violence, and satyagraha.

## **Conclusion:**

Mahatma Gandhi's lifelong engagement with the idea of truth constitutes one of the most profound intellectual and moral contributions of the twentieth century. His philosophy does not treat truth merely as a moral slogan, an abstract metaphysical ideal, or a religious

dogma; rather, Gandhi elevates truth to the status of the ultimate principle governing human life, society, and spiritual evolution. Throughout his life, Gandhi interpreted truth as an active, dynamic, and transformative force capable of reshaping human behavior, liberating the individual from fear and falsehood, and guiding entire communities toward justice and harmony. This study has attempted to examine the depth and breadth of Gandhi's truth-philosophy, showing how it permeates every aspect of his thought—ethical, political, social, and spiritual.

At the center of Gandhi's worldview is the conviction that truth and God are identical. His famous statement, 'Truth is God,' encapsulates a worldview grounded in the belief that the universe is governed by a moral order. Truth, therefore, is not something created by human beings; it is eternal, unchanging, and universal. This perspective has far-reaching implications. First, it places truth above all human institutions—above governments, ideologies, and personal desires. Second, it demands that individuals cultivate a life of sincerity, discipline, and moral courage. Gandhi believed that the human mind becomes purified only through constant alignment with truth. A person committed to truth must be ready to examine their actions, confront their weaknesses, and reform their character. Thus, truth becomes not only a philosophical principle but also a continuous practice of self-improvement.

Furthermore, Gandhi considered truth to be inseparable from non-violence. Violence, for him, arises from fear, deception, and attachment, all of which contradict the essence of truth. Non-violence, on the other hand, is the practical expression of truth in human relationships. It creates a foundation for mutual respect, reconciliation, and justice. Gandhi's political campaigns—rooted in satyagraha—demonstrated how truth and non-violence can serve as powerful tools for social transformation. His movements in South Africa and India showed that moral force, when combined with collective resolve, can challenge even the strongest structures of oppression. Through non-violent resistance, Gandhi gave truth a political dimension, proving that ethical principles can reshape history.

On a social level, Gandhi believed that truth has the capacity to uplift communities and nations. A society built on truth fosters trust among its citizens, strengthens institutions, and promotes equality. Dishonesty, by contrast, erodes the moral fabric of society and leads to corruption, injustice, and alienation. Gandhi insisted that truth must guide not only personal conduct but also political governance, economic systems, and social relations. He envisioned a world where truth acts as the guiding force behind public policy, education, and community life. His ideas emphasize that lasting peace and progress are possible only when individuals and institutions remain accountable to truth.

On a deeper spiritual plane, Gandhi taught that the pursuit of truth brings human beings closer to divine reality. To him, truth is not something that can be fully possessed; it must be continuously sought, experimented with, and realized through experience. Gandhi's own life was a series of such experiments. His humility in acknowledging his mistakes, his willingness to revise his views, and his constant introspection underscore that truth is an evolving journey rather than a final destination. This understanding encourages individuals to cultivate openness, tolerance, and humility—virtues essential for harmonious living. Thus, Gandhi's philosophy presents truth as the supreme value governing personal development, social justice, and spiritual fulfillment. It is a path that

demands courage yet offers liberation. It requires discipline yet leads to inner peace. It challenges individuals to rise above selfishness and embrace a higher moral order. Above all, Gandhi teaches that truth is the force that can transform individuals into complete human beings and societies into just and peaceful communities. In a world increasingly torn by conflict, misinformation, and material pursuits, Gandhi's message of truth remains not only relevant but urgently necessary. His philosophy invites us to rediscover the power of sincerity, moral integrity, and non-violence—principles that can guide humanity toward a more ethical and compassionate future.

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