THE SATYAGRAHA OF MAHATMA GANDHI: STRUCTURAL PARALLELS WITH THE VRATA TRADITION

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satya-vrataṁ satya-paraṁ tri-satyaṁ
satyasya yoniṁ nihitaṁ ca satye
satyasya satyam ṛta-satya-netraṁ
satyātmakaṁ tvāṁ śaraṇaṁ prapannāḥ

Śrīmad Bhāgavatam, 10.2.26

Abstract

The concept of truth had a deep and abiding meaning for Mahatma Gandhi. This meaning became clear to him in the course of political action and not merely as a consequence of philosophical reflection. Truth is not to be renounced even in face of death. Such is the value ascribed to truth in Gandhi's vision. The quest for truth was central to Gandhi's life but his was not a kind of truth that could be ascertained through critical scholarship. For Gandhi, verification depended on deliberate action controlled by a vow. According to him, 'truth is the essence of the vow' and this dictum took the form of the Satyagraha. For Mahatma Gandhi, Satyagraha is closely bound with his conception of the truth and is deeply embedded in the Jaina and Hindu traditions. This article attempts a structural analysis of Satyagraha engaging with one subjective meaning of Satyagraha — that of Mahatma Gandhi's, and tries to locate a structural parallel between Hindu Vrata and Satyagraha. Satyagraha here is sought to be understood not as a historical category, rather as a text in itself. With the famous Hindu Vrata of Savitri as a case in point, I have attempted to decompose Satyagraha into its structural constituents and uncover the homology that Satyagraha shares with Vrata.

Keywords: Dialogue, homology, Satyagraha, truth, *vrata*

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Satyagraha

When Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi first went to South Africa to practice law, little did he know what fate had in store for him. An opportunity to influence the course of history by detached action came his way when the Transvaal Government passed an act in 1907, which enjoined all Indians to get themselves registered. This was found to be an instance of unconcealed racial discrimination. At a protest meeting that Gandhi convened, one man stood up and proclaimed that he would resist the measure at the risk of his life. This gave Gandhi the inspiration to ask all who were willing to do so to participate in taking this vow. Thus was born serendipitously the idea of *Satyagraha*, though Gandhi himself did not realise it at that time. Meanwhile, Gandhi resisted the order and was sentenced to two months of imprisonment, his first subjective and objective lesson in civil disobedience.

Satyagraha and Non-Resistance

Influenced by Thoreau, Gandhi initially called his action 'passive resistance', for want of a better term. In his *Satyagraha in South Africa,* Gandhi wrote:

> None of us knew what name to give to our movement. I then used the term 'passive resistance' in describing it. I did not quite understand the implications of 'passive resistance' as I called it. I only knew that some new principle had come into being…The phrase 'passive resistance' gave rise to confusion and it appeared shameful to permit this great struggle to be known only by an English name (1968: 119).

The first and literal translation of the term passive resistance is '*nishkriya pratirodha*' from the Sanskrit *nishkriya* meaning devoid of action and *pratirodha*, to oppose; and hence 'passive resistance'. This phrase, as one can appreciate, has an internal contradiction brought forth by the incongruous union of a passive and an active principle, to not do (anything) but simultaneously to do (resist). Therefore, Gandhi could not be satisfied with this oxymoron-like quality that the term carried. *Satyagraha*, for Gandhi, represented a more dynamic and coherent concept. *Satyagraha* is not non-resistance or pacifism in that sense — in fact it is far from that. The dictionary definition of non-resistance is,[1] 'the practice or principle of not resisting authority, even when it is unjustly exercised'. At the heart of this is discouragement of, even opposition to, physical resistance to an enemy. It is considered as a form of principled non-violence

or pacifism which rejects all physical violence, whether exercised at individual, group, state or international levels. Practitioners of non-resistance may refuse to retaliate against an opponent or offer any form of self-defence. Sometimes non-resistance has been a doctrine of particular religious groups, at others it has been part of movements advocating social change. The movement led by Mahatma Gandhi for India's Independence could be described as nonviolent resistance or civil resistance, but not passive non-resistance, because that would imply acceptance or acquiescence of the existing unjust order. Gandhi's *Satyagraha* movement was based on a belief in resistance that was active but at the same time nonviolent, and he did not believe in using non-resistance (or even nonviolent resistance) in circumstances where a failure to oppose an adversary effectively amounted to cowardice. 'I do believe', he wrote, 'that where there is only a choice between cowardice and violence, I would advise violence' (Prabhu and Rao, 1967). Hence if one were to choose a phrase to describe *Satyagraha*, it would be active non-resistance and not passive non-resistance. The term Satyagraha was meant to connote an active force. Truth (*satya*) implies love and firmness (*agraha*) engenders and therefore serves as a synonym for force (Jack, 1956: 65). Agraha or insistence is a term that implies action, doing and not passively awaiting, and when aligned with *satya* or truth, it takes on the character of dogged indefatigability. Hence though non-violent, *Satyagraha* by its very lexical quality is not passive, if anything quite the opposite of that. In Gandhi's conception, *Satyagraha* was also not for the weak. It required rigorous self-purification through exercising control over mind and body before one could practice *Satyagraha*.

Not satisfied, therefore, with the limited English meaning for what was so profound a concept, Gandhi then announced a prize in the *Indian Opinion*, his weekly journal in South Africa for suggesting a name for the struggle. Maganlal Gandhi suggested 'Sadagraha' meaning firmness in a good cause. However, to Gandhi it did not quite capture the essence of what he thought Satyagraha was. It was, therefore, only in the fitness of things, that Gandhi himself chose the final coinage 'Satyagraha' which he described as 'force which is born of truth and love or non-violence' (Gandhi, 1968).

Gandhi further clarified the meaning of *Satyagraha*. According to him, if we continue to believe and let others believe that we are weak and helpless and therefore offer passive resistance, our resistance would never make us strong. The *satyagrahi*, on the other hand, has to be full of moral courage. It is only the strict adherence to truth that can give such courage to a person. *Satyagraha* is not for

the weak, or an expression of retreat or capitulation. Gandhi refers to *Satyagraha* as 'soulforce', a word he would frequently use as the English equivalent for 'satyagraha'. 'Satyagraha is not physical force. A satyagrahi does not inflict pain on the adversary ... never resorts to firearms. ... Satyagraha is pure soulforce [and] the soul is informed with knowledge. In it burns the flame of love. If someone gives us pain through ignorance, we shall win him through love' (Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi: electronic book*, Volume 16:10). The aim of the *satyagrahi* should be an unwavering resolve to see the struggle until the very end, undeterred even by the fear of death. For Gandhi, *Satyagraha* was not a utilitarian principle to serve as an instrument of negotiation or political bargaining. Gandhi also drew a distinction between the person and the system that one upholds. The aim of the *satyagrahi* is to non-cooperate with the system if he holds it to be wrong (Bose, 1972:109). Further, a *satyagrahi* can fight only a moral or just cause. There is no limit for a *satyagrahi* nor is there a limit to his capacity for suffering. There is also no scope for violence in *Satyagraha*. Gandhi's neologism *Satyagraha* was based on the traditional Indian practice of Satyakriya – to make something come to pass through truthful action, though Gandhi himself has not consciously acknowledged this in any of his writings. The validation of such a truth does not depend on the acceptance by others of the truth, but only by the person concerned acting upon it to be judged by one's own conscience, *atman* or God.

Furthermore, what distinguishes the Satyagraha from any other political resistance movement is that 'while Gandhi's Satyagraha encompassed vast social and political change, it was heavily grounded in devotional principles (Snodgrass 2008: 5). Gandhi's practice of Satyagraha was not limited to the political domain. When Gandhi returned to India in 1915, and established his first *ashram* in India, he named it 'Satyagraha'. In his article 'Satyagraha Ashram' printed in the *Young India* in 1928, Gandhi looked back on 13 years of practice to describe Satyagraha's purpose as a 'prayerful and scientific experiment' (Gandhi, 1998: 15). From the very beginning of the practice of Satyagraha, Gandhi was convinced that social or political change in India would only be achieved through 'religious' means (Ibid.: 23). In his Ashram, at Gandhi's instance, prayers were chanted during morning and evening. Mahatma Gandhi also propagated the Ekadasha Vrata, eleven vows, which are inextricably linked with his practice of Satyagraha. The *ekadasha vrata* represent the core values that form the bedrock of Satyagraha. These vows are *satya* — truth, *ahimsa* —nonviolence, *brahmacharya* — celibacy, *asteya* — non-stealing, *aparigraha* or *asangraha* — non-possession,

sharira shrama — physical labour or bread labour, *asvada* — control over the palate, *abhaya* — fearlessness, *sarva-dharma-samaanatva* — equal respect for all religions, *swadeshi* —use of indigenous goods and *asparshyata nivaarana* - removal of untouchability. 'Steadied or braced by the practice of vows, cultivation of freedom emerges as a kind of venture of journey...' (Parel, 2000: 111). As early as in 1914, Gandhi had written to Raojibhai Patel, a close friend and follower: 'Remain firm in the vows you have taken. Cling to them like a fanatic. You will then...conquer the world and become master of yourself; you will also achieve India's freedom. In other words, one single key ensures victory of every kind, such is the path we follow. This ancient path is indescribably easy and also difficult' (Gandhi, *Collected Works - electronic book*, Volume 14: 278-9).

In early 1915, in 'Fragment of letter to Mathuradas Trikumji', Gandhi wrote: 'Truthfulness, *brahmacharya,* non-violence, non-stealing and non-hoarding, these five rules of life are obligatory on all aspirants. Everyone should be an aspirant. A man's character, therefore, is to be built on the foundation of these disciplines' (Gandhi, *Collected Works – electronic book*, Volume 14:355). Subsequently in the same year, he wrote: 'I am absolutely clear in my mind that India's deliverance and ours will be achieved through the observance of these vows' (Gandhi, *Collected Works – electronic book*, Volume 14: 'Letter to Maganlal Gandhi': 383). The first five of these eleven vows are essentially the five *yamas* (rules of moral discipline) of Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra* - *ahimsa* (not hurting any being; non-violence), *satya* (truth), *asteya* (non-stealing), *brahmacharya* (celibacy), and *aparigraha* (non-possession). The yamas are the first limb of Ashtanga Yoga (Swami Vivekananda, 2012). Practice of these inculcates the moral and bodily steadiness to further one's yogic practice. According to the *Yoga Sutra* of Patanjali, these observances are the great vows, universal, regardless of the circumstances of one's life-state, place or time of birth' (Bryant, 2019). The first five vows are purificatory in nature and impart a state of constant preparedness in the practitioner to engage in Satyagraha. The final six vows are connected to the specifically identified purposes and teachings of Satyagraha as a political movement and belong in in the domain of the secular. In Satyagraha, we see a coming together of ritual practice and political praxis. 'The addition of the six new modern virtues to the five traditional ones was part of Gandhi's innovative strategy' (Parel, 2000:17). The verse from the *Isopanishada*, which was dear to Gandhi, encapsulates the spirit of temperance in the vows and of detached struggle:

Isavasyamidam sarvam yatkiñca jagatyam jagat
tena tyaktena bhuñjitha ma grdhah kasyasvid dhanam

(Everything animate or inanimate that is within the universe is controlled and owned by the Lord. One should therefore accept only those things necessary for himself. The Lord resides everywhere in this universe; the one who renounces all shall enjoy pure delight.)

Sri Isopanishada, mantra 1.
(Swami Prabhupada (Tr.) 1969, *Sri Isopanishad*:13)

The Hindu Vrata

This entire conception of *Satyagraha* rooted as it is in Hindu philosophy and ritual tradition, finds a close structural parallel in the Vrata tradition of Hinduism. It is common knowledge that Gandhi's mother would keep strict ritual fasts on Ekadashi and other occasions.[2] Having been born in a devout family and of a mother who would keep strict religious vows, Gandhi had been reared with a tradition of keeping the Ekadashi fast and other ritual fasts, initially at the instance of his parents and to please them, and later in life, by his own volition. When Gandhi wanted to travel across the seas to acquire higher education, he had to make three promises to his mother, which were in the nature of sacred vows. The famous three promises were — 'no wine, women and meat'. It was only after he made his three famous promises did his mother relent and give him permission to travel to London. In that sense, the vow was already an integral part of Gandhi's life, long before he started the *Satyagraha* movement. It is also not an occurrence of mere chance that Gandhi added precisely six principles over and above the five Yamas enshrined in Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra*. Ekadasha Vratas appear to represent at the level of the secular what Ekadashi Vrata pertains to the religious. But this analogy is not the only resemblance that can be observed. Indeed, what is of even greater interest here is that the above conception of *Satyagraha* rooted as it is in Hindu tradition, has a close structural homology with the Vrata tradition of Hinduism.

No Indian is unfamiliar with the concept of Vrata — the vow, often loosely equated as fasting. But there is a qualitative difference between the two. Fasting is undoubtedly one important aspect of the *vrata*. Fasting, *upavasa* literally means living without all or some articles of food and drink. Fasting is to be found in practice in several religions. In Indic tradition fasting also constitutes a part of *ayurvedic karmas* including in the Panchakarma method of body

purification.[3] Vrata, on the other hand, is unique to the Hindu universe and connotes more than observance of a ritual or secular fast. It is a comprehensive principle that denotes intent to succeed in a predetermined religious venture. It is a vow that an individual enters into for achieving certain desired goals, for averting known or unknown disasters, for expiation of known and unknown transgressions, or any combination of these. In the Hindu tradition, many Vratas belong to the local religious tradition as elements of the Little Tradition (as distinguished from the Great Tradition of classical Hinduism). Many are often associated with women, such as those having to do with safeguarding marriage and preventing widowhood, begetting progeny, warding off disease, and the like. These become part of the ritual domain of women. Vows create a compact between women and nature. While most Vedic rituals in the Great Tradition of Hinduism have been traditionally arrogated by men, there is an entire class of specialised myth stories for the ritual use of women. I find this useful to mention it here because Gandhi's first contact with religious vows came through his observation of his mother's engagement with *vratas*. Vows can be annual, monthly or specially scheduled when a person — man or woman — has a desire to be fulfilled. Most vows follow a similar pattern. People purify themselves through a ritual fasts and prayers. At the culmination of a fast, *prasad* (consecrated food) is distributed after completing the rites of worship of the deity being invoked through the *vrata*. Many *vratas* are accompanied by their vow stories — the v*rata kathas*. Sometimes and especially in the *vratas* belonging to the Little Tradition and those performed by women, the ritual is progressed collectively, such as by a group of women praying and chanting together.

The Vrata of Savitri

The narrative of Savitri is one such *vratakatha*. As narrated in the *Matsya Purana* (Basu, 1917) it can be summarised as follows:

> Savitri, literally the dazzling one, was the daughter of king Ashvapati of Madra begotten through a boon of the Goddess of the same name. When she attained marriageable age, she was married to Satyavana, the son of King Dyumatsena. At the time, sage Narada foresaw that Satyavana would die within a year of marriage. Undeterred by this catastrophic revelation, Savitri took to the forest with her husband to prepare for his death. As the fateful day approached, Savitri took a vow, which involved among other things, a fast for three days. When the appointed hour

> came, Yama,[4] the god of death, came to claim his victim. Stricken with grief, Savitri, steadfast in her vow and strengthened by it - followed Yama. Yama assured Savitri that having served her husband well in life, she need not follow him in death. To this Savitri's resolute reply was, 'By virtue of my asceticism, of my regard for my superiors, of my affection for my lord, of my observance of vows, as well as of thy favour, my course is unimpeded' (*Mahabharata*, Vol. 3: 631). 'Deprived of my husband, I am as one dead' (Ibid.: 634).

Yama, another name for whom is Dharmaraja, upholder of Dharma, was pleased with Savitri's devotion, her repartee and courage in the face of adversity and offered to grant her boons. In one boon, Savitri asked that she may be the mother of a hundred sons. In granting Savitri the boon, Yama had no option but to restore Satyavana to life. Caught in the dilemma of Dharma, bound by his word, Yama had no other recourse. For the upholder of Dharma could not have asked for the chaste Savitri to desecrate the ideal of fidelity to her husband even in his death. Dharma demanded that if Savitri was to have a hundred sons, these could only be from Satyavana, exclusive devotion to the husband being the preeminent trait of chaste womanhood and the prerequisite for the motherhood of sons (Kakar, 1981: 67). Even the certainty of death would have to be overcome by none other than the god of death himself, if it came in conflict with Dharma, such is the sanctity and inviolability of *dharma*.

The triumph of Savitri is narrated as the story of the triumph of feminine resolve and strength. It represents to Hindu married women, the way of combatting untoward occurrences and widowhood which is traditionally regarded as a state of utter hopelessness and destitution. Annually, on the full-moon day of the month of Jyeshtha of the Hindu calendar[5] women in many parts of India observe the Vata Savitri Vrata, literally the *vrata* of Savitri of the Banyan tree, this being the locale of Savitri's famous conversation with Yama.

The Vrataic Dialogue

The above theme of the *vrata* of Savitri is well known in Hindu tradition. A structural analysis (*a la* Levi-Strauss, 1993) of the above narrative reveals the binaries that are engaged in the dialogue of this *vrata*. The myth of Savitri shows the salient components of the *vrata* to be as follows: (1) Two participating entities mutually so juxtaposed that at least one participant in the dyad is interested in a establishing a dialogic relation with the other; (2) The two are brought together in a relationship of asymmetry; (3) They belong to different orders of

existence; (4) Both participants share the same normative universe upholding and cherishing a set of values in common.

In the case of Savitri, it is she who is intent upon establishing a dialogic relation with Yama, who is the 'other' in this binary. The two are brought together by circumstances as polar opposites in a relationship of deep asymmetry. Savitri and Yama belong to two different orders of existence and in their meeting is the coming together of the sacred and the profane, the topography of the terrain being a point of intersection of the two liminalities in a geometric space made pure by ritual practices that Savitri has engaged in as the participant in the *vrata*. In the narrative of Savitri, Yama represents *dharma* – the absolute, irrevocable, inviolable and binding law of the universe, the *lex universalis* – that of the unfailing mortality of human existence. For Savitri, to be able to establish a dialogue with Yama, she has to be able to access the portal through the meeting place consecrated by ritual and resolve. In that portal as Savitri is face to face with Yama, transformed through the *vrata*, she is able to engage in a dialogic discourse wherein she matches her wits with the very repository of *dharma*. This interchange is made possible because, however asymmetrical be their binary, within this dialogic dyad is shared a common valuational, cultural and cognitive universe. One voice in this dialogue emerges as firm of resolve and fearlessness, determined to achieve a cherished goal that has the support and approval of the mutually accepted morality. It is cajoling, beseeching and requesting, sometimes demanding. The 'other', whom it addresses, is capable of and instrumental in fulfilling the cherished goal of the subject. It is characterised as being self-aware, solid, dominant, bequeathing and with the potential to be benevolent.

To enter into this relationship, the one who observes the *vrata* has to make herself pure through austerity so as to be able to access the sacred domain. It is only then that the two can share the same conversational space. The resolve, along with its rigours, also make the mortal participant transcend fear. No object then becomes insurmountable for such a fearless one. In the myth of Savitri narrated above, Savitri and Yama are the two poles of this dyadic relation. Both Yama and Savitri share identical conceptions of ideal womanhood and of Dharma. Though Yama is the signifier of death, he is not intrinsically bad or evil, for he is only upholding the truth of human mortality. Further, in this dialogue, while one has the power to confer, the one who receives is not intrinsically weak; though rendered weak through circumstance, the subject has the power and the means to extract. Both participants share the same idiom in this dialogic relation. Vrata cannot be successful if

both the entities do not share the same cognitive and moral space. There has to be a convergence of values between the two so that the dialogue holds the same meaning for both. It is through staunch and unstinting adherence to the mutually accepted dharma that Savitri is able to transcend the profane-sacred barrier and access spaces in a sacred geometry that are otherwise not possible to enter in the physical body. Vrata also cannot be performed if the 'other' is not identified as just, honourable, powerful, benevolent and an upholder of dharma. Yama being the embodiment of *dharma*, Savitri could perform and succeed in her vow.

For the vrataic dialogue to be successful, the truth that the *vrata* upholds has to belong to both participants in the dialogue and should be precious to both. The receiver of the bounty has to be steadfast in her truth but the one who has the power to confer too cannot diverge from the truth. It is through the internal consistency of the two truths that a meaningful dialogic relationship can be established between the giver and the recipient. If Savitri could succeed in her *vrata*, it was because the position of the 'other' was occupied by a lord of *dharma*, righteousness. For who but the upholder of *dharma* would respect Savitri's devotion to *dharma* the most. The quintessential truth here is that the two entities in the interaction should share the same meaning of the Truth. If both do not belong to the same cognitive and moral universe, the possibility of negotiation through dialogue, vrataic or otherwise, will not arise. For if a *vrata* dialogue is to constitute itself, it is necessary for all its structural components to be present.

In the *vrata* dialogue, both participants transcend their liminalities and are transported to the threshold of intersection with this world and the sacred. The doer has to purify oneself through fasts, prayers and other such means and has at least temporary transit in the sacred domain. There is no place for intermediaries; hence the conventional dichotomy between sacred and profane is obscured for the duration of the *vrata* and till the time of its resolution. It is as though the participant is in a trance- like state transported to the realm of the sacred, being in a state of chirality with her own mundane self and persona. As Levi-Strauss has upheld, 'We see, then, what a structural analysis of the myth content can achieve in itself: It furnishes rules of transformation which enable us to shift from one variant to another by means of operations similar to those of algebra' (1993: 235). We can see the narrative of Savitri's *vrata* not as a specific instance of the practice of the *vrata* but rather *a particular sequence* of dialogic transactions in and among a binary,

permutations and combinations of which can be replicated anytime anywhere. Applying the principles of structural analysis, I intend to show by means of the above example of the *vrata* of Savitri, that there exists a strong structural correspondence between the *vrata* and *satyagraha*. What interests us here, are the underlying structures beneath the *vrata* binary and their uncanny homology with the *Satyagraha* binary. A close analysis of Mahatma Gandhi's *Satyagraha* shows the presence of the same structural principles as the *vrata* and not merely an outward resemblance.

Satyagraha as Vrata

There is a deep likeness between *satyagraha* and the *vrata*. The *Satyagraha* too, like the *vrata*, has to be entered into after self-purification. For Gandhi, this process of purification involved most of all, the observance of *brahmacharya* (celibacy), *aparigraha* (non-possession) and *ahimsa* (nonviolence). To facilitate celibacy and accelerate self-purification, Gandhi frequently undertook fasts, maintained strict vegetarianism and conducted experiments in food and diet. He has explained in his writings that Christ and Buddha too had to make such preparations. Gandhi points out that Christ, before he went out to serve the world, spent forty days in the wilderness, preparing himself for his mission. Buddha too spent many years in such preparation. For Gandhi, this preparation is an ongoing process, since life itself is one continuing *satyagraha* where one's preparedness could be invoked at any time. For Gandhi, if the body has to be put in the service of truth and humanity 'we must raise our soul by developing virtues like celibacy, nonviolence and truth' (Iyer, 1991: 307).

The imprints of Hindu myths can be found in Gandhi's childhood reminiscences. Gandhi, in his childhood, was deeply inspired by certain traditional Indian exemplars of human virtue and strength of character. He has narrated in his autobiography about how the mythical character Shravana Kumar's devotion to his parents impressed him. He would often ask himself why everyone should not be truthful like Harishchandra, the hero of another popular Hindu myth. Gandhi's own description of *satyagraha* is imbued with metaphors from Hindu tradition. It is these mythical role models etched from his childhood that have shaped Gandhi's worldview through the mesh of the myriad experiments that Gandhi conducted on himself. In his writings, Mahatma Gandhi has recalled fragments of memory of his mother's fasts and religious observances which

to him seemed as if from another world. Gandhi has admitted that the remarkable impression that his mother left on him was that of saintliness. He mentions in his autobiography that 'as far as memory goes', he does not remember his mother ever having missed the Chaturmas (Gandhi, 1927: 4). He further states: 'She would take the hardest vows and keep them without flinching. I can recall her once falling ill while keeping the Chandrayan vow but illness was not allowed to interrupt the observance' (Ibid.).[7]

The *vrata*-like component in Gandhi's construction of *satyagraha* can be understood by looking at some recorded narratives of *satyagraha*. But it is not the apparent similarities that interest us here. What we are seeking to locate is the structural homology between the two. A careful analysis of the structure of the *satyagraha* shows its close parallel in the *vrata*. Chronologically the *vrata* predates the *satyagraha*, but both reveal the same set of algebraic structures indicative of their common ancestry in the Hindu tradition. An overview of a few instances of *Satyagraha* will help recognise this structural homology with the *vrata*.

Cases when Satyagraha is Feasible

1. The Champaran Enquiry, 1917

In 1917, Gandhi became involved with a *satyagraha* campaign for liberating peasants who worked in the indigo fields of Champaran, from paying taxes on their produce to the British. Champaran was a deeply rural district in north Bihar little touched by the economic, social or political developments influencing urban life (Brown 1990:109). It was characterised by the presence of large estates dominated by landlords. The hardships of the peasants were exacerbated by Wartime conditions. They were forced to grow indigo in their best lands. Gandhi systematically collected information on the conditions at Champaran, and having convinced himself *prima facie* that the peasants of Champaran were indeed an exploited lot, he felt that *Satyagraha* could be tried in India as well, with Champaran as its starting locale. However, while he was still in the process of ascertaining the grievances of the peasants, the government ordered Gandhi to leave Champaran. Gandhi disobeyed the order in the interest of the Truth. He then took the legal machinery by surprise by actually pleading guilty of violating the order for the sake of gathering the truth. This completely disarmed the administration. The consequence of this was that Gandhi got the

necessary permission and was assured cooperation from the highest in the government, to look into the woes of the cultivators. Gandhi calls this as 'the first direct object-lesson in civil disobedience'.

2. The Salt Satyagraha, 1930

In 1930, Gandhi led the famous Salt March to Dandi in protest of the unfairness of the salt tax, which had been fixed by the British on the Indian people. Salt was extracted from the sea. But only the British could refine it, and then sell it back to India. On 12 March 1930, Gandhi and 79 followers marched from the Sabarmati Ashram to Dandi on the western sea coast, a distance of roughly two hundred miles. Their mission was civil disobedience, an intentional breaking of the law, by Gandhi collecting 'illegal' salt from the seashore. The famous 24-day march was imbued with mystic fervour through invocatory chanting of the well-known *bhajan* (prayer) '*Vaishnava Jana*' (Jack, 1956: 246). On the route to Dandi, the march was followed closely by national correspondents, as well as journalists from the international community. Gandhi gave several speeches along the way, continuing to instruct the marchers in the basic tenets of nonviolence. In a talk to volunteers, first printed in *Young India*, he said, 'I repeat that ours is a sacred pilgrimage, and self-examination and self-purification are essentials which we cannot do without' (Gandhi, *Collected Works–electronic book*, Volume 48:450). Gandhi also continued his congregational daily *bhajans*. During the march, he spoke of the love for the enemy, a quality that had been extolled in the theme of one of the *bhajans*. 'A satyagrahi's path is the path of love, not one of enmity. It should be the ambition of a satyagrahi to win over even the most hard-hearted of enemies through love. How can one demonstrate that there is nothing but love underlying civil disobedience? This band of satyagrahis which has set out is not staging a play; its effect will not be merely temporary; even through death, it will prove true to its pledge - if death becomes necessary. Not only should there be no anger within one's heart at the time of death, but on the contrary, one should feel and pray: "May good befall him who kills me!" (*a quote from another bhajan).* When anyone meets death in such a manner, I would call it a satyagrahi's death and only in such a death would the dying person be considered to have been true to his pledge' (Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi - electronic book, Volume* 48:446-47; italics mine). The group arrived at Dandi on April 5th, where Gandhi announced: 'God willing expect with my companions to commence actual Civil Disobedience... tomorrow

morning. April 6th has been to us since the ... Jallianwala massacre, a time of sacramental remembrance. We therefore commence it with (sung)-prayer and fasting' (Jack, 1956: 239).

3. Conjugal Satyagraha

For Gandhi, *Satyagraha* was not meant only for the public domain. The assertion of truth through a vow could be practiced in one's private life as well. In fact, *satyagraha* was not a religious or a political discourse but a way of life. While in South Africa (1908), when Gandhi was continuing his experiments on fasting, diet and nature cure, Kasturba, his wife, became afflicted with a haemorrhagic condition. Gandhi 'entreated' her to give up pulses and salt in her diet. When Kasturba challenged him if he could as readily do the same, for the sake of Kasturba's health and well-being, he instantly agreed and took a vow to abstain from these items in his diet for the requisite period. Gandhi, in his autobiography, fondly recounts this incident as 'an instance of Satyagraha', and one of the 'sweetest recollections' of his life (Gandhi, 1927: 273).

*Dialogue with the Self***:** Furthermore, all *satyagraha* is not for reinforcing a specific *sankalpa* (vow). The dialogue of the *satyagraha* could also be with the self. In 1924, Gandhi kept a historic fast of 21 days which was meant to quell fighting and act as penance for Muslim-Hindu violence. In 1925, he kept a seven-day fast which was noteworthy, as he fasted not for a political or social cause, but to atone for the transgressions committed by his own Ashramites. As their leader, he felt it was from his shortcomings that their transgressions had occurred. This was, thus, another one of his fasts meant as an act of expiation for others' actions.

Cases when Recourse to *Satyagraha* is not possible

There are also instances when Gandhi felt *Satyagraha* could not be practiced; in other words, as one may argue, when the necessary structural components are not adequately present.

1. Rowlatt Act, 1919

A *hartal* (boycott) called by Gandhi against the oppressive measures contained in the Rowlatt Act, broke out in violence, with a school teacher in Amritsar being killed. Gandhi realised then that people were not yet ready for nonviolent agitation. This had resulted in

British retaliation in the form of the brutal Jallianwala Bagh massacre in which Indians were slaughtered in large numbers. Protesting in an enclosed compound, with only one way out of the enclosure; four hundred Indians were massacred and twelve hundred were injured. The Jallianwala Bagh massacre, though it was exceptional in the history of the British Raj, became a symbol of British brutality. This was a defining moment for Gandhi, as he understood just how difficult *satyagraha*'s task would be. Yet he blamed himself for having 'miscalculated the forces of evil in Indian society, and... had summoned his people to *satyagraha* before they were ready for it' (Mehta, 1976:141).

2. Noakhali, 1946

A similar situation presented itself towards the close of the Raj. In Noakhali at the time of the communal riots towards the end of the British rule (1946), Gandhi said that he could not go on a fast. He would instead go to Noakhali to console the victims of the riots, to wipe the tears of the oppressed. He could only plead with the rioters and try to restore love and harmony between the two groups. At the time he felt that he could serve them in many ways and thus try to win them over so that they would begin to regard him as their friend. Gandhi opined that only after gaining that trust could he feel entitled to undertake *satyagraha*. 'The whole of India, Gandhiji said, was faced with a difficult situation. That of Bengal was still more so, he remarked in his post-prayer address on Friday last. He had been asked as to what their duty was under the circumstances. According to the scriptures, that was dharma which was enjoined by the holy books, followed by the sages, interpreted by the learned and which appealed to the heart. The first three conditions must be fulfilled before the fourth came into operation. Thus one had no right to follow the precepts of an ignorant man or a rascal even though they commended themselves to be a righteous one. Rigorous observance of harmlessness, non-enmity and renunciation were the first requisites for a person to entitle him to lay down the law, i.e., dharma' (Gandhi, *Collected Works – e book*, Volume 92 (Extracted from Pyarelal's weekly letter): 436).

Historically, there have been various interpretations of this. But structurally speaking, we can see that the essential structural requirements for a *satyagraha* to take place were missing on those occasions when *satyagraha* was not undertaken. At some level, Gandhi is himself aware of the structural prerequisites for the *satyagraha*. In

the above cases, it is quite evident that the aim of a satyagrahi is to win over an opponent and bring about a change of heart and not to coerce people. Gandhi agreed that in a *satyagraha*, a fast cannot be undertaken against one who considers the *satyagrahi* as his enemy. Of particular interest here is the choice of the word 'entitled' in the context of a *satyagraha*. Gandhi has admitted in his autobiography that he seldom spoke what he did not mean and that he made a conscious effort to say only precisely what he actually wished to convey. The meticulous search for the most correct and apt description for his method of *satyagraha* through its terminological journey starting from being known as 'passive resistance' is also illustrative of this. The word entitled suggests that a *satyagraha* fast is to be regarded as a privilege, both for the one who undertakes the fast and the one to whom it is directed. The process of fasting transports both the entities into the realm of the Truth. A fast cannot stand alone; the participants in the dialogue must both share and speak the same language. When the latter's heart is touched out of respect for the heroism of the *satyagrahi*, the door is likely to be opened to his reason. All through such nonviolent non-cooperation, a *satyagrahi* tries to discover how much right is on the opponent's side, even while he holds on steadfastly to what he considers to be right on his own side (Bose,1972: 110). It naturally follows that rudeness has no place in the *satyagraha*. Further, for a satyagrahi there can only be one goal — to lay down his life performing his duty whatever that may be.

In all the above cases, if we look closely at the algebraic structure of the *satyagraha*, we can identify the structural components that underlie each specific empirical instance of the *satyagraha* of Mahatma Gandhi and see further, how these resonate with the Hindu Vrata. These can be summarised as below:

1. The *satyagrahi* must lead a life of austere discipline following *yamas* and *niyamas*.[8] The satyagrahi has to make himself pure in mind and body to undertake the *satyagraha*.
2. The *satyagraha* dialogue can only take place when the *satyagrahi* is firmly rooted in the truth.
3. *Satyagraha* is not for political bargaining. It is not an instrument of ambassadorial negotiation. It is a dialogue entered into with the 'other' in the interest of attaining objectives that have the firm backing of truth.
4. The success of the *satyagraha* dialogue rests upon the 'other' with whom the dialogue is entered into also sharing the same conception of the truth espoused by the *satyagrahi*.

5. The *satyagraha* dialogue may also be with one's own inner self. A *satyagraha* may hence be purificatory in nature as expiation for one's own transgressions or the transgressions of others towards whom one feels a sense of responsibility.

Broken down into its elementary structures, the *satyagraha* binary can be identified as isomorphic with the *vrata* binary. Viewed as a dialogic relation, in the *satyagraha* dialogue too as in the *vrata*, the participants have to understand the same language. There can be no basic distrust of one another. Gandhi did not believe that the British were intrinsically evil or sinful. He had a tremendous regard for the British Constitution. In fact, he has narrated in his autobiography: 'Hardly have I known anyone to cherish such loyalty as I did to the British Constitution. I can now see that my love of truth was at the root of this loyalty… In those days I believed the British rule was on the whole beneficial to the ruled' (Gandhi, 1927:142).

Though historically, the behaviour of individual incumbents in the British Government was not in consonance with the ideals of the Constitution, the principal requirement for the dialogue to commence was largely fulfilled. In this process, Gandhi from his end has always demanded through *satyagraha* only what he has believed to be a truthful and just demand.

Thus, structurally speaking, in the *satyagraha* tradition, all the elements of the *vrata* dialogue are well-formed. There is a dialogic relation within the ambit of which space is provided for negotiating the inbuilt asymmetry of the binary equation. Both participating ends hold certain truths in common, though the one holding the power may not always address the language of the one who is seeking redressal. At no point in the *satyagraha* is there any personal animosity. There is shared, mutually significant meaning in the communication. The *satyagrahi* firmly believes in and is fearless in his truth. The *satyagrahi* is prepared to go all the way for the accomplishment of his goals regardless of the nature of the dialogic response. And above all, the *satyagrahi* has the necessary forbearance to see that the struggle reaches its desired consummation. All this reveals a strong resemblance to the structural framework of the Hindu *vrata* in Gandhian *satyagraha*. The two share a common ancestry in Hindu religious tradition making them homologous phenomena and internally and structurally isomorphic in their nature. There is a one-to-one correspondence between an element of the *vrata* and the respective element of the *satyagraha*.

There may have been many *satyagraha*-like movements in history,

some documented and others unsung, but the *satyagraha* of Mahatma Gandhi is best analysed as a category apart. It is better seen, not as a historical generic category, rather as a phenomenon typical of Gandhi and closely bound with his religion and spirituality, and hence not to be understood separate of him. Historically, while there was a visible paradigm shift in Gandhi from Swaraj (self-rule) within the Raj (British Empire) to Purna Swaraj, in terms of the political goals defined by *satyagraha*, structurally speaking, the *satyagraha* framework remains unaltered.

Notes

1. *Oxford English Dictionary*, online edition.
2. The eleventh day of the lunar month of the Hindu Calendar; Ekadashi is considered a spiritual day and is usually observed by partial fasting.
3. Panchakarma is an *ayurvedic* detoxification technique which may involve dietary restrictions of various kinds including fasting.
4. Another name for Yama is Yamaraja, literally king Yama. The meaning of the word *yama* is restraint, control or reining in. Iconography depicts Yamaraja as riding a buffalo and holding a noose with a rope. The physical and spiritual *yamas* of Patanjali are also to do with restraint and self-control.
5. Jyeshtha is a month of the Hindu calendar which usually corresponds to June.
6. The Chaturmasya or the four-month period from the tenth day of the Hindu month of Ashada and until the eleventh day of Kartik, is the time that lord Vishnu of the Hindu trinity is said to be asleep. When Vishnu is thus sleeping, special care must be taken against demons and other evil beings. On the eleventh day of Bhadrapada, Vishnu is said to turn to the right. These three days are considered particularly significant and are observed as *vratas*.
7. A fast in which the daily intake of food is increased or diminished in accordance with the cycles of the moon.
8. While the five *yamas* represent moral precepts at the social level, Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra* also enumerates the five *niyamas* which are the personal precepts for an individual. These are *shaucha* (hygiene, cleanliness), *santosha* (contentment), *tapas* (austerity), *svadhyaya* (self-study, usually in the spiritual and scriptural context) and *ishvara pranidhaana* (surrender to the lord).

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