

What is Proactive Nonviolence?

While resisting British colonialism in South Africa, Mohandas K. Gandhi coined the word “Satyagraha” (pronounced Sat-YAH-graha) to describe his civil disobedience campaign against unjust colonial laws. That word, derived from the Sanskrit language, is traditionally translated as “Truth Force.”

Gandhi returned to India in 1915 and entered politics. In response to the repressive Rowlett Act he initiated the Noncooperation Movement of 1919-1922. This first attempt at mass mobilization by Gandhi was organized and led by the upper-class, educated Indians and reflected their elite goals which did not address the needs of the general populace, especially farmers. Thus most Indians had no motivation to join the campaign which consequently failed both as a massive turnout and to gain concessions from the ruling colonialists. When violence erupted Gandhi called it off.

Gandhi temporarily withdrew from politics to pondered ways to gain support from all the people. Then, in 1930 he had a plan – he mobilized the Civil Disobedience Movement to challenge unjust salt laws which gave the British exclusive rights to harvest salt and tax it heavily. Gandhi started a Salt March to the sea to harvest salt in defiance of the law. This resulted in arrests but the people persisted.

Gandhi’s life was a constant experiment in truth. As he gained new insights Satyagraha, being the force of truth, also evolved. Satyagraha became proactive by acquiring a Constructive Program to complement Confrontational Nonviolence. The Constructive Program showed the people a better way of life than being submissive to colonial law. Gandhi also introduced Khadi – spinning their own yarn and weaving their own cloth to make their own garments. The people learned other “cottage industries” like how to manufacture their own cooking oil by squeezing certain seeds and nuts.

This Constructive Program made the people more self-sufficient and, by sidelining British-made commodities, it diminished the advantages of colonialism. Gandhi called off the Civil Disobedience Movement in 1932 when the British removed the salt-harvesting ban, recognized Gandhi’s Indian National Congress as a political party, released political prisoners, and allowed Indians to vote for provincial legislators (but not governors). The Great Depression helped trigger mass

participation because the Constructive Program enhanced self-sufficiency which saved money.

Proactive Nonviolence can be defined as the Satyagraha that evolved during India's Civil Disobedience Movement of the 1930s: Satyagraha = Confrontational Nonviolence + Constructive Program = Proactive Nonviolence. Unfortunately, many nonviolent practitioners today still define Satyagraha by its South African application of Confrontational Nonviolence only. Confrontation still plays a part but a lesser one. The more important Constructive Program bypasses the oppressor to empower the people. That is being proactive. And when a nonviolent campaign is successful, the Constructive Program must be in place to fill the gap when the oppressive regime is removed. That is being even more proactive.

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