

The Mahatma's Message: Gandhi's Contributions to the Art and Science of Communication

Arvind Singhal
University of Texas at El Paso, USA

Abstract: This article investigates Mahatma Gandhi's life from the disciplinary lens of communication arts and science. It begins by analyzing his symbolic and communicative "acts"—e.g., the Salt *Satyagraha* and daily spinning—which, by focusing on the aspirations of the poorest-of-the-poor, mobilized a nation against British colonialism. It then reflects on Gandhi's moral authority and credibility which earned him the moniker of *Mahatma* ("Great Soul"), and discusses his ethically-anchored rhetorical position on conflict resolution and conciliation. When it comes to embodying and enacting communication praxis, Gandhi has few equals. Communication practitioners, scholars, and strategists must understand the debt they owe to a life keenly observed. [China Media Research. 2010; 6(3):103-106]

Keywords: *ahimsa, charkha, darshan, dayabal, Mahatma Gandhi, khadi, Salt March, satyagraha, swadeshi*

On April 4, 1930, "a balding, diminutive, bespectacled, dhoti-clad barrister-cum-journalist [Mahatma Gandhi] completed a much publicized and anticipated 241-mile walk from his ashram in Sabarmati" to Dandi,¹ a coastal town in Western India known for its salt deposits.² Accompanied by tens of thousands of fellow marchers, and leading a moving column of people that some estimated was 2-3 miles long, Gandhi had set out on this march with 78 hand-picked followers 24 days previously. Gandhi and his fellow marchers, donning the homespun garb of the Indian peasantry, looked like a brigade of peace soldiers, armed with the philosophy of *satyagraha* ("insistence on truth") and an open transparent mission: to defy the oppressive British tax laws on the production and consumption of salt in India.

The next morning, on April 5th, Gandhi scooped up a lump of mud and salt from the beach, raised his hand, and claimed it as his own. The crowds roared, and cameras clicked. In that moment Gandhi had broken the British-imposed salt ordinance. This symbolic gesture signaled to the tens of thousands on the beach at Dandi, and hundreds of thousands, on beaches along India's 4,000 mile-long coastline, to collect saltwater in vessels, and boil it to produce one's own salt.

The Symbolism of Salt

Gandhi's iconic Salt March against British taxation on salt was a symbolic peaceful protest on behalf of 400 million poor Indians. Prior to beginning his march, Gandhi wrote to Lord Irwin, the British Viceroy in New Delhi, noting that much like water and air, salt was a naturally-available commodity essential for human survival, and one that the poor—who toiled in the fields—needed it most and could least afford. He wrote: "I regard the salt tax to be the most iniquitous from the poor man's standpoint" (see <http://www.thenagain.info/webchron/india/SaltMarch.html>). Gandhi labeled his fight against the salt laws as one of "right against might."

When Irwin declined (and derided) Gandhi's call to repeal the salt laws, the march became a moral necessity. Gandhi would personally invite dozens of journalists from the world over, enlisting their support for the cause. As the number of marchers swelled day-by-day over its 24-day journey, and as news of the march spread—from the hinterlands of India to the august chambers of the British Parliament and U.S. Congress—world public opinion rose sharply in favor of the cause. A long, peaceful march, involving a large number of people and spread over 24 days of progressive action, invites public attention, engagement, and involvement. Why is he marching? Why for salt? Will he reach the sea? How many more miles does he have to go? Will he really break the law? Will the British administration not arrest him? Such questions were endlessly discussed and debated in the global, national, and local media, creating an interpersonal buzz of the likes not seen before.

Gandhi's Salt March, like his other *satyagrahas*, was strategically integrated with a series of other protests and agitations that disrupted or completely shut down British-controlled saltworks, mills, and shops. Notable among these was the Dharasana Satyagraha,³ a non-violent raid of the Dharasana Salt Works in Gujarat under the leadership of Mrs. Sarojini Naidu, a trusted Gandhi lieutenant and well-respected women leader in the Indian National Congress. Hundreds of unarmed *satyagrahis* peacefully approached the main gate of the salt works, protected by an armed contingent of policemen, who had laid out barbed wire around the salt pens. Webb Miller, an American journalist, an eyewitness to the beating of *satyagrahis* by steel-tipped *lathis* (wooden clubs) reported (also see Weber, 1997):

Not one of the marchers raised an arm to fend off the blows. They went down like ten-pins...with sickening whacks of the clubs on unprotected skulls.... In two or three minutes the ground was

quilted with bodies. Great patches of blood widened on their white clothes. The survivors without breaking ranks silently and doggedly marched on until struck down.... The spectacle of unresisting men being methodically bashed into a bloody pulp sickened me.... I felt an indefinable sense of helpless rage and loathing, almost as much against the men who were submitting unresistingly to being beaten as against the police wielding the clubs.

Miller's story about the selfless suffering of *satyagrahis* was read by tens of millions around the world, and discussed and debated on radio, in political forums, and in tea stalls and cafes. It appeared in 1,350 newspapers throughout the world and its text was officially admitted into the minutes of the U.S. Senate as documentation of British savagery in its prized colony of India.

Miller's story helped clarify for the world that there was nothing passive about *satyagraha*. The premise of Gandhian *ahimsa* ("non-violence") was not just about "not hating." Rather it was about loving, and that too—active loving. The women who tended to their felled *satyagrahis* in Dharasana also lovingly offered water to the hundreds of tired and thirsty policeman wielding their clubs in the hot April sun.

The compassionate and loving response to sickening brutality on the grounds of Dharasana Salt Works exemplified the Gandhian notion of *dayabal*—a force that persuades through compassion and love. By putting one's body on the line, and lovingly accepting its suffering at the hand of the oppressor, Gandhi laid a framework for an ethical and moral basis for persuasion.

To practice *dayabal*, however, a *satyagrahi* needed discipline, a sense of dignity and self-worth, a sense of belonging to a community, and a code of action. Gandhi's prescription to achieve such discipline: engage in daily spinning.

Spinning One's way out of Poverty

"I believe that the yarn we spin is capable of mending the broken warp and woof of our life."
—Mahatma Gandhi on the *charkha* ⁴

The *charkha* (or "spinning wheel"), although materially a hand-cranked spinning device used to make thread and yarn, represents a rich metaphor of Gandhian communicative wisdom: a non-verbal symbol of village labor, human dignity, self-reliance, self-discipline, social cohesion and mobilization, as also standing for actionable participation, protest, and progress.

The *charkha* also symbolized Gandhi's emphasis on "putting the last first," an unequivocal belief in the well-being for the poor, the marginalized, and the

overlooked. He made hand-spun, hand-woven cloth (*khadi*) the centerpiece of his program for Indian independence (see Bean, 1989). He spun his own yarn on a *charkha* (spinning wheel) each day, and urged the poor, the unemployed, and people from all walks of life to do the same. For farmers, who engaged in productive labor only during agricultural seasons, the *charkha* equated to food and wages. Gandhi noted: "The spinning wheel alone will solve, if anything will solve, the problem of the deepening poverty of India" (see <http://www.mk Gandhi.org/epigrams/c.htm>).

Khadi was a quintessential communication message, a daily statement made by (rather, worn by) all Indians, cutting across caste, religious, region, and social class differences. Its mass appeal—especially for the poor, rural, and marginalized in India—was *swadeshi*, the production of, and pride in, indigenous products (signifying self-reliance).

In the Gandhian vision, the *charkha* symbolized much more than the wheel and wages of the spinner. The *charkha* was at the center of his village reconstruction ripple, connecting both economically and socially the village farmer, weaver, dyer, washerman, blacksmith, carpenter, and citizen-consumer.

The Indian National Congress, at Gandhi's urging, voted to require its officers and workers to spin and wear *khadi* and to boycott foreign cloth. The spinning wheel was adopted as the symbol of the National Congress, and placed in the center of the party's flag.

The *charkha* was, quintessentially, integrated Gandhian communication praxis in action. As he went about his daily routine of spinning, Gandhi spun a yarn of moral authority that would bring together the impoverished masses of a subjugated nation.

Personal Influence and Moral Authority

"Generations to come will scarce believe that such a one as this ever in flesh and blood walked upon this earth."

Einstein⁵ on Mahatma Gandhi

A woman once came to Sevagram Ashram in Wardha asking Gandhi to persuade her little boy to stop eating too much sugar.⁶

"Sister, come back after a week," Gandhi said.

Puzzled, the woman left and returned a week later.

"Please do not eat too much sugar, it is not good for you," Gandhi told the little boy.

The boy's mother asked: "Bapu, why didn't you say this to him last week? Why did you make us come back again?"

Gandhi responded: "Sister, last week, I too was eating sugar. First, I had to try to see if it was possible."

For Gandhi, there were no gaps in thought, creed, and action. Actions should match words. "Be the change

you wish to see," he emphasized.

Gandhi's credibility and moral authority came from such actions, vesting him with immense power to mobilize, persuade, and influence. Ralph Waldo Emerson (1844) emphasized that such power emanated from Character—a force which acts directly by presence, and without means. This latent power is not flashy, nor vested in official positions or titles, but is natural like light and heat, and characterized by "greatness," "virtuosity," and "magnetism." Gandhi would draw multitudes in his prayer meetings, marches, and on train stations; long lines and jostling crowds vied for the Mahatma's *darshan* (sighting)—a visual communion with a higher spirit.⁷

The "Mahatma" embodied in an Aristotelian sense the attribute of Ethos—a credible, moral authority and source who persuades through their simple presence. Such an ethos brought moral means to discourses and actions, as Gandhi's approach to conflict mediation illustrates.

Conflict Mediation and Conciliation

Throughout his life, Gandhi "remained a barrister" demonstrating a "respect for correct procedure, evidence, and rights."

—Rudolf and Rudolf (1967, p. 25)⁸

What does Gandhi's communication praxis teach us conflict resolution, conciliation, and compromise?

When Gandhi settled his first legal case in South Africa, he did so by arbitration, i.e., out of court. He even persuaded his client, Dada Abdullah to take payments from the losing party, Abdullah's cousin, in installments so as not to ruin him. In so doing, Gandhi learned first-hand the value of mediation, conflict resolution, and compromise. These early experiences would deeply influence Gandhi's conciliatory conflict resolution approach.

After settling his first case by arbitration, Gandhi emphasized: "I had learned the true practice of law. I had learned to find out the better side of human nature and to enter men's hearts. I realized that the true function of a lawyer was to unite parties driven asunder" (Rudolf & Rudolf, 1967, pp. 36-37).

So, as opposed to advocating for adversarial approaches, Gandhi believed that "solutions based on compromise were better because they rested on mutual confidence rather than institutionalized conflict." This thread of conciliation, compassion, and compromise, i.e., "avoiding conflict to find areas of agreement that could produce settlement," remained central to his conflict mediation approach.⁹

In 1918, Gandhi arbitrated a wage dispute between textile mill owners in Ahmedabad and factory workers who were locked in a stalemate. The factory workers

wanted a 35 percent increase in salary; the mill owners' best offer was 20 percent. The stalemate continued for several months; both parties were hurting and no viable solution seemed to be in sight. Gandhi stepped in with a culturally-acceptable solution that reframed the existing problem and saved face for both parties. The factory workers received their desired 35 percent increase the first day (hence satisfying their demand), 20 percent the next day (mollifying the factory owners), and then a perpetual 27.5 percent increase, the arithmetic compromise (see Gardner, 1997).

Gandhi believed that unjust rules, laws, and institutions must be reformed or abolished. That sin, corruption, injustice must be made visible and condemned without condemning the sinner or oppressor. Mediation and conciliation were to be approached with an open heart, a sense of compassion. Firmness and flexibility were both vital in resolving conflicts.

Conclusions

Gandhi, the symbol user, knew the value of collective symbolic acts in educating and galvanizing public opinion in support of just causes. Akin to Moses leading the Jews out of Egypt, Gandhi's Salt *Satyagraha* evoked collective feelings of strength, power, unity, and dignity among the poorest-of-the-poor, oppressed, and subjugated masses of India (see Merriam, 1975; Weber, 1997). His *charkha* (spinning wheel), and daily acts of mass spinning, emphasized his belief on "putting the last first," while also representing a non-verbal symbol of village labor, self-reliance, self-discipline, social cohesion, and actionable participation.

Gandhi, the persuader, embodied the Aristotelian attribute of Ethos—a highly credible, saintly, moral authority who influenced others through his daily acts and simple presence. His virtuous acts of self-sacrifice won him millions of admirers and the moniker of *Mahatma* ("Great Soul").

Gandhi, the mediator and conciliator, believed that conflicts were best resolved not by force, nor even the edicts of heartless law; rather, they were to be resolved through entering peoples' hearts, and bringing to the fore their common humanity. When the caregivers of the beaten *satyagrahis* offer water to the tired policemen who felled their loved ones, a door opens for compassionate resolution.

In embodying and enacting communication praxis, Gandhi has few equals. He was a consummate communication strategist and practitioner.

Notes

1. Salt in Dandi was created by evaporating sea water on mud flats.
2. This vivid description is provided by Chaudhary and Starosta (1992); also see Weber (1997) for an excellent historiography of the Salt March.

3. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dharasana_Satyagraha. Accessed on April 23, 2010. Also see Desai (1999); Fischer (1982).
4. See <http://www.mk gandhi.org/epigrams/c.htm>. Accessed on April 23, 2010.
5. <http://www.quoteworld.org/quotes/4042>. Accessed on April 23, 2010.
6. This story is narrated by Easwaran (1997, p. 159).
7. See Desai (1999; 2008); Gandhi (1994); and Rajmohan Gandhi (2006). Desai (1999) notes that in 1933-34, as he traveled across the country for the cause of Harijans, an estimated 1.2 million experienced his *darshan*.
8. Also see Singh (1979); Singhal (2008; 2009).
9. Quoted in Rudolf and Rudolf (1967, p. 37). His compromises were sometimes a cause for despair among his followers, especially among those who wanted to take an adversarial and rigid stand against the enemy.

Correspondence to:

Dr. Arvind Singhal
Samuel Shirley and Edna Holt Marston Professor
Department of Communication
University of Texas at El Paso
500 West University Avenue
El Paso, TX 79968-5666, USA
E-mail: asinghala@utep.edu

References

- Bean, S. S. (1989). Gandhi and *khadi*, the fabric of Indian Independence. In A. B. Weiner & J. Schneider (Eds.), *Cloth and human experience* (pp. 355-376). Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- Chaudhary, A. G., & Starosta, W. J. (1992). Gandhi's Salt March: A case study of *Satyagraha* with rhetorical implications. *World Communication*, 21(1), 1-12.
- Desai, N. (1999). *My Gandhi*. Ahmedabad, India:

Navjivan Publishing House.

- Desai, N. (2008). *My life is my message*, Sadhana (1869-1948) (4 Vols.). Translated from the original Gujarati by Tridip Suvrud. New Delhi: Orient Longman.
- Easwaran, E. (1997). *Gandhi, the man: The story of his transformation*. Tomales, CA: Nilgiri Press.
- Emerson, R. W. (1844). Essay on Character. Retrieved April 23, 2010, from <http://www.emersoncentral.com/character.htm>.
- Fischer, L. (1982). *The life of Mahatma Gandhi*. London: Grafton Books.
- Gandhi, R. (2006). *Mohandas: A true story of a man, his people and an empire*. New Delhi: Penguin/Viking.
- Gandhi, M. K. (1994). *The collected works of Mahatma Gandhi*. New Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting.
- Gardner, H. (1997). *Extraordinary minds: Portraits of exceptional individuals and an examination of our extraordinariness*. New York: Basic Books.
- Merriam, A. H. (1975). Symbolic action in India: Gandhi's nonverbal persuasion. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 61(3), 290-307.
- Rudolph, S. H., & Rudolph, L. (1967). *Gandhi: The traditional roots of charisma*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Singh, K. (1979). Gandhi and Mao as mass communicators. *Journal of Communication*, 29(3), 94-101.
- Singhal, A. (2009). Gandhi's customer strategy: The last come first. *IBA Journal of Management*, 1(1), 39-42.
- Singhal, A. (2008, May). Putting the last first: Gandhi and communication for social change. *Mazi: The Communication for Social Change Report*, 15. Available: <http://www.communicationforsocialchange.org/mazi-archives.php?id=369>.
- Weber, T. (1997). *On the Salt March: The historiography of Gandhi's march to Dandi*. New Delhi: HarperCollins.