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Dharasana

For peaceful protesters to willingly walk forward and be cruelly beaten might seem, on the surface, to be masochistic and futile. Yet this is exactly what happened at Dharasana, India, in 1930. But far from being futile, the beating of the protesters reverberated around the world, turning public opinion against Britain's rule over India. The events at Dharasana are a perfect example of how violence against nonviolent protesters can backfire on the attackers. But the main way this process operated was not the way Gandhi thought it did.

In this chapter, I tell the story of the famous 1930 salt march, focusing on the Dharasana events. Along the way, I highlight the methods used by the British to minimize outrage and tell why these methods failed.

British forces conquered India in the 1700s and turned it into a profitable colony. As Britain's industrial economy boomed, India's declined through forced dependency. Considering the vast size and population of India, British rule did not require very many troops, because so many natives were willing to work for their colonial masters. The problem for Indian nationalists was that the country was split along so many lines, including caste, religion, class, ethnicity, and gender. These divisions were exploited by British overlords to keep the country in bondage. From the 1920s on, the struggle for independence followed a distinctive path, led by Mohandas Gandhi.

Gandhi, born in 1869, had a conventional upper-caste upbringing and then moved from India to South Africa to further his legal career. He became involved in the struggle against apartheid, was radicalized, and developed his own approach to social change. Central to this approach was satyagraha, often translated as truth-force or more generally as nonviolent action. Gandhi believed one's methods should reflect one's goals and therefore violence should be avoided. He developed an approach based on personal purification, dialogue with opponents, and principled use of nonviolent action. He held that a conscientious search for the truth — strongly linked to justice — was the proper way to promote change. But for Gandhi, satyagraha was not just a technique, but rather a way of life, reflecting a long-term goal of community-level self-reliance built around self-governing villages.

Returning to India in 1915, Gandhi soon became a leader of the nationalist movement. His challenge was immense. On the one hand there were the "moderates," including landowners and industrialists, who prospered under British rule and who favored independence so long as their positions were not threatened. On the other hand there were Marxists and other radicals who favored armed struggle. It was also difficult to bridge the split between Hindus and Muslims.

The pinnacle of Gandhi's campaigning was the 1930 salt march. Salt was a British monopoly, subject to taxation, and it was illegal for Indians to manufacture it. Therefore salt, a basic necessity, was a potent symbol of British oppression. Gandhi conceived a plan of mass civil disobedience by making salt. To build support for this action, he led a 24-day march over more than 200 miles, giving talks along the way. The march was widely publicized across the country, leading to increasing support as the challenge to the British gained momentum. At the conclusion of the march, near the village of Dandi on the coast, Gandhi and his followers walked into the sea and scooped out handfuls of salty mud. This symbolic act of defiance put the British rulers in a quandary.

The dilemma for the British was whether to tolerate a brazen challenge and thus be seen as weak or whether to crack down hard with the risk of creating even more opposition. The dilemma can be seen in letters from Lord Edward Irwin, the Viceroy, during this period.

Prior to the march, Gandhi wrote an open letter to Irwin requesting his "assistance" by removing the salt monopoly, which would then make it unnecessary for Gandhi to proceed with his plan to march and make salt, which he explained in full detail. Gandhi always began with direct dialogue, seeking to win over his adversaries by appeals to justice, before mounting campaigns. Gandhi, a deeply spiritual person who drew on several religious traditions for inspiration, wrote in a way that resonated with Irwin, a devout Christian. Irwin respected Gandhi for his principled views.

Irwin could have ordered Gandhi's arrest at the outset, but this would have inflamed public opinion in India and abroad. Yet as the march proceeded, generating tremendous enthusiasm across the country, the difficulties became even greater for Irwin. A nationalist newspaper expressed the dilemma:

> To arrest Gandhi is to set fire to the whole of India. Not to arrest him is to allow him to set the prairie on fire. To arrest Gandhi is to court a war. Not to arrest him is to confess defeat before the war is begun … In either case, Government stands to lose, and Gandhi stands to gain. … That is because Gandhi's cause is righteous and the Government's is not.[1]

Irwin sought advice from provincial governors. Some of them recommended arresting Gandhi immediately whereas others advised a more cautious wait-and-see approach on the grounds that arrest would only make matters worse. Irwin's ambivalence is apparent in a letter to his father:

> I am anxious to avoid arresting Gandhi if I can do so without letting a "Gandhi Legend" establish itself that we are afraid to lay hands on him. This we clearly cannot afford. But at present there are no signs of that idea gaining currency. Apart from this, there is the undoubted fact that he is generally regarded as a great religious leader rather than a politician and that his arrest, while it will certainly not make the world fall in half, would yet offend the sentiment of many who disagree with him and his policy …[2]

Irwin's ambivalence was shared by others in the British government, such as Wedgwood Benn, Secretary of State for India, who wrote to Irwin from London that, "if Gandhi is arrested and disorder followed, it would become merged in the terrorist organization and thereby strengthen it." Gandhi's use of nonviolent methods caused special difficulty for the British. Benn noted that in the face of terrorism, "it will be a straight fight with the revolver people [violent opponents], which is a much simpler and much more satisfactory job to undertake." In other words, the British had no hesitation in using ruthless force against terrorists.[3]

The difficulty of suitably responding to Gandhi's methods was also expressed by a British police officer, John Court Curry, who encountered Gandhi in both 1919 and 1930.

> From the beginning I had strongly disliked the necessity of dispersing these non-violent crowds and although the injuries inflicted on the law-breakers were almost invariably very slight the idea of using force against such men was very different from the more cogent need for using it against violent rioters who were endangering other men's lives. At the same time I realized that the law-breakers could not be allowed to continue

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[1] Quoted in Dennis Dalton, *Mahatma Gandhi: Nonviolent Power in Action* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 112.

[2] Quoted in ibid., 130.

[3] Quoted in ibid., 132.

> their deliberate misbehavior without any action by the police.[4]

So great was Curry's tension that he felt "severe physical nausea" throughout the period.

After breaking the salt law at Dandi on 6 April 1930, Gandhi continued to promote the "salt satyagraha." He began a speaking tour; actions were undertaken across the country. The next major stage of the campaign was raids on the salt works at Dharasana. Gandhi drafted a letter to Lord Irwin telling of his intentions. Gandhi was arrested that very night, on 5 May, leading to demonstrations across the country. Gandhi had counseled against violence in the wake of his arrest, an admonition that was largely followed.

Gandhi's followers proceeded with plans for salt raids. At Dharasana, salt was produced and stored under the British monopoly. The raiders proposed to "liberate" this salt that, they argued, was legitimately owned by the Indian people. The raids were to take place under strict nonviolent discipline. Due to the arrest of Gandhi and some of the other key salt marchers, the leadership of the Dharasana raids fell to Sarojini Naidu.

Initial raids were mild affairs, for example with individuals strolling near the salt works, then rushing across the ditch around the salt pans to gather some salt in small sacks, followed by their arrest and transport to jail. Naidu and the other leaders decided to adopt a more confrontational approach. They called for volunteers to approach the salt works in groups of 50 in attempts to get through the wire fence. This mass action would force the government to take stronger action. This plan led to a confrontation later dramatized in the 1982 film *Gandhi.* At the time, the drama was captured by U.S. press correspondent Webb Miller. Here is a section of his report from 21 May.

> In complete silence the Gandhi men drew up and halted a hundred yards from the stockade. A picked column advanced from the crowd, waded the ditches, and approached the barbed-wire stockade, which the Surat police surrounded, holding their clubs at the ready. Police officials ordered the Marchers to disperse under a recently imposed regulation which prohibited gatherings of more than five persons in any one place. The column silently ignored the warning and slowly walked forward. I stayed with the main body about a hundred yards from the stockade.
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> Suddenly, at a word of command, scores of native police rushed upon the advancing marchers and rained blows on their heads with their steel-shod lathis [batons]. Not one of the marchers even raised an arm to fend off the blows. They went down like ten-pins. From where I stood I heard the sickening whacks of the clubs on unprotected skulls. The waiting crowd of watchers groaned and sucked in their breaths in sympathetic pain at every blow.
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> Those struck down fell sprawling, unconscious or writhing in pain with fractured skulls or broken shoulders. 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. When every one of the first column had been knocked down stretcher bearers rushed up unmolested by the police and carried off the injured to a thatched hut which had been arranged as a temporary hospital.
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> Then another column formed while the leaders pleaded with them to retain their self-control. They marched slowly towards the police. Although every one knew that within a few minutes he would be beaten down, perhaps killed, I could detect no signs of wavering or fear. They marched steadily with heads up, without the encouragement of music or cheering or any possibility that they might escape serious injury or death.

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[4] Quoted in ibid., 133.

> The police rushed out and methodically and mechanically beat down the second column. There was no fight, no struggle: the marchers simply walked forward until struck down. There were no outcries, only groans after they fell. There were not enough stretcher-bearers to carry off the wounded; I saw eighteen injured being carried off simultaneously, while forty-two still lay bleeding on the ground awaiting stretcher-bearers. The blankets used as stretchers were sodden with blood.
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> At times the spectacle of unresisting men being methodically bashed into a bloody pulp sickened me so much that I had to turn away. The Western mind finds it difficult to grasp the idea of non-resistance. 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, and this despite the fact that when I came to India I sympathised with the Gandhi cause.[5]

This drama continued over a number of days, until the raids were called off. Hundreds of satyagrahis were hospitalized, and four died. As well as the beatings, the confrontation included arrests and police clearing or destruction of camps established by the raiders.

Most of the police who engaged in the beatings did not seem deterred by the lack of resistance by their opponents. Indeed, some of the police became enraged, kicking the men in their stomachs and testicles after they had fallen, sticking lathis up their anuses, and throwing them into ditches.

On the other side of the confrontation, some witnesses among the camp of the raiders were nearly driven to distraction by the brutality and had to be restrained from using violence themselves. Maintaining nonviolent discipline was a top priority among the protesters; there were occasional lapses as salt raids occurred in different parts of the country.

For those who were not directly involved, the brutal beatings of nonresisting raiders had the potential to cause enormous outrage. Therefore it is not surprising the government attempted to minimize the political damage in various ways. One was to prevent correct information about the encounter reaching wider audiences. Thomas Weber, author of the definitive study of the salt march, says that after the raids on 31 May, “Red Cross workers were denied access to the wounded and according to nationalist sources ‘even press reporters were chased away’ in order to prevent bad publicity.”[6] On this day more than a hundred raiders received serious injuries.

The government provided its own account of what happened, claiming no brutality was involved and that stories about hospitals filled with wounded satyagrahis were false. A government communiqué about the events of 31 May stated that,

> Some half a dozen of the attackers got into the salt pans where they were easily caught, but the remainder, on seeing the horses [ridden by police], turned tail and fled with the horses after them. The whole affair was over in a few minutes and no casualties whatever resulted as the mounted men did not come into contact with the volunteers nor had they any sticks or weapons in their hands.[7]

The police also alleged that raiders were feigning their injuries.

Another method used by the government was ridicule. One communiqué described some protesters requesting a “tap or two on the back of the legs” so they could obtain meal tickets and return home.[8]

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[5] Webb Miller, quoted in Thomas Weber, *On the Salt March: The Historiography of Gandhi’s March to Dandi* (New Delhi: HarperCollins, 1997), 444–45.

[6] Weber, *On the Salt March,* 450.

[7] Quoted in ibid., 451.

[8] Weber, *On the Salt March*, 453.

Probably the biggest impact of the raids was outside India. Press correspondent Webb Miller's moving account, part of which was quoted earlier, had an enormous influence in shaping opinion. The government knew that free flow of information was damaging to its rule and so had imposed press censorship. Miller, as a foreign correspondent, was not covered by this censorship law, but his attempts to cable his story from Bombay to the United Press office in London were initially blocked.

> An apparent Gandhi sympathiser informed him by way of an unsigned note, that his message was not sent. On inquiring, at first he could get no information about his message at all. Later, at Government headquarters of the Bombay Presidency he was reassured that as there was no censorship his telegram must have gone. After further protests and a statement of his intention to fly to Persia if necessary to get his scoop to the world, it was admitted that his message was stopped by the censor. After further arguments most of his message was transmitted.[9]

Miller's story, circulated by United Press, appeared in 1,350 newspapers, was read out in the U.S. Congress, and was reproduced by Gandhi supporters in the United States with more than 250,000 copies.

Gandhi believed nonviolent action worked by conversion of opponents, through "melting their hearts" by the voluntary suffering of satyagrahis.[10] Thomas Weber argues that the Dharasana raids showed Gandhi's view to be wrong.[11] Few if any of the police who inflicted the serious injuries were converted; indeed, some of them became incensed by the satyagrahis' lack of resistance and redoubled their brutality. Nor, apparently, were many government officials converted. The greatest impacts were on the Indian masses, who were informed of the events through the nationalist media, and on foreign public opinion, in Britain, the United States, and elsewhere, via reports by Miller and others. Using violence against disciplined nonviolent protesters thus generated outrage most importantly through indirect means — through written accounts of the Dharasana raids — rather than, or as well as, directly on the participants.

The salt march and the salt raids did not lead to a breach in the government's salt monopoly, but it did transform consciousness in India. According to Weber,

> Talking with those old enough to remember the heady days of 1930, the consistent response is that the event transformed the feeling in the country from one of pessimism to revolution, that nothing which could now be said about those times could possibly capture the intense sense of drama and wonder that surrounded the event, that the movement changed the face of India's history, that the country of before and after the Dandi March was not the same.[12]

Beyond its impact on India, the events of 1930 introduced to the world the idea of nonviolent action — including civil disobedience and disciplined mass protest — as a strategic method of social action.

Conclusion

The beatings at Dharasana were a transformative event in the struggle for India's independence.[13] The British used all five methods of inhibiting outrage, yet without much success.

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[9] Ibid., 403.

[10] Gandhi's views on nonviolence are discussed at greater length in chapter 13.

[11] Thomas Weber, "'The Marchers Simply Walked Forward until Struck Down': Nonviolent Suffering and Conversion," *Peace & Change* 18 (July 1993): 267–89.

[12] Weber, *On the Salt March,* 479.

Cover-up. British authorities imposed press censorship within India and attempted to prevent Webb Miller's reports getting to his editors.

Devaluation. Indians were devalued in the eyes of many British whites. In some accounts, their resistance was trivialized.

Reinterpretation. The government said there was no police brutality and that victims were faking their injuries.

Official channels. Gandhi and other members of the independence movement were arrested; the courts served as agents for dispensing "justice."

Intimidation. The predictability of being beaten and the possibility of arrest discouraged many potential participants.

Gandhi believed nonviolence worked by converting opponents, but actually at Dharasana the police, who so ruthlessly beat the protesters, were not won over at all. Instead, the most powerful impact was on third parties, namely those not directly involved in the confrontation: Indians in the rest of the country and members of the public in Britain, the United States, and other foreign countries.[14]

The events at Sharpeville, Dili, and Dharasana have several similarities. In each case, violence was used against protesters who were peaceful, or nearly so. In each case, the attack rebounded against the attackers, leading to a dramatic increase in support for the cause espoused by the target group. Because this effect was so strong, these can be called classic backfires.

There are some important differences among the three events. At Dharasana, protesters carefully planned and prepared for the confrontation, which was fully anticipated: participants knew what was in store for them. At Sharpeville and Dili, in contrast, the protesters did not expect an assault, nor had there been training in nonviolent discipline. Of the three events, the number killed was far less at Dharasana, yet the emotional impact of the violence was enormous. This suggests that when protesters are highly principled in their nonviolent methods, and design their campaign carefully, then even a relatively low level of violence against them will seem shocking. At Sharpeville and Dili, there was less planning and little anticipation of violence, but the scale of the killing was so great that it shocked audiences worldwide. The key to the impact in all three events thus appears to be that authorities used violence seen as grossly excessive in relation to the actions of the protesters.

These three cases are vivid testimony that brutal attacks on peaceful protesters can backfire. But what about other sorts of attacks? Can they backfire too? In the following chapters, I examine a range of other attacks, from unfair dismissal to illegal invasion. In every one, the perpetrators try to inhibit outrage using the same five methods; when these methods fail, the attacks backfire.

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[13] Analysis of the salt march as a transformative event is given in David Hess and Brian Martin, "Backfire, Repression, and the Theory of Transformative Events," *Mobilization* 11 (June 2006): 249–67.

[14] This process is analyzed in more detail in chapter 13.