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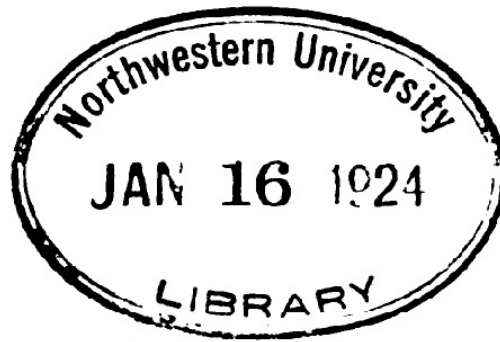


# **The Ethics of Passive Resistance**

**BY**

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*(By the courtesy of the Indian Opinion)*

*“Just as fire by its touch removes all dirt from things, so SATYAGRAHA will remove all miseries and pains. . . It is a panacea for all evils.”*

—M. K. GANDHI.

## THE ETHICS OF PASSIVE RESISTANCE

*All truth is safe and nothing else is safe ;  
and he who keeps back the truth, or withholds  
it from men, from motives of expediency, is  
either a coward or a criminal, or both.*

—MAX MULLER.

### I

NINETEEN centuries ago one of the greatest moralists of the world laid down his life in passive resistance to constituted authority in what was then a great centre of spiritual activity. The ground for the resistance was unquestionably valid, as it has continued down to this day a memorable and living example of loyal submission to human law, where such submission was

not in direct conflict with the higher law of conscience. The resistance had reference to an injunction that a living faith in a super-human or divine power was to be abjured, and a claim to spiritual kingship over a certain race of people was to be renounced in favour of the temporal power then existing. "We found this fellow perverting the nation, and forbidding to give tribute to Cæsar, saying that he himself is Christ a King." To Pilate's question, after asking him whether he put the question of himself, Jesus said: "My Kingdom is not of this world: if My Kingdom were of this world then would My servants fight." His death on the cross has ever been a unique episode in the world's history—a magnificent example of what disobedience to the law really meant. There was no question as to the doubtful character of the authority which sought to enforce the decree of death by crucifixion. The illegal nature of the punishment was not in itself a matter of dispute. It was harsh: it was unjust;



it was rigorous in the extreme: it was wholly unmerited. But he who found himself placed in subjection to the law as it then operated, and to the authority which asserted itself in carrying out that law, deemed it within his right, in obedience to his conscience, to resist both, but in a passive manner: there was no idea of resisting it by force. A combination of his servants and followers against the law would have been a direct condemnation of his claim by physical means, would have been derogatory to his moral character and to his high mission. And so the man who had the most powerful force behind him, by virtue of his transcendent moral sway—a force, irresistible in its inherent strength, and overwhelming in its ultimate result, if put into effect—preferred to resist the law by submitting to the dread decree pronounced against him for breaking the laws, (to him) unlawful demand.

During the same epoch of Christian history, and but a few months after the

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consummation of Christ a holy man met martyrdom at the hands of his adversaries. His offence was "speaking blasphemous words against Moses and against God." He, however, proved a passive resister. His detractors proceeded to open violence. He was dragged out of the city and stoned to death. Upon the removal of Stephen, a general persecution was raised against the Church people at Jerusalem. Men and women were hauled up and committed to prison. Thus passive resistance obtained Divine sanction, and men had recourse to it as the only effective weapon against tyranny and injustice and oppression. As martyrdom was a penalty of self-consciousness, born of the deepest convictions, in religious life, so in civil life those whose minds and whose consciences revolt against oppressive laws, against laws which seek to take away the best of manhood and to degrade humanity, adopt passive resistance as the most effectual salve to their outraged consciences.

## II

“WHAT kind of Society is it which, at this period, has for its base, inequality and injustice? The hell of the poor makes the paradise of the rich. Not only has happiness not come, but honour has fled.” We should be sorry to think with Victor Hugo that this is so. And yet Tolstoy and Hugo shine as two of the greatest minds which have probed into the depths of humanity in our time. Thoreau, one of the greatest of American moralists, the author of “The Duty of Civil Disobedience,” was a martyr to his principles—principles dictated by the highest sense of duty to the State, as well as obedience to conscience. Human convictions may be right or wrong, but there is always a limit to human endur-

ance in the fulfilment of human law. No man to-day will pretend to deny to a modern Japanese the highest form of personal courage and the severest form of moral rectitude. They have been apparent to us of late years in many ways. To us his "Bushido" may seem a blind fetish, but its true meaning, its deep significance, is understood and appreciated by the deepest thinkers of our day. They know it touches the deep chords of humanity. When we have grasped the true moral side of Japanese ethics, and realize to ourselves what a changed being a cultured Japanese has become under the law of evolution, it will be easy for us to understand why at moments of great trial when the spirit of patriotism and family relationship is in the ascendant—he passively resists the admonitions of the inner monitor, refuses to save his life, and creates for himself a moral injunction as it were for physical extinction so as to reach up to a spiritual life of national redemption and regeneration.

Passive resistance as a political weapon and a moral action has, therefore, the fullest possible justification behind it. To offer physical force against recognised authority which seeks to enforce any law, good or bad, would be morally wrong. When you however resist the law, not actively but passively, you thereby imply that what is good and just law to some may be bad to others. While human institutions continue, imperfect men of strong conscience and rational ideas will adopt this mode of expressing their protest against iniquitous ordinances.

Under any form of government power is relegated to a group of men to judge in righteousness and to rule with enquiry and justice. It does not follow that because men are called to power and are invested with authority to enact laws, they must be considered immaculate or infallible. Too often the best men—the most humane, the most just, the most practical, the most considerate—remain subjects, and do not

become rulers or framers of laws for their fellowmen. Similarly, too often those who attain to power are inconsiderate, tyrannical, unjust. If proof were needed it will be found ready to hand from almost every country and from every age. To take a recent case in point from a nation in the front rank, I would cite the passive resistance offered by a large section of highly educated people in England against the last Education Act. Here we have a form of Government which has undergone a purifying process during centuries of civilisation—a government which, by common admission, has reached almost the highest limit of advanced democracy, in which power is attained by a just and equitable process—by sheer force of intellect and reason—a government which bears on the face of it every element of moral right and expediency. Yet we see a law promulgated apparently in the best interests of the whole community, but which proves in its operation, directly antagonistic to and

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unacceptable by a large, intelligent and otherwise obedient section of that community. Numerous laws are in operation to which it gives willing and unquestioned obedience, but, owing to reasons which have swayed humanity in all ages, it finds that its conscience revolts against the new measure. The new enactment caused a serious conflict in their minds, it warred against their sense of right. It therefore simply declined to do the law's bidding and accepted the consequent penalties.

Laws are said to be made for the safety, the security and the protection of the interests of the people; they are not made to chastise and oppress. They must be guided by reason, necessity, expediency—in the interests of all. They must injure none: they must not remorselessly override the domain of reason and conscience. They must act with justice and circumspection. "Render unto Cæsar that which is Cæsar's" does not mean that men should resign themselves body and soul to the law, at

the law's bidding. Three times within my knowledge has a high-minded, law-abiding and intelligent citizen met the laws' injunctions by paying the required fine instead of complying with the law which demanded that he should have his child vaccinated. On moral grounds he was right not to set aside his conscientious scruples. To salve his conscience he became a passive resister. In the words of Thoreau, this man was a man first and a subject afterwards. He obeyed the law of conscience before blindly complying with the alternative of man-made law. "It is not desirable to cultivate a respect for the law so much as for the right. The only obligation which I have a right to assume is to do at any time what I think right."



### III

**PASSIVE** resistance is indeed an extreme course with an honest man ; he is generally driven to that course by the stress of physical power, and hence his action is not unjustifiable on moral grounds. If passive resistance on the part of a minority in a state becomes an imperative necessity, then the majority cannot continue strong for long ; it is bound to weaken and become effete as to its action in the matter of enforcing its power or its authority against that minority. And passive resistance of subjects, who are not even legal units of a lawful or legally constituted Government, has all the more reason for its action, in a given case, since such a Government cannot justly impose burdens or restrictions on units which had no voice in its creation.

Such imposition of burdens on one particular section of a community would be tyrannical, and must ultimately tend to endanger the political fabric of that community. The very *raison-d'être* of the Government would, in these circumstances, become open to question.

There is so much force in what Thoreau has written on the ethics of passive resistance that I make no apology for introducing here some of the relevant passages bearing on the subject of civil disobedience.

\* "Unjust laws exist: shall we be content to obey them, or shall we endeavour to amend them, and obey them until we have succeeded, or shall we transgress them at once? Men generally under such a government as this (United States) think that they ought to wait until they have persuaded the majority to alter them. They think that, if they should resist, the remedy would be worse than the evil. But it is the fault of the government itself that the remedy is worse than the evil. It

makes it worse. Why is it not more apt to anticipate and provide for reform? Why does it not cherish its wise minority? Why does it cry and resist before it is hurt? Why does it not encourage its citizens to be on the alert to point out its faults and do better than it would have them?"

"Action from principle, the perception and the performance of right, changes things and relations; it is essentially revolutionary, and does not consist wholly with anything which was. It not only divides States and churches, it divides families; ay, it divides the *individual*, separating the diabolical in him from the divine."

Speaking of the inconsistent side of the aggregate intelligence placed in authority and power, he says: "After all, the practical reason why, when the power is once in the hands of the people, a majority are permitted, and for a long period continue, to rule, is not because they are most likely to be in the right, nor because this

seems fairest to the minority, but because they are physically the strongest. But a Government in which the majority rule in all cases cannot be based on justice, even as far as men understand it."

Again: "I think that it is enough if they have God on their side without waiting for that other one. Moreover, any man more right than his neighbours constitutes a majority of one already. . . . Under a Government which imprisons any unjustly the true place for a just man is also prison."

Modern conditions have altered the whole face of State administration. The voting system under a party government often, however, places an illiberal group of men in place and power. To meet conditions of this kind Thoreau exhorts all honest men in this wise: "Cast your whole vote not a strip of paper merely, but your whole influence. A minority is powerless while it conforms to the majority; it is not even a minority then;

but it is irresistible when it clogs by its whole weight."

Upwards of four centuries before the advent of Christ, Socrates of Greece, was reputed to be the wisest moralist of his age. His unflinching integrity made him many enemies. The State, or rather those in power in the State, accused him of corrupting the Athenian youth and of despising the national gods. He was indicted in a regular manner. His chief offence consisted in his heeding the divine voice or inward monitor, which people in those times did not comprehend as clearly as he did. He declared that his *demon* rebuked him for misconduct, and commended him for every good word and work. He was in advance of his times. And for his originality, integrity and wisdom he was condemned to death. When one of his disciples exclaimed "How shameful to condemn a man so innocent." Socrates asked if his friends would think it less shameful if he were guilty. Here was a man who, abandoning

all speculations as regards the material world, fearlessly taught "that the proper study of mankind was man," was derided, reviled and then condemned to undergo the extreme penalty of the law. The law of conscience was accounted nothing in those days as it is still considered of little account in reference to human laws and administrative enactments, under our present forms of civilised government. The Delphic Oracle pronounced Socrates the wisest of men. To this he made a characteristic declaration: "Whereas other men thought they knew something, he alone had attained to this element of true knowledge, he knew that he knew nothing."

Passive resistance is emphatically submission to physical force under protest. "Resist not evil" said Jesus of Nazareth, and Socrates, by drinking the poison, refrained from resisting what he had adjudged in his own mind as evil. How far this consorts with the philosophy of Plato, another brilliant heathen sage, will be

apparent from the following prophetic picture of the Man of Sorrows whom the Western world has deified.

“A man perfectly good, virtuous and just; not one who wishes to appear so before his fellows, but one who is really and sincerely so. We strip him of his good name . . . deprive him of everything except his intrinsic goodness. Without doing wrong, we will suppose him to be accounted an evil doer, that his virtue may be tried so as by fire. . . . Neither infamy nor ill usage, neither poverty nor distress, neither the malignity of persecution nor the pain of cruel torture can make him swerve from the path of duty. Death stares him in the face, but he remains unshaken; branded as a sinner, he is still a saint. . . . To complete the picture we will suppose this godly man to be beaten with bats scourged with whips put to the torture, laden with chains nailed to a cross numbered with transgressors and yet without sin.”

Plato wrote thus, three centuries before the advent of Christ. His further definition of a modern passive resister is almost inspired. "A bad man is wretched amidst every earthly advantage; a good man—troubled on every side, yet not distressed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed."

Most men of our day account Count Tolstoy a paradox. By common admission, however, he is a great thinker, is not quite a seer. He has certainly probed into the deeps of humanity. He has laid bare many of the human follies and foibles. Upon war, as upon capital punishment, he looks with the deepest horror. An extremist he may be, yet he is a realist—a rationalist. Passive resistance is almost a fetish with him. "We can suffer, we might not break the law. Men do far more harm and inflict far more injury on one another by attempting to prevent evil by violence than if they endured evil



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patiently. Besides have you ever considered that it is only by suffering pain, torture, misery and death that you are able to convert men? Do not think Christianity made its way in the world by preaching? Bah! No such thing. No one was ever converted by preaching. What converts men is not preaching but martyrdom. It is only when men see other men—weak, sensitive, comfort-loving-men like themselves—taking joyfully the spoiling of their goods, rejoicing in persecution, and going gladly to death for their faith that they begin to believe there is something in it. No one ever believes in the truth of anything till he sees that someone is willing to die for it. The prison, the stake, the gallows—these are the great arguments which convince men. And if you refuse to submit to these punishments, you destroy your only chance of converting men to your faith.”

Count Tolstoy explicitly lays it down that all punishments are in their nature

persecution. "If you say a man is a trouble and a nuisance to his neighbours, remember that the best of men have been so regarded. Do you think that Christ was not considered as a great nuisance and a trouble by his brothers? The household went on quietly until he began to make a stir."

Tolstoy and Thoreau appear to agree in the matter of civil disobedience: they seem to beat one in regard to the claim of conscience on the individual soul. Yet far be it from me to claim human perfection for either of them: they are merely men of advanced thought in the domain of reason; their intellectual pre-eminence claims respect from us for their ideas. Tolstoy holds peculiar views with regard to Christianity. There is much in them which we may discard as inconsistent with his own writings. Still we must admit that there is wisdom in most things he has said. Christianity on him is a broad humanitarianism: Christ a supreme

Rationalist; he subordinated everything to the inner light—"the light that is in you"—that is, the light of reason. This is the deduction upon which all philosophers and moralists base their passive resistance to constituted authority—the conflict of reason with the surrender of conscience.

I think I have now made it clear that passive resistance, as an honourable weapon *in extremis* to those who are subject to physical force, has high, if not divine, sanction for its exercise. Its ethics in governments and communities of men are plain and unmistakable. I have referred to modern morality. Going further back to antiquity we find Confucius indicating in his moral code the dividing line between active disobedience and passive resistance in simple and homely words: "At first my way with men was to hear their words and give them credit for their conduct. Now my way is to hear their words and look at their conduct . . .

. . . To see what is right and not to do it, is want of courage."

I will conclude in the words of Macaulay so eloquent and so pregnant with meaning; "The sceptre may pass away from us. Unforeseen accidents may derange our most profound schemes of policy. Victory may be inconstant to our arms. But there are triumphs which are followed by no reverse. There is an Empire exempt from all natural causes of decay. Those triumphs are the pacific triumphs of reason over barbarism; that empire is the imperishable empire of our arts and our morals, our literature and our laws. . . . But let not us mistaking her character and her interests fight the battle of truth with the weapons of error and endeavour to support by oppression that religion which first taught the human race the great lesson of universal charity."

# SATYAGRAHA

BY

MAHATMA GANDHI.

THE English expression "Passive Resistance" hardly denotes the force about which I propose to write. But Satyagraha, *i.e.*, Truth-force correctly conveys the meaning. Truth-force is soul-force, and is the opposite of the force of arms. The former is a purely religious instrument, its conscious use is, therefore, possible only in men religiously inclined. Prahlad, Mirabai and others were Passive Resisters (in the sense in which the expression is here used). At the time of the Moroccan War the French guns were playing upon the Arabs of Morocco. The latter believed that they were fighting for their religion.

They defied death and with "Allah" on their lips rushed into cannon's mouth. There was no room left here for them to deal death. The French gunners declined to work their guns against these Arabs. They threw up their hats in the air, rushed forward and with shouts of cheer embraced these brave Arabs. This is an illustration of "Passive Resistance" and its victory. The Arabs were not consciously "Passive Resisters." They prepared to face death in a fit of frenzy. The spirit of love was absent in them. A "Passive Resister" has no spirit of envy in him. It is not anger that bids him court Death. But it is by reason of his ability to suffer that he refuses to surrender to the so-called enemy of the tyrant. Thus a "Passive Resister" has need to have courage, forgiveness and love. Imam Husain and his little band refused to yield to what to them appeared to be an unjust order. They knew at the time that Death alone would be their lot. If they yielded to it, they felt that their

manhood and their religion would be in jeopardy. They, therefore, welcomed the embrace of Death. Imam Hussian preferred the slaughter in his arms of his son and nephew for him and then to suffer from thirst rather than submit to what to him appeared to be an unjust order. It is my belief that the rise of Islam has been due not to the sword, but to the self-immolation alone of the Fakeers of Islam. There is little to boast of in the ability to wield the sword. When the striker finds out his mistake, he understands the sinfulness of his act which now becomes murder and has to repent of his folly. Whereas he who courts death even though he might have done so in error, for him it is still a victory. "Passive Resistance" is the Religion of Ahimsa. It is, therefore, everywhere and always a duty and is desirable. Violence is Himsa and has been discarded in all religions. Even the devotees of methods of violence impose elaborate restrictions upon their use.

“Passive Resistance” admits of no such limits. It is limited only by the insufficiency of the Passive Resister’s strength to suffer.

No one else but a “Passive Resister” can answer the question whether his “Passive Resistance” is lawful or otherwise. The public can only judge after the “Passive Resister” has begun his work. He cannot be deterred by public displeasure. His operations are not founded upon Arithmetical Formulae. He may be considered a clever politician or a thoughtful man who commences his so-called Passive Resistance only after having weighed chances of success and failure. But he is by no means a “Passive Resister.” The former acts because he must.

Both soul-force and force of arms are from times immemorial. Both have received their due mead of praise in the accepted religious literature. They respectively represent Forces of Good and



Evil. The Indian belief is that there was in this land a time when the forces of Good were predominant. That state still remains our ideal. Europe furnishes a forcible illustration of predominance of the Forces of Evil.

Either of these is preferable to rank cowardice. Neither Swaraj nor an awakening among us is possible without resort to one or the other. "Swaraj is no Swaraj, which is gained without action. Such Swaraj could make no impression on the people. No awakening is possible without the people at large realising that power. In spite of protestations by leaders and effort by the Government, if they and we do not give "Passive Resistance" due predominance, methods of violence will automatically gain strength. They are like weeds, they grow any how in any soil. For a cultivation of "Passive Resistance" endeavour and courage form the necessary manure; and as weeds, if they are not rooted out, overwhelm a crop, even so will

violence grow like weeds if the ground is not kept clean, by self-sacrifice, for the growth of "Passive Resistance" and violence that may have already taken root be not dealt with by loving hands. By the method of "Passive Resistance" we can wean from the error of their ways the youths who become impatient of and angered by what to them appears to be the Governmental Zoolum and we can strengthen the forces of good by enlisting in favour of "Passive Resistance" their heroism, their courage, and their power of endurance.

Therefore the sooner the spirit of "Passive Resistance" pervades the atmosphere the better it is. It will bless both the Raj and the Raiyat. A Passive Resister never wants to embarrass a Government or anybody else. He does not act thoughtlessly, he is never insolent. He, therefore, shuns boycott, but takes the Swadeshi vow as a part of his religion and never wavers in practising it. Fearing

God alone, he is afraid of no other power.  
Fear of kings can never make him forsake  
the path of duty.









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