

The Power of Non-Violent Resistance

Guest post by Jerry M. Tinker. Originally published in The Voluntaryist, August 1987.

As many writers have noted, the basic thesis, or strategy, upon which Gandhi's *satyagraha* and all non-violent resistance rests is that all structures of power – government and social organizations – always depend upon the voluntary cooperation of great numbers of people even when they seem to rely upon coercion. The chief wielders of power, in other words, must have the tacit assistance and cooperation of hundreds or even thousands of persons in order to exercise power. The strategy, then, of those who oppose or wish to change an established power structure, particularly one equipped with overwhelming physical force, is to persuade large numbers of persons to refuse to cooperate with it any longer. This is not the objective of non-violent resistance, but its strategy.

Altering the present power structure, or certain policies or aspects of that structure, is the goal of non-violent resistance; its success or failure in attaining that objective rests squarely on the degree to which its strategy succeeds in inducing individuals to withdraw support from the structure. Once such cooperation is withdrawn, the power structure must at some point come to terms with the resisters; political change is brought about and conflict resolved. Two forces operate in this process: a form of *persuasion* and a degree of *coercion*.

Conflict is resolved in society and in government to the extent that a majority, or a substantial portion of individuals comprising it, are “persuaded” – either voluntarily or coercively – to adopt or follow a particular position. Persuasion by violence is part of the well-known story of mankind. *Satyagraha*, however, attempts to persuade without violence.

As noted previously, the strategy of non-violent resistance is to develop techniques of persuasion that will induce the hundreds of clerks, soldiers, police, heads of departments and thousands of other individuals upon which the opposing power rests, to abandon it – refusing tacitly, if not explicitly, to cooperate with it. The question- is , of course, how does non-violent resistance induce such non-cooperation? In what manner does non-violent resistance persuade? Essentially, it persuades by manipulating techniques that play upon “suffering.”

One of the persistent myths of non-violent resistance is that its persuasion is only accomplished through a particular kind of human reaction to suffering: namely, the opponent supposedly has a guilty change of heart – a sense of remorse – upon seeing poor passive resisters suffering.

This conception of the role of suffering in non-violent resistance makes the fundamental

error of presuming that only *two* persons are involved in the process – the suffering resister and the opponent. One suffers, and the other feels guilty and presumably makes amends. Actually, non-violent resistance operates within a framework involving *three* actors: the suffering passive resister, the opponent, and the larger, on-looking populace.

Because in every conflict situation the outcome is dramatically affected by the extent to which the on-looking audience becomes involved, this third actor is most important in politics. This concept was best enunciated by E. E. Schattschneider; he calls it “the contagiousness of conflict.” Although intended to analyze the functioning of pressure groups in the United States, his concept clearly has relevance to the operation of non-violent resistance in the political process.

Schattschneider notes that a great change inevitably occurs in the nature of conflict as involvement inexorably expands to include the on-looking audience. Hence, a most important aspect of conflict in the public arena is how, and in what way, the scope of conflict expands. It is unlikely, says Schattschneider, that both sides will equally benefit by an expansion in the scope of conflict, for every change in the battle lines and its composition has a bias: it favors one side or the other. The moral of the phenomenon of the contagiousness of conflict is: If a fight starts, watch the crowd, because the crowd plays the decisive role. In every conflict one protagonist struggles to “privatize” it – to contain it and limit attempts to involve the larger public – while the other attempts to “socialize” it.

The tactics of non-violent resistance seek primarily to create situations that crystallize public opinion – that “involve” it – and which “direct” it against the government, while at the same time legitimatizing its own position. This legitimatization is accomplished when the resister willingly *suffers*; it demonstrates his integrity, courage, honesty, while showing the injustice, cruelty, or tyranny of the government. The essential function of suffering is comparable to the interaction that takes place between a martyr and a crowd. The resister’s token of power in the face of the opponent’s violence is his capacity to “suffer” in the eyes of the on-looking audience.

The non-violent resister employs techniques calculated to *provoke* a response from the opponent which can be made to seem unjust or unfair – thus confirming the resister’s claims against the power structure. Yet, were the opponent or government to fail to act, it would abdicate its power, its control over the population, and over the enforcement of its laws. The classic non-violent resistance technique is to suddenly thrust the initiative to the opponent, and thus also the responsibility, for a conflict with unarmed citizens that it cannot avoid and which will have the inevitable consequence of alienating a portion of the on-looking audience. And because the resister is unarmed and “suffers” (going to jail, being beaten, etc.), the onus of responsibility for all the suffering falls squarely on the opponent. Hence, the primary function of non-violent resistance suffering is to re-draw the lines of battle in favor of the resister; it attempts to involve the audience and to coalesce public

opinion in ways favorable to him.

How frequently does suffering in and by itself succeed in “persuading” an opponent? Does it really represent a powerful enough force to change an opponent’s course of action – to cause him to abandon the opponent being resisted? Reviews of past cases of non-violent resistance show a mixed picture, and results seem to depend largely on certain significant variables.

First, is the attitude and orientation of the opponent; success seems somewhat dependent upon whether the opponent really cares how a population views him – whether he has any long-term interests in pacifying or winning support. Also, the effect varies upon whether the opponent is the resister’s own countrymen; if foreigners are being resisted, non-violent resisters may more easily play upon common identity and nationalism. Finally, in some societies passive suffering may be viewed with contempt, and it can produce an opposite effect: instead of viewing suffering as noble, they perhaps see it as masochism or “an exploitation of the rulers’ good natured reluctance to allow unnecessary suffering, denying thus any attributes of personal courage or virtue to the sufferer.”

In summary, if non-violent resistance is stripped of its moral and philosophic trimmings, its role in conflict resolution may be simplified as follows:

1. The *strategy* of non-violent resistance is to rob an opponent of the public support and cooperation upon which his power ultimately rests. Even though it may seem to rest on violence, all power to be sustained long must at least have the acquiescence of the majority of individuals involved.
2. The *tactic* of non-violent resistance involves the use of various techniques – most of which demonstrate “suffering” – to manipulate the interaction of protagonist, antagonist and audience in ways that crystallize public opinion, alienating it from the opponent while legitimatizing the passive resister’s position.
3. The *objective* of non-violent resistance is to resolve conflict by forcing, through non-violent coercion, the opponent to seek grounds for mutual agreement and to synthesize a satisfactory solution.

As qualified earlier, this is not to exclude entirely the objective of some non-violent resisters who seek a “change of heart” in an opponent. However, this is not the basis upon which the true efficacy or full political power of non-violent resistance rests.

The success of non-violent resistance rests, to a large extent, on whether it gains widespread compliance within a society. The strategy of robbing the opponent of popular support upon which his power depends cannot be made effective if only a few individuals respond. Most non-violent resistance techniques require mass action if they are to be anything more than just fleeting symbolic acts. A boycott, for instance, presumes

participation by great numbers of people.

How does non-violent resistance secure such widespread compliance? What forces and factors induce people to participate or support the resister's cause? What are the prerequisites for non-violent resistance action?

One method is to clothe the movement and its techniques in the values and norms of society – in things people accept without questioning. Here lies one of Gandhi's greatest achievements in India; unlike previous nationalist leaders, Gandhi couched his movement in terms and symbols familiar to the mass of India's population. The result was that the Congress party and the Indian Independence movement became a mass rural movement for the first time. Gandhi had secured widespread compliance, and at that point one can rightly say the last days of the British *raj* began.

Communication and Propaganda

The first phase of a campaign is characterized by a period of intense propaganda activities: parades, demonstrations, posters, newspapers, and other forms of communication. Propaganda is directed to the opponent, but even more to the populace – to educate and inform both.

Once the resistance movement is launched, there must be continuing means of "spreading the word." No movement can operate without some form of communication between the leaders and the led. One of the principal organs used by Gandhi was his newspaper, *Young India*.

Publicity and propaganda are essential tools in securing widespread compliance. Even under circumstances when open publication is banned, a non-violent resistance movement must have some means of communication. There are numerous examples of underground newspapers operating effectively during World War II in Nazi-occupied Europe where non-violent resistance met with considerable success.

Population Pressure

In attempting to insure widespread compliance, non-violent resistance movements benefit from pressures, intentionally applied or not, that work against the public in the same coercive fashion as they operate against the opponent. For example, the technique of ostracism has frequently been used to apply pressure on sections of the public not participating in the resistance campaign.

Aside from any organized attempts at such coercion, there are powerful informal pressures for conformity that also help to secure compliance. The fact that resistance occurs mostly during times of crisis, of national ferment, or of popular unrest, means there is often a

greater sense of nationalism – of a particular “we” arranged against “they.” When issues are involved that society says the individual should be involved with (and when the organizers of non-violent resistance are able to cast their program in such terms), there are strong pressures demanding conformity – to do what everyone else is doing.

Consensual Validation

The technique of consensual validation – the phenomenon of simultaneous events creating a sense of validity in their own right – is often useful to coalesce public support. For example, the simultaneous occurrence of mass Congress demonstrations in widely diverse parts of India in 1930 gave a sense of validity to the complaints against the salt tax. It gave the apparent sanction of a widespread section of society and helped rally public opinion all the more. (A minority group can organize a multitude of “front” organizations, and the sense of seemingly widely separated organizations simultaneously advocating the same themes will give the impression that a large body of opinion is represented.)

These, then, are some of the factors that can be utilized in a non-violent resistance campaign to marshal widespread compliance, so essential for success. A second prerequisite for launching a non-violent resistance campaign is careful organization which will also insure training and the maintenance of discipline. In its need for discipline, some have likened Gandhi’s *satyagraha* to the military. It calls upon the individual to display many of the same virtues associated with violent resistance: courage, strenuous action, enterprise, endurance; “a devotion and sense of unity with one’s own kind; and order, and training.” No one has ever argued that there are any fewer risks involved in non-violent action than in violent resistance – they both imply the possibility of suffering – the only distinction being that in non-violence the resister makes no attempt to physically harm the opponent although he may be faced with a violent response. Obviously, a discipline no less strenuous than that required to steel individuals to face the violence of military action is required to condition those who hope to resist non-violently the same kinds of physical threats.

The basic tactics of non-violent resistance are corollary to the efforts to secure widespread social compliance. In utilizing the various techniques of non-violent resistance, the underlying consideration must be whether they serve to legitimize or alienate the position of the resister vis-a-vis the “audience.” In order to obtain popular support and compliance, the resister’s methods must seek to place the onus for what happens on the opponent.

Again, a key factor in launching non-violent resistance action is rearranging the conflict situation in such a way that the opponent is suddenly thrust the initiative, and thus also the responsibility for unfavorable developments he cannot really prevent. Thomas Schelling in *The Strategy of Conflict* has, in almost a devilish manner, developed a hypothetical

illustration of this process: If a group of non-violent resisters were attempting to protest unfair railway labor practices, they might, he suggests, dramatically sit down on the tracks of the main railway station halting all trains and disrupting service. Such a move clearly would thrust the initiative to the railway management or government, as well as the responsibility for what happens. If the trains do not stop and run over helpless resisters, the onus is on the government; if the trains do stop, then the government has abandoned its power and weakened its authority. If the resisters are arrested and taken to jail, the responsibility for this suffering is also on the hands of the government which, under certain circumstances, might prove a stimulus for the crystallization of public opinion against the government.

Attention-Getting Devices

Non-violent resistance in the earliest stages usually takes the form of actions calculated to gain attention, or to provide propaganda for the cause, or to be a nuisance to the government and police forces. In 1930 Gandhi used this technique with magical skill: he launched the *satyagraha* campaign by walking to the sea with 78 disciples to break the salt tax laws. "Day by day the tension mounted," reports one writer, "as all India followed the elderly Mahatma plodding through the countryside on his crusade." Then the dramatic moment came; as hundreds of congressmen and government officials watched, Gandhi made salt from the sea, breaking the law and setting the rest of India into a "semi-comic frenzy of producing uneatable salt." It was a supremely successful "attention-getting device." Immediately Congress organizations set about to utilize the other attention-getting devices, such as demonstrations, mass meetings and picketing.

The creation of symbols is a universal non-violent resistance device. Even prior to the 1930 campaign, Gandhi had developed a host of symbols – from *khadi* cloth (particularly the "Gandhi cap") to the spinning wheel.

Ostracization campaigns – the refusal to speak or be friendly – were also effectively used in the Salt *Satyagraha*. This was documented in several British reports. In typical bureaucratic British understatement, one form of such ostracization was mentioned in an official report: during an attempt by *chaukidars* (local guards) to assist officials in making tax collections during a "no-tax" campaign, they were, said the report, "forcibly deprived of their uniforms and subjected to social boycott."

Non-Cooperation

Techniques of non-cooperation call for a passive resister to behave normally in a slightly contrived way, but not in a way that permits police or government to accuse him of breaking normal laws. Such activities as "slow-downs," "boycotts," and forms of disassociation from government, are all examples of non-cooperation. Nearly all Gandhi

campaigns emphasized these various forms of non-cooperation; there were boycotts of British manufactured goods (vis., cloth and liquor) as well as British culture. There were innumerable *hartals*, or the voluntary closing of business activity for a day.

As a tool of non-violent resistance, non-cooperation has been widely demonstrated to be effective in disrupting the processes of society – of severely hampering and challenging the writ of a government – all in a fashion that is most difficult for the government and its police to question. For non-cooperation is only an individual altering his normal behavior in a slightly contrived way. However, when large numbers of individuals do the same, it adds up to a society behaving in a most abnormal manner.

Civil Disobedience

Perhaps the most powerful weapon of non-violent resistance – certainly the most threatening to any government – is civil disobedience. This technique involves deliberate unlawful acts, mostly misdemeanor crimes, done in mass action. Anything beyond misdemeanors crosses the boundary of non-violent resistance. Forms of civil disobedience in the 1930 *satyagraha* included breaking the salt tax law, general tax laws (non-payment of taxes), no-rent campaigns, laws prohibiting mass meetings, and so forth.

Civil disobedience is a powerful weapon, but to be effective it must be exercised by a large number of individuals. There is a calculated risk involved: the breach of law, whether in a totalitarian state or not, automatically justifies and involves punishment by the government – jail, fines, even death. But if civil disobedience can be organized on a mass scale, it progressively becomes less profitable for the government to carry out its sanctions. The official British reports on the 1930 campaign testify to a government's dilemma in this regard: "... arrests were rendered impracticable owing to the size of the crowds which had committed breaches of some particular law." The threatening nature of civil disobedience to a government was most cogently summarized by Lord Irwin, the Viceroy, in a speech to the legislative council in 1930:

In my judgment and in that of my Government the (non-violent resistance) campaign is a deliberate attempt to coerce established authority by mass action... . Mass action, even if it is intended by its promoters to be non-violent, is nothing but the application of force under another form, and, when it has as its avowed object the making of Government impossible, Government is bound either to resist or abdicate.

To "resist or abdicate" is indeed the dilemma civil disobedience presents a government. The tactics of non-violent resistance are to make counter steps by the government not only difficult (through mass action, so that the arrest of hundreds of individuals is unprofitable) – but, as noted above, to also make government accept the onus of responsibility for "repressive" acts.

Again, official British reports provide eloquent evidence of a government's dilemma in trying to stop passive defiance, yet avoid the onus attached to counter actions. The strategic success of Gandhi in 1930 is seen in the following official refrain:

In the initial stages Government endeavored to avoid making arrests on a large scale; but as the tide of ... disorder extended over the country this policy had to be abandoned. On the other hand, the clashes which have occurred between the forces of law and the populace have inevitably created a good deal of bitterness And Congress organizers took every opportunity of exploiting for their own purposes the emotions which these incidents aroused. By the simple expedient of staging a procession or demonstration on a scale large enough to force the authorities to take action against it, they could now count in many places upon being able to bring about an automatic revival in popular sympathy for their cause....

To make the official position all the more difficult, and to further complicate enforcement, Congress strategically employed women – (some emerging from *purdah* for the occasion.) This truly amazed the British, and, as the official reports remark, it “made the work of the police particularly unpleasant.”

Severe repressive measures which a government may wish to use, and may be organized to use, require some justification. The violence of resisters themselves is, of course, the best justification for violent counteraction; but if resisters are non-violent, the government is faced with the dilemma of how to explain their violence or coercion. This explains the tendency of all governments when faced with non-violent resistance to emphasize any violent fringes that may emerge. This was certainly the tactic of the British in India. Time and again official British reports and statements on Gandhi's *satyagraha* movement stressed mainly the accounts of terrorist and violent acts (which largely occurred in Bengal). The British regularly repeated the theme that “despite the sincere endeavors of many of the Congress leaders to keep the Movement ‘non-violent’, experience again proved that it is inevitable... that an organized and strenuously conducted campaign of defiance of Government and of the law should result in serious and widespread disturbances.” In the face of non-violent resistance an opponent can be expected to justify his counteraction, which is normally coercive physical force, by seeking examples of breaches in the resister's non-violence. Gandhi once temporarily suspended non-violent resistance precisely because violent reactions by some Indians threatened to undermine

the basic strategy of *satyagraha*.

Another important stratagem of civil disobedience is to be selective in the laws to be breached. To be most effective, the laws should be related in some manner with the issues being protested or the demands being made. The Salt Satyagraha is again, a perfect example. The salt tax laws were indiscriminate in that they taxed both the rich and poor, being specially hard on the poor. Gandhi thus selected them for contravention "because they not only appeared to be basically unjust in themselves, but also because they symbolized an unpopular, unrepresentative, and alien government." Their contravention was, in other words, related to the long-range objectives of independence.

Conceived as a political instrument, it can be seen that non-violent resistance does not set out to, nor does it significantly accomplish individual persuasion or change of heart. This is not to say that in politics only coercion is possible, as though politics were wholly rational and that therefore persuasion on a moral basis is irrelevant or impossible. Rather, It is simply to say that the importance and effectiveness of non-violent resistance rests in the political arena.

It is no exaggeration to say that its ability to manipulate the political dynamics of society is comparable to the effectiveness of coercive techniques of threats and terror in an insurgency. Indeed, it is instructive to note that the strategy of non-violent resistance largely parallels the approach of revolutionary insurgents. The terrorist's aim is to separate the existing government from its base of power by capturing the institutional supports upon which it rests – either at the top or, in the Mao Tse-tung tradition, at the rural base of the masses. It has been observed that revolutionaries in modern society do not so much "seize" power as destroy and re-create it. The simple creation of disorder will not automatically bring a subversive group to power. It can, however, create a vacuum into which new organizational instruments of power can move.

By all these yardsticks, the Gandhian technique is subversive, especially in the context of India in 1930. However, Gandhi found that he could accomplish the goals of the coercive subversive without terror and violence. He fashioned *satyagraha* into techniques that attained and shaped the same political ends.

Reflecting on the use and effectiveness of non-violent resistance in other parts of the world – in Europe during World War II, in the Soviet Union, with the Buddhists in South Vietnam in 1963, and certainly with the Negro in the southern part of the United States – it seems clear that non-violent resistance does not depend upon any particular attitude of the opponent or upon the nature of the political system (i.e., democratic vs. totalitarian) to be effective. The strategy and tactics of Gandhian non-violent resistance are relevant in any social conflict situation and in any society because they have achieved a fundamental insight into the dynamics of political and social change. The only aid a democratic

framework provides, vs. a totalitarian, is to make the process easier, or at least safer, for the resister – although individual willingness to “suffer” and to sacrifice is as basic to non-violent struggle as it is implicit in violent resistance.

It should be stressed that we have reviewed here the potentiality of non-violent resistance when used *within* a political system. Its effectiveness against a foreign invasion or as a tool in international relations, naturally involves a number of other, perhaps more complex, variables. However, within the terms of internal societal conflict, or when used against an outside occupier or colonial power, it is clear that *satyagraha* has continuing relevance. Contrary to many who argue that Gandhi was only successful because he was confronted by a democratic government observing the rule of law, the analysis here shows that his success was due solely to his insights into some fundamental principles of political change operative in any political system. What Gandhi did was to develop a tool – a highly sophisticated tool at that – by which he very successfully manipulated those principles. Gandhi did not so much render his British “opponents impotent through their own virtues,” as some have argued, as he successfully prostrated them on their own terms. He robbed them of their political and social base of support by undermining the cooperation of millions of Indians upon which their rule ultimately rested. The lessons flowing from this are still relevant for our time – in Vietnam, Angola, Alabama, or Quebec, to mention a few.

“Is Gandhi relevant?” ask those celebrating his centenary. The answer is that he is so long as there are those willing to understand and manipulate his tools of non-violent political change. He will be so long as he is simply not dismissed as a “saint,” but seen as the political revolutionary he was. As India’s Prime Minister Indira Gandhi has written, “The ultimate justification of Gandhi is that he showed how armed strength could be matched without arms. If this could happen once, can it not happen again?”