UNIT 10 STRIKE

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10.1 INTRODUCTION

Strike, primarily, is a cessation of all actions and a form of protest against existing unrest. It is expressed by the dissatisfied public against the rulers and is a non-violent weapon, which, to some extent, imposes coercion on the opponent. It is a method that tries to secure the legitimate and just demands from the rulers. Strike is an expression of protest against the recognised injustice and that, which intends to invoke in the offender/oppressor a sense of guilt and wrongdoing. The terms 'strike' and 'hartal' are used interchangeably to explain the modes of non-cooperation. Iyer explains hartal as a 'traditional form of protest in India, a temporary strike with advance notice as to its duration, the closing down of shops and businesses and sometimes the halting of the work of administration' (R.N.Iyer, p.302). Nevertheless, it has been used as a non-violent method protesting the oppressive British rule. In this Unit, we learn the intricacies involved in the method of 'strike' and how it is used as a means of conflict resolution.

Aims and Objectives

After reading this Unit, you would be able to understand

- The meaning and significance of strike
- How strike can be used as a means of conflict resolution
- The case studies that illustrate the success of the strikes.

10.2 STRIKE: MEANING AND BASIC PRECEPTS

Satyagraha is the method adopted by Gandhi during his struggles against racial discrimination in South Africa and also in India during the freedom struggle movement. R.R.Diwakar categorises satyagraha into three main streams. Firstly, it is constructive wherein constructive activities are taken up and there is a selfless service of the society; secondly, there are

methods like hartal, fasting and prayer that involve self-denying actions and purificatory in nature; and finally, where there is direct action and a deliberate breach of law, Satyagraha turns into an aggressive form, wherein repression and suffering are likely to lead to the death of an individual in an attempt to remove the evil (R.R.Diwakar, p.56).

Though fasting, strike/hartal and non-cooperation are taken as part of Satyagraha, the methods differ from one to another and are said to be consisting an element of coercion. In the statement before 'Evidence Before Disorders Inquiry Committee', on January 9th, 1920, Gandhi in reply to the question of what Satyagraha is, termed it as 'a movement intended to replace methods of violence. It is a movement based entirely on truth. It is, as I have conceived it, an extension of the domestic law on the political field, and my own experience has led me to the conclusion that that movement and that movement alone can get rid India of the possibilities of violence spreading throughout the length and breadth of the land for the redress of grievances, supposed or real' (CWMG, vol.16, p.378). Drawing a sharp distinction between hartal and Satyagraha, he stated that 'hartal may sometimes be satyagrahic or may not be. Here civil disobedience as such had absolutely nothing to do with hartal. Hartal had a two-fold purpose: one, to strike the imagination of the people as also to strike the imagination of the Government; but the second was a discipline for those who have to offer disobedience. I had no method of understanding the mind of India except by some such striking thing. The hartal is a proper index to show how far I could carry my principle' (Ibid, pp.386-387).

Bondurant remarked that 'a genuine Satyagraha campaign is, throughout, active and constructive, aggressive and synthesizing. Insistence upon arriving at the truths of the situation, together with persistence in exploring new and creative approaches, are fundamental' (Joan Bondurant, p.43). Bondurant also opined that methods like strike do not fulfill the essentials for a movement qualifying as satyagraha. They can be at the most used during some stage of satyagraha. Taken in this sense, Satyagraha enables 'the usage of distinct instruments to be utilised either simultaneously or separately' (J.N.Sharma, p.36). Strike is one such instrument used by the labour demanding a certain standard of treatment from the employer. In a political movement, it is most often taken as extracting certain demands from the government. The application of the strategy of strike is termed as satyagraha in this context. As mentioned earlier, it means the cessation of all activities and extending non-cooperation to the government in every possible way. Attacking these vantage points through the instrument of strike, consequently, becomes satyagraha strategy (Ibid, p.36). Hartal is a temporary strike of work and stopping of business, usually for 24 hours. It is a form of protest. It is prolonged if the cause is sufficiently serious and the wrong very great (Diwakar, p.56). It was estimated that there were approximately 200 strikes in India during 1920 and no fewer than 400 in 1921 (CWMG, vol.19, p.365).

Picketing is a method that spreads the message of the strike and adds to its effectiveness though strike is not the only signal for picketing. It means a general appeal to people to withdraw its patronage from concerns and shops. For example, during the freedom struggle, some of the shops importing the British-manufactured goods were picketed; in 1942, there was picketing of administrative officers, police stations and public transport.

Dharna or the sit-in protest is also a form of strike and is one of the oldest methods of protest. It draws the attention of the public to the cause for which it is being done and thus compels the offender/ offending party to come to an agreement or solution. Whether it is successful or crushed, dharna attracts and influences public opinion considerably.

Gandhi often restrained his supporters from sitting on dharna, as he was not in favour of it on the grounds of coercion.

It is important to note that strike can be resorted to only after the legitimate methods of conflict resolution fail to achieve the desired ends. Thomas Weber enlists them as follows:

a) moral appeals to the conscience of the employers to concede just demands, and

b) if these fail, a resort to voluntary arbitration where the decision of the umpire would bind the parties.

An example may be quoted from the Ahmedabad Mill Workers' strike wherein Gandhi sought to bring about peaceful resolution to the problem by appealing to the good sense of the employers to accept the arbitration principle. Strike becomes inevitable when the disputes go out of hand and call for urgency to solve the matters. A peaceful conducting of strike can be an absolute success and a violent strike would not only lead to violence but also its perpetration. It would ultimately lead to the loss of trust between the disputing parties making it all the more complex to resolve the conflict. The strikers should maintain tolerance so that the targeted party does not cave in to the pressure of the former.

10.3 GANDHI ON THE ETHICS OF STRIKE

Though Gandhi successfully used strike as a non-violent method of protest, he advised his supporters to follow an ethical code of conduct. For a successful strike he laid down the following principles:

1. never to resort to violence
2. never to molest blacklegs
3. never to depend on alms, and
4. to remain firm, no matter how long the strike continued, and to earn bread during the strike by any other honest labour.

Gandhi's principles were well understood by the workers who, in turn, accepted them and 'pledged themselves at a general meeting not to resume work until either their terms were accepted or the mill-owners agreed to refer the dispute to arbitration' (CWMG, vol.39, p.339). True to Gandhi's ethical principles, the workers adhered to their pledge and duty to maintain peace and self-respect. They daily paraded the streets of the city in peaceful procession, carrying their banner bearing the inscription '*Ek Tek*' (Keep the pledge). Gandhi noted that "strikes are an inherent right of the working men but must be considered a crime immediately the capitalists accept the principle of arbitration" (Young India, 5-5-1930). Gandhi preferred giving enough work to those who are striking; especially, the spinning and hand-weaving ensure enough incentives and income to live. Instead of leading an ordinary life, labourers may work toward making their living conditions better in many a way. There should be better awareness in order to demand their legitimate rights and even demand a respectful behaviour from their employers keeping in view their (labour's) contributions to the organisation. If these conditions are not fulfilled, there is justification in the labourers resorting to strike. 'Strikes, therefore, for the present should only take place for the direct betterment of the labourers' lot, and when they have acquired the spirit of patriotism, for the regulation of prices of their manufactures' (CWMG, vol.19, p.366).

Strikes carried out on the basis of untruth or for unjustified demands negate the very

purpose of non-violent methods of protest or reasonable demands. They are also said to have the elements of coercion but can be justified on the grounds of addressing grievances that have been in practice for long. Gandhi never supported such strikes that had no moral grounds. He felt that they would blur the vision towards attaining truth and self-realisation.

At the same time, Gandhi opined that frequent calls for hartal or strikes would amount to their abuse and also result in their inefficacy. The government would cease to respond and reform itself in response to such incidents and the very purpose of targeting the erring government is lost if these methods are abused and when they are reduced to the status of cheap gimmicks. It would render them invalid. Hartals are meant as a protest against something extraordinary; therefore, the frequent calls to observe hartals would be in bad taste.

10.4 PACIFIC STRIKES

Gandhi, in the ***Young India*** edition on 18th November 1926, refers to the extract titled *No More War*, an organ of the British Pacifists. Gandhi provided the extract for the benefit of the readers. A. Fenner Brockway authored the conditions towards this direction.

1. A strike in protest of social evils, which destroy human life, can be as much an act of pacifism as a strike against war. (Starvation wages kill as many human beings as are killed by guns).
2. If it be said that "constitutional" means could be used to end these evils, the same can be said of war. Our "Constitutional" machinery is inadequate. The voters two years ago had neither wage reductions nor war in mind.
3. If it be said that a strike (and particularly a general strike) against wage reductions is an effort to "coerce" the nation or the Government, the same can be said about a general strike against war. As a matter of fact, neither has any promise of success unless the greater part of the nation supports it.
4. It is not accurate to liken a strike to an economic blockade. So far as there is danger of hunger, it would be the strikers themselves who would suffer first. In actual fact, in the recent General Strike, the T.U.C. (Trade Union Congress) was prepared to co-operate in maintaining life and health. The Government refused co-operation.
5. The determining factor as to whether a strike is pacific or not is the spirit from which it springs. A strike against war in which the motive was hatred of members of the Government rather than of war and which represented a spirit which might be transformed into civil war, would not be an act of pacifism, nor would a strike against wage reductions animated by hatred of the employers or of members of the Government, or by anti-social feeling. But both are acts of pacifism when inspired by the spirit of protest against the evil themselves.
6. Whilst it is admitted that a non-pacifist spirit occasionally showed itself in the utterances, and still more rarely in the acts of strikers, I have not the least hesitation in saying that the dominant motive in the Great Strike was that of self-sacrificing moral protest and not anti-social force or personal hatred. It was this, which gave it spiritual power; in this the secret of the wonderful self-discipline of the mean was to be found.

Gandhi added one more to these admirable conditions that a 'pacific strike must be limited to those who are labouring under the grievance to be redressed'. Gandhi cautioned that strikes and hartal, though are effective means, it is definitely not difficult to misuse them. Workmen, he said, have to organise themselves into strong labour unions and the strike should be undertaken only with their consent. It is wrong to resort to strike without previous negotiations with the owners or management. It is all the more important not to strike when the management opts for arbitration and ensures scope for conflict resolution. In this case, panchayat principle (the traditional Indian practice of settling the local disputes by the five elder members chosen by the local community) is important where both the parties respect the decision.

10.5 STRIKES: CONDITIONS AND CONDUCT

Gandhi enumerated the following conditions for a successful strike. If a strike fulfills all the conditions as given below, it is said to have been successful.

1. The cause of the strike must be just.
2. There should be practical unanimity among the strikers.
3. There should be no violence used against non-strikers.
4. Strikers should be able to maintain themselves during the strike period without falling back upon Union funds and should therefore occupy themselves in some useful and productive temporary occupation.
5. Successful strikes have taken place even when all the above conditions have not been fulfilled, but that merely proves that the employees were weak and had a guilty conscience. We often make terrible mistakes by copying bad examples. The safest thing is not to copy examples of which we have rarely complete knowledge but to follow the conditions, which we know and recognize to be essential for success.

In the instances of disputes with management, the labourers should follow certain general principles. These are summarised by Thomas Weber in the following words:

1. The workers or their leaders (among whom there must be perfect correspondence and understanding) should not exaggerate their demands; they should study the pros and cons of the case carefully before formulating their demands. They should always be ready for correction if the opposite party is able to convince them that they are wrong.
2. The weapon of the strike, which is really the very last weapon in the armoury of the industrial workers, should not be resorted to unless all peaceful and constitutional methods of negotiations, conciliation and arbitration are exhausted. Even during the course of a strike, workers should be prepared for any just settlement or a reference to arbitration (This assumes "practical unanimity among the strikers").
3. Peaceful and nonviolent behaviour, even under provocation, is the *sine qua non* for obtaining justice through any mass struggle of this type. While on strike the workers should not damage the property or injure the person of anybody. They should bear no ill-will towards their employers or their officers, as they are fighting the evil in the employers and not the employers personally.

4. The workers should be self-respecting and, therefore, they should not rely on the funds raised by sympathisers for the successful conduct of the strike. A striking worker should find alternative employment during this period to maintain themselves and their family, and no work should be considered below one's dignity. This is because "there is nothing more injurious to…morale and self-respect than enforced idleness", and because labour cannot "prolong a strike indefinitely, so long as it looks to pecuniary support from public subscriptions or alms or depends on the resources of its union and no strike can absolutely succeed which cannot be indefinitely prolonged".

5. A strike is a form of satyagraha. Strikers, therefore, must not submit to superior force or hardship. Once they make a resolve they keep firm to it and even at the cost of privations, including starvation, they stick to the resolution.

6. While on strike the workers should be truthful, courageous, just and free from hatred or malice towards anybody, and should be prepared for voluntary service putting their faith in God. (Weber, 1991, pp.78-79).

10.5.1 Duties of the Workers

While Gandhi was vocal about these conditions and spoke of workers' right to strike for reasons that are genuine, he enlisted the duties of the workers and the necessity to conduct themselves in the right spirit.

(1) If the workers wish to improve their conditions and want the goodwill of their employers, they should be honest and give up their addictions.

(2) They should be industrious, hard working, efficient and courteous.

(3) Carry out orders and speak with due respect not only with the employer but also with everyone else.

(4) More important than the strike is the weapon of non-violence wherein justice for any unsettled matter may be sought from *panch* (as in the panchayat system).

(5) In case a matter is with *panch*, during this course the workers should not continue their strike.

(6) If any member of the Union is rude and refuses to back to work, they should cease to be the members of the Union.

(7) Workers should not adopt coercion to concede the demands.

(8) If a worker is unreasonable, it would only benefit the employer and not the worker as unreasonable demands do not justify strike in any form.

(9) While a hartal may be taken up in true religious spirit, it should rule out any direct action that is damaging in nature.

10.5.2 Sympathetic Strikes

Gandhi found the sympathetic strikes to be humanitarian or political and those that are undertaken expressing sympathy for the others in need. Citing the example of the Assam-Bengal Railway and the steamer strikes, he termed it as the out of the ordinary attempt. It is necessary to gauge the pros and cons of such strikes and the consequential sufferings. He remarked in this context that the 'labourers were not ready for a

philanthropic strike. In my opinion the labourers and artisans of India have not yet arrived at that degree of national consciousness, which is necessary for successful sympathetic strike' (Young India, 22-9-1921). Gandhi was never inclined towards taking up these fasts and attributes it to the lack of our understanding regarding the wants and aspirations of these classes and our own inability to inform them of the political situation in the country. It is important not to exploit them for any ends. The best service, he said, is to 'teach them self-help, to given them an idea of their own duties and rights, and put them in a position to secure redress of their own just grievances. Then and not till then are they ready for political, national or humanitarian service' (Ibid). Secondly, as in other strikes, in sympathetic strikes Gandhi excluded the idea of causing embarrassment to the government. Sympathetic strikes have to be self-purificatory in nature and enable the wrong doer to see his folly and redress it. The merit of the sympathetic strike lies in the inconvenience and the loss suffered by the sympathizers (Ibid). These strikes should continue inspite of the threats and temptations that are held against them. The feeling of patriotism and fellow feeling is as much necessary during the conduct of these strikes.

10.6 CASE STUDIES

Here, the learner is appraised with two case studies, i.e the Ahmedabad Mill Strike of 1918 and the protest against the Rowlatt Act, which have been dealt at length in some of the previous courses.

10.6.1 Ahmedabad Mill Strike (1918)

The textile mill owners and the labour force of Ahmedabad got embroiled in a dispute over the grant of a bonus ultimately boiling down to the issue of allowances. Gandhi was approached for resolution and he found it appropriate that the method of arbitration would resolve the issue. Though it was agreed upon in the beginning, the issue further escalated into a strike by the workers that deeply anguished the mill owners. On 22nd February 1918, a lock-out was declared; though Gandhi tried to prevail upon both the parties to solve the issue, it was of no avail. On disagreement over the wages, the labourers began a regular strike from 26th February. The labour adhered to an ethical code of conduct during this time. They pledged not to go for work till their demand for just wages was met; decided to observe absolute non-violence and not to create any trouble; not to indulge in looting or any bad behaviour; not to harm the property of the mill and maintain peace at all costs. Gandhi and his co-workers and supporters helped the labour by apprising them of the merits of maintaining hygiene, educated them about the issue and conducted daily meetings on the problem solving methods. Though the morale of the labour was high, the mill owners tried to thwart the workers to go further with their strike.

At this stage, Gandhi announced his decision to fast till the problem was solved. This led the mill owners to term the fast as a method of coercion; Gandhi, in the meantime, felt that fast was the only means through which he could keep the morale of the workers high. He said in this context: 'Instead of five to ten thousand blooming faces full of the lustre of iron determination, I saw but a thousand or two who seemed worn out and dejected…I am one of those who believe that one has to stick to his vow in any circumstances. I cannot even for a moment tolerate the idea that you should violate the solemn pledge you have taken. Till such time you would all get your 35 per cent increment or you are all completely defeated in your object, I am not going to touch my food nor am I riding a car'. Finally, through arbitration, the issue was resolved with the

management deciding to pay the increment of 35% to the workers. Gandhi's non-violence and his approach of no ill-will for the workers and mill owners was remarkable. His secretary Mahadev Desai noted that the 'strike was conducted with the cleanest means, on the strength of sheerest determination, and with least bitterness on both sides. The result too was beneficial to both the parties' (J.N.Sharma, p.69).

10.6.2 The Rowlatt Satyagraha

The Rowlatt Bill was the outcome of the recommendation made by the Sedition Committee presided over by Sir Rowlatt in 1918, and was prepared to strengthen the hand of the government in the control of crime and sedition. The Rowlatt Act (Govt. of India Act No XI of 1919) "was formed to enable an archical offences to be tried expeditiously before a strong court, consisting of three High Court Judges, with no right to appeal." It gave the powers of preventive detention i.e., the arrest and confinement of those suspected of acts threatening public safety, and to ask such people to abstain from any specified act. It basically bestowed with Government the emergency powers to deal with any situation viewed as subversive. Gandhi actively campaigned against its implementation traveling all over the country. He termed it as the most repressive. Gandhi mooted the idea of Hartal to protest against the Rowlatt Act on 6th April 1919. The response, undoubtedly, was widespread. Gandhi noted in his Autobiography on the beginning of the Rowlatt Satyagraha thus: "The idea came to me last night …that we should call upon the country to observe a general hartal. Satyagraha is a process of self-purification, and ours is a sacred fight, and it seems to me to be in the fitness of things that it should be commenced with an act of self-purification. Let all the people of India, therefore, suspend their business on that day and observe the day as one of fasting and prayer. The Musalmans may not fast for more than one day; so the duration of the fast should be 24 hours. It is very difficult to say whatever all the provinces would respond to this appeal of ours or not, but I feel fairly sure of Bombay, Madras, Bihar and Sindh. I think we should have every reason to feel satisfied even if all these places observe the hartal fittingly" (Autobiography, p.383). Consequently, the whole country, with few exceptions, went on an unprecedented strike. People did not report to work, banks did not operate, public transportation came to a stand still, and so did other government offices. There was an astounding non-activity everywhere proving the effectiveness of the non-violent means. The British authorities treated this movement as "sedition". Unfortunately, even before the objectives- both short-term and long-term were accomplished, Gandhi's detention enraged the masses, that escalated towards widespread violence. Gandhi admitted his 'Himalayan Miscalculation' and realised that people were still unprepared for a non-violent movement. The hartal was thus a failure in this case and instead of leading to the repeal of the Act, it led to mass violence. He immediately suspended the movement and undertook a three-day fast as penance for the violence committed by the people. This case illustrates that the desired results of a movement need not always end up being successful. But it clearly demonstrated Gandhi's leadership acumen, his courage to take up a non-violent movement and his readiness to withdraw it in the event of violence, thus condemning violence as a means of conflict resolution.

10.7 SUMMARY

This Unit dealt with strikes/hartal as a means of non-violent conflict resolution, its meaning, methods, ethics and conditions. Unlike fasting, strike evokes a sharp response and has also an element of coercion. It is said to be one of the fastest ways of conflict resolution because of this characteristic. Nevertheless, Gandhi himself was vary of its use as it might

create a feeling of bitterness between the offending as well as defending parties to the conflict. But, applied with the right intent and will, it would yield positive results. But for a strike/hartal to be successful, it is befitting that non-violence be adhered to for greater gains and achieving the desired objectives. C.E.M. Joad, hailing Gandhi as the icon of moral force, remarked that Gandhi 'announced a method for the settlement of disputes which may not only supersede the method of force, but, as men grow more powerful in the art of destruction, must supersede it if civilization is to survive' (cited in S.Radhakrishnan, p.124). Thus, he demonstrated to the world that the power of non-violence as a method of conflict resolution is unparalleled.

10.8 TERMINAL QUESTIONS

1. What do you understand by strike/hartal? What are its basic precepts?
2. What are the ethics of conducting a strike? How did Gandhi envision it as a method of conflict resolution?
3. What are the conditions and code of conduct involved in the method of strike? Examine in detail.
4. Illustrate two case studies depicting the success and failure of strike as a method of conflict resolution.

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