

### **C. Sharpening the focus for attack**

Nonviolent action is a technique of struggle in which the participants are able to advance their cause in proportion to the degree that the opponent's desire and ability to maintain the objectionable policy are weakened, and that the nonviolent group is able to generate the will and power to give it the internal strength to effect the change. The skillful choice of the point of attack is important in this connection. In intellectual arguments one often concentrates on the weakest links in the opponent's case. In war, instead of attacking with equal force on the whole front simultaneously, one usually concentrates forces on what are believed to be the enemy's weakest points in the belief that a breakthrough there will lead to a weakening or collapse of other sections of the front. So in a nonviolent struggle the nonviolent leadership will show wisdom in concentrating action on the weakest points in the opponent's case, policy, or system. This will contribute to the maximum weakening of his relative position and the maximum strengthening of that of the nonviolent group.

In nonviolent action it is necessary to have a pivot point on which to place the lever which is to remove the evil. The selection of this pivot or issue is very important for the whole consequent campaign. One does not, in Gandhi's view, launch a nonviolent campaign for such general objectives as "peace," "independence," "freedom," or "brotherhood." "The issue must be definite and capable of being clearly understood and within the power of the opponent to yield."<sup>55</sup> In applying this technique of struggle under less than perfect conditions, success may depend, Miller writes, on "phasing strategy in such a way as to score a series of minor gains or to secure a single major victory in the most accessible sector, rather than trying for a cluster of major objectives at the same time."<sup>56</sup> Whether the specific objective(s) chosen is (are) highly limited or very ambitious will hinge in part on the nonviolent group's assessment of its relative strength and capacity for action.

In a study of the defeated campaign in Albany, Georgia, in 1962, Professor Howard Zinn wrote:

There has been a failure to create and handle skillfully a set of dif-

ferentiated tactics for different situations. The problem of desegregating Albany facilities involves various parties: some situations call for action by the city commission; some for decision by the Federal Courts; some for agreement with private businessmen. Moreover, there are advantages to singling out a particular goal and concentrating on it. This is an approach not only tactically sound for Negro protest but also creates a climate favorable to a negotiated solution. The community is presented with a specific concrete demand rather than a quilt of grievances and demands which smothers the always limited ability of societies to think rationally about their faults.<sup>57</sup>

Martin Luther King, Jr., reached a similar conclusion in the same case: . . . we decided that one of the principal mistakes we had made there was to scatter our efforts too widely. We had been so involved in attacking segregation in general that we had failed to direct our protest effectively to any one major facet. We concluded that in hard-core communities a more effective battle could be waged if it was concentrated against one aspect of the evil and intricate system of segregation.<sup>58</sup>

Without question there were other serious causes of the Albany defeat, but those do not invalidate these observations.

Instead, then, of a campaign for some very general objective, Ebert writes: "In working out the staged plan, it is essential for the success of the campaign to find the correct point of attack or one flash-point among many in social relationships which symbolizes all the other conflicts."<sup>59</sup> In the Vykom campaign, sketched in Chapter Two, the issue was the right of people to use a road that led to their homes. In the 1930-31 independence movement the specific issue which initiated the campaign was that of the Salt Laws, which touched the lives of most of the people in India; other wider political aims were condensed into eleven demands."<sup>60</sup>

This is not a matter of being moderate in one's aims, but of concentrating one's strength in ways which will make victory more likely. The planners choose the point of attack, the specific aspect of the general problem which symbolizes the "evil" which is least defensible by the opponent and which is capable of arousing the greatest strength against it. Success in such limited campaigns will in turn increase the self-confidence of the actionists<sup>61</sup> and their ability to move effectively toward the fuller achievement of their larger objectives as they gain experience in the use of effective means of action to realize their aims.

The choice of the point of attack requires considerable understanding and a keen perception of the total situation. Amiya Chakravarty has described very well Gandhi's ability to combine short-run and long-run plans in the selection of a focal point for action. It sometimes happens, Chakravarty writes, that "in following one obvious remedial line we have hit upon a symptom which symbolizes, demonstrates and challenges a root situation." A series of attacks on these points makes it possible to move "from one total situation to another." The issue should be kept clear and clean, he continues, pointing out that, for example, segregation in opium parlors would be an erroneous choice as a point for attack on racial segregation, while the right to pray in unsegregated churches "would be an issue of overwhelming convergence." Repression against nonviolent actionists concentrating on such a point of attack could but strengthen their cause. "Again and again, Gandhiji showed an instinct, a spiritual instinct, for the right issue, for the converging issues which supported each other at a point."<sup>62</sup>

This approach to political action has strong support from a quite different source, namely, Lenin, who wrote: "The whole art of politics lies in finding and gripping as strong as we can the link that is least likely to be torn out of our hands, the one that is most important at the given moment, the one that guarantees the possessor of a link the possession of the whole chain."<sup>63</sup>