

Gene Sharp  
*Gandhi As A Political Strategist*  
(Boston: Porter Sargent, 1979, 357pp.)

“The politician in me has never dominated a single decision of mine, and if I seem to take part in politics, it is only because politics encircle us today like the coil of a snake from which we cannot get out, no matter how much one tries. I wish therefore to wrestle with the snake.” M.K. Gandhi

Gandhi was an extraordinary political strategist, and although not a systematic social analyst, he developed a conceptual framework and outline of a comprehensive program to reconstruct society by voluntary self-help outside the dominating institutions and the state apparatus. Gene Sharp deals with Gandhi as a socio-political strategist.

However Gandhi did not begin as a political strategist but rather as one who tried to manifest the workings of spiritual laws. “I do not believe” Gandhi wrote “that the spiritual law works on a field of its own. On the contrary, it expresses itself only through the ordinary activities of life. It thus affects the economic, the social and the political fields.” The workings of spiritual laws have been taught down the ages by masters who experimented with their lives: the Buddha, the Christ, the Jain saints, the unknown author of the *Gita* — all of whom influenced Gandhi’s understanding. However the specific application of a spiritual law can only be known through meditation, to listening to the inner voice.

As Gandhi wrote, the leader of a satyagraha campaign “depends not on his own strength but on that of God. He acts as the Voice within guides him. Very often, therefore, what are practical politics are unrealities to him, though in the end this proved to be the most practical politics.” Sharp points out that “the very term *satyagraha* has connotations of the union of ethical and practical action. *Agraha* means holding fast, adherence, or insistence. *Sat* or *Satya* also from the Sanscrit means Truth but Truth here connotes essence of being. Thus *satyagraha* may be interpreted as clinging to, holding fast to, adherence to, or insistence upon Truth. Action thus in harmony with the nature of existence and reality must in the final analysis be action which works and is practical.”

One of the insights of Indian thought as to the working of spiritual law is that the Divine is manifested through will and vision — matter is only a manifested form of Divine will. Therefore to fulfil Divine purpose, man must follow the Divine approach. First is the vision, next the will to accomplish the vision, then the manifestation through strategies and tactics— always to be tested against the vision.

Gandhi had a vision of a transformed and renewed India, a self-reliant people devoted to truth and justice. But he knew that the English also needed a vision of an England without an Empire, of an English industry that did not need to dominate the Indian market in order to prosper. For Gandhi, it was no use to have a vision only a free India. Unless the English had an alternative vision of themselves, they would stay on in India with good conscience.

Thus, there was always a double thrust to Gandhi’s campaigns. They were not simply opposition to English colonial institutions. The aim was to awaken Indians to self-reliance and at the same time to have the English realize that English society could exist — and

improve — without dominating India. It was only as both Indians and English came to hold other visions of what cooperation without domination could be, and as Indians grew in self-reliance that transformation came about.

A clear vision is important, but it must be made manifest through will. The lack of directed will was the fatal weakness of Indian society. “It is my certain conviction that no man loses his freedom except through his own weakness. For even the most powerful cannot rule without the cooperation of the ruled. The governance of India is possible only because there exist people who serve.” Gandhi wrote this in 1905. Sharp sees this analysis of will as central to all Gandhi’s strategies. Sharp writes “This view of power claims that all governments depend on sources of power which come from the society, and are made available because of the assistance, cooperation, and obedience of members of that society. When such assistance, cooperation, and obedience are withdrawn effectively the government’s power is weakened, and when the sources of power are severed permanently, the government’s power is destroyed. Hence, all government, no matter how tyrannical, is potentially subject to control by the citizenry if they are willing to withhold their support despite repression until the regime, with no further sources of power available, disintegrates.

“Not only unjust government but all hierarchical social and political systems exist because of the essentially voluntary submission, cooperation and obedience of the subordinate group.” No person can amass wealth without the cooperation, willing or forced, of the people concerned. Gandhi wrote “The rich cannot accumulate wealth without the cooperation of the poor in society. If this knowledge were to penetrate to and spread amongst the poor, they would become strong and would learn how to free themselves by means of non-violence from the crushing inequalities which have brought them to the verge of starvation. All exploitation is based on cooperation, willing or forced, of the exploited. However much we may detest admitting it, the fact remains that there would be no exploitation if people refused to obey the exploiter. But self comes in, and we hug the chains that bind us. This must cease.”

As Sharp points out, this voluntary servitude to unjust power can cease by first locating the sources of power and then by withdrawing the will to obey these hierarchical structures. These sources of power “include the acceptance of the ruler’s right to rule (authority), economic resources, manpower, military capacity, knowledge, skills, administration, police, prisons, courts, and the like. Each of these sources is in turn closely related to, or directly dependent upon, the degree of cooperation, submission, obedience, and assistance that the ruler is able to obtain from his subjects. These include both the general population and his paid helpers and agents. That dependence makes it possible, under certain circumstances, for the subjects to reduce the availability of these sources of power, or to withdraw them completely, by reducing or withdrawing the necessary cooperation and obedience.”

Thus, if all governments are dependent for their existence upon the cooperation, obedience and submission of the people they rule, consequently noncooperation, disobedience and defiance through non-violent techniques may be able to coerce despotic governments but also to destroy them.

Given the ever-increasing power of unjust government and institutions, Sharp rightly sees the need “to be able to present a non-violent alternative technique of action and struggle which people can utilize in place of rioting, civil war, terrorism, and international war. There are increasing signs that this approach can be successful in the development of this non-violent alternative form of struggle.” Sharp, following Gandhi, sets out first the need for

vision, then the mobilization of will. “The prime task before us is first to formulate the next major steps to move toward a fundamentally better society. The task is then to make major changes in our imperfect society, leading to additional improvements, moving progressively toward the kind of society which most of us wish to see ultimately: a society based upon the widely espoused but often ignored principles of human dignity and worth, social justice, political freedom, and world peace. Our responsibility, therefore, is not to dissent from dictatorship but to prevent and disintegrate them, not to denounce genocide but to make it impossible, not to renounce war individually but to remove war from society, not to repudiate particular social oppression but to construct a very different society with justice.”

Today, the vision of a world of justice and the will to carry out the needed steps is weaker than the vision of a world of states defended by weapons and the will to maintain the status quo.

Likewise, when Gandhi began his non-violent struggles in India in 1918, the British Empire was strong, the result of exceptional vision and will. If one reads Philip Woodruff’s masterly study of English colonial civil service *The Men Who Ruled India* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1953) one recognizes the strength of the vision of a far-flung, multi-racial British Empire and the power of the will exerted to hold the Empire together. A handful of Englishmen imposed their vision and will upon millions of Indians with relatively little use of military violence.

Thus, today there is an increasing need to have a clear vision of an alternative world society, an increased will and improved non-violent techniques to move away from our voluntary servitude to unjust social and political structures.

Rene Wadlow

