

The Book Trail

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Gandhi would have us believe that Satyagraha, his method of "non-violent direct action," contains the power of conversion rather than that of coercion. By means of mass civil disobedience and exemplary non-resistance to acts of force on the part of authorities, the Indian leader believes hostile and repressive governments can be made to see the light of truth. Hence, as Gandhi has it, it is a final understanding of justice and not duress of mass threats which leads officials to concede the rights of India's native lower classes.

But at least one of his followers is frank enough to admit that this is but bandying words. Krishnala Shridharani tells us in *War Without Violence* (Harcourt, Brace & Co. \$2.50) that Satyagraha "fulfills the function of war," and, elsewhere in the book, "there is an element of what, for want of a better term, we shall call compulsion in it, if not of coercion, since the latter implies revenge and punishment." Then again, "it has become a revolutionary weapon for destroying an undesirable political order." It "aspires to be an equivalent of war." It "has given evidence of being an effective mode of revolution or civil war."

War Without Violence contains a seductively uplifting appeal. Every page is permeated with the deep spirituality of the Swaraj (self-government) movement; every episode throbs with the dramatic martyrdom of the natives reaching out in vain for a sublimation of their miserable lot. But what would it profit the Indians to gain self-government if at the same time they did not gain a solution of the basic economic problem?

The author's failure to think through to this point is all the more remarkable in light of his understanding of the question of means and ends—a question which I have missed no opportunity to discuss at length in these columns, and elsewhere as well. "The means," says

Mr. Shridharani, "should be the end in process and the ideal in the making."

If this is so, and I for one am convinced that it is, then how can "an equivalent of war" used as a means lead other than to an end in which coercive strife of necessity must be a predominating factor?

The obvious and unquestioned sincerity of Gandhi and of his Satyagrahis, including Mr. Shridharani, makes it difficult for a conscientious critic to belittle the appeal of a cause genuinely devoted to the defense of human dignity. And yet truth must not be denied on the ground of sentiments which cannot be sustained on practical grounds.

As far as I am able to discover Gandhi has no fundamental program for economic reform. He has evolved a method of agitation which, to date, has succeeded in gaining world-wide and deserved sympathy for the plight of the Indian victims of British imperialism (which is not to be confused with the traditional domestic ideals of British democracy). He has secured, through this means, a modicum of respect for his people; and he has brought to the Indians themselves a sense of self-respect and a ray of hope—a sizable accomplishment in itself.

Be this as it may, the fact remains that Satyagraha is a form of coercive mass action. As such it inevitably involves a debasement of rationality. It calls for a suspension of the thinking processes while men and women merge their individualities into a horde and press forward with impassioned impatience toward the achievement of a single objective. It is, despite its high purposes and its genesis in injustices that cry out for redress, a form of rabble-rousing. And not even Gandhi can make of rabble-rousing an instrument for the solution of social problems.

I found *War Without Violence* fascinating reading, despite my inability to reconcile the Gandhi method with the basic task before social reformers. Indeed, Mr. Shridharani's book is a "work" in the real sense of authorship. Its 300-odd pages present a well-rounded, carefully written account of a social movement in

which the author places great faith and in which he is participating as an active leader. It bears, then, the stamp of personal experience, of observation, of research, of conviction. Its style is simple yet finished, pleading yet fair-minded. As I read on from page to page I could not resist the recurring thought that such intelligence, energy and determination if directed to educating the Indians in fundamental economics might really have brought about a new state of affairs in the British Empire.