Non-Violence as Political Power: Gandhi's Ideological Framework of Ahimsa and Satyagraha

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Abstract

Mahatma Gandhi was the founder of a unique form of political thought that was developed to support the Indian independence movement and introduced the concept of non-violence to the global arena. Gandhi's political philosophy was based upon the moral basis of truth and non-violence; therefore, it emphasised the importance of both Satyagraha (the Movement for Truth) and the use of moral means. His political strategy was that nonviolent resistance would be the primary method for achieving his goals, and he believed that, through self-restraint and disciplined mass action, both oppressor and oppressed would have their minds changed. As a result, the intellectual foundation of his Satyagraha was the conviction that all people were to be treated equally and humanely, thereby laying the groundwork for non-violence. Gandhi's concept of Swaraj (Self-rule) included personal discipline, community autonomy, and participatory local self-government as additional components to political independence. Further, to construct a true democracy in India, Gandhi believed that decentralised village republics would be a necessary foundation for India's future, self-sufficient citizens. The principles of Sarvodaya (welfare for all) and Trusteeship emerged from Gandhi as models of economic and social justice grounded in the welfare of all, equality, simplicity, and responsible stewardship of resources. Gandhi viewed social reform as a requirement of the National Liberation Movement, i.e., the abolition of untouchability, the uplifting of women, and the building of communal harmony. Gandhi rejected heavy industry, capitalism, and violent revolution, and proposed a sustainable, human-centred economy.

Keywords: Gandhi, Non-violence, Political Idea, Trusteeship, Sarvodaya.

Introduction

As a political thinker and leader, Mahatma Gandhi has made significant contributions to almost every socioeconomic and political development in

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the 20th Century. Although his ideas initially focused on India, they later became influential in many other parts of the world, particularly with the emergence of ethical philosophy, socio-economic reform, anti-colonial thought, and worldwide non-violent movements. Gandhi's political vision was based on the interconnected principles of truth, non-violence, Swaraj, and Sarvodaya, or the welfare of all. Rather than formulating a rigid ideological system, Gandhi developed a practice-based, evolving liberal political philosophy developed through experience, ethical experimentation, and constant self-criticism (Parekh, 1989, p. 21). Gandhi often emphasised the integrated unity between personal behaviour and political action. The phrase "My life is my message" is widely attributed to him - especially in connection with his speech during the Quit India Movement in August 1942 - although the exact phrase does not appear in the verifiable pages of Mahatma Gandhi's collected works. Therefore, it should be considered an explanatory feature, serving as a summary of Gandhiji's principled political views (Press Information Bureau, Government of India, 2016, p. 1).

Gandhi's worldview was shaped by a variety of religious, political, and socialist theoretical influences, including Jain and Buddhist ethics, the Bhagavad Gita, the writings of Tolstoy and Ruskin, and his own personal struggles with racial discrimination in South Africa. In Hind Swaraj (1909), Gandhi criticised the harmful aspects of modern civilisation and argued that materialism, industrialism, and reliance on brute force led to the degradation of moral and spiritual life. He wrote that modern civilisation "sacrifices the higher nature of man for the sake of material progress" (Gandhi, 1909/1993, p. 33). Gandhi further clarified that Swaraj should be understood as moral self-rule rather than merely political independence, stating that "true home rule is self-rule or self-control" (Gandhi, 1909/1993, p. 25). Parekh (1989) explains that Hind Swaraj should be seen not only as an anti-colonial argument but also as the moral foundation of a modern industrial society (Parekh, 1989, p. 44).

Gandhi's use of Satyagraha in major nationalist movements such as the Non-Cooperation Movement (1920–1922), the Civil Disobedience Movement (1930–1934), and the Quit India Movement (1942) illustrated how collective mass movements could mobilise political movements through non-violence and discipline (Parekh, 1989, p. 76). Although the concept of non-violence was borrowed from traditional Hindu, Jain and Buddhist traditions, it was transformed by Gandhi into a universal moral philosophy with clear political implications. In An Autobiography (1927), he argued that non-violence was not simply a matter of avoiding physical harm but an active commitment to love, compassion and non-abuse in all relationships (Gandhi, 1927, p. 233). Iyer (1973) also observed that Gandhiji extended the principle of non-violence to include social and economic structures in his political philosophy and argued that poverty, social

inequality and exploitative labour were also forms of violence (Iyer, 1973, p. 112). As a result, Gandhiji's political project sought to dismantle not only colonial rule but every system that degraded human dignity. Central to this project was Gandhiji's concept of Swaraj, which is often mistakenly associated only with political independence from British rule. Gandhiji consistently argued that Swaraj began at the personal level, requiring individuals to develop moral discipline, self-restraint and moral responsibility (Gandhi, 1909/1910, p. 9). At the institutional level, he envisioned Swaraj as a decentralised system of governance based on self-sufficient rural communities. Gandhi cautioned that, without a critical moral examination, independent India could be sowing the seeds of the oppressive conditions of Western political systems. Gandhi believed that Swaraj was a moral ideal on one hand, and a political goal on the other. Therefore, Swaraj would have to be pursued through individual self-control and through a collective responsibility for moral self-rule (decentralised decision-making).

Research Objectives

- Examine the philosophical foundations of Gandhi's ideologies of ahimsa (non-violence) and Satyagraha (truth-power).
- Analyse how Gandhi's political thought integrates ethics, spirituality, and practical strategies of resistance.
- Explore the ethics in Gandhi's theory of nonviolent struggle.
- Discuss the importance of nonviolent movements and the global appeal of resistance.

Literature Review

Research on Mahatma Gandhi's political ideology spans political science, philosophy, history, sociology, and development studies. A diverse group of scholars have examined Gandhi from multiple perspectives, including anti-colonial theory, ethics, political practice, and socio-economic criticism. This literature review synthesises the debates and interpretations of major studies on Gandhi's political thought. Gandhi's own writings provide the primary basis for understanding his political ideology. Hind Swaraj (1909) is widely considered his seminal political text, outlining his critique of modern industrial civilisation, his advocacy of moral self-government, and his early statements on Satyagraha (Gandhi, 1909). Scholars consistently refer to this text to explore Gandhi's philosophical underpinnings of self-restraint, nonviolence, and anti-modernism. An Autobiography of Gandhi: The Story of My Experiments with Truth (1927) provides a more detailed account of his ethical evolution, blending personal narrative with philosophical reflections (Gandhi, 1927). Spanning over 90 volumes, the

collected works of Mahatma Gandhi serve as an indispensable source for scholars examining his changing views on nationalism, religion, caste, and economics.

One of the most discussed ideas in Gandhi's philosophy is Satyagraha, his unique approach to nonviolent resistance. Bondurant (1958), in The Triumph of Violence, describes Satyagraha not as a quick or improvised tactic but as a carefully structured moral and political method. He explains that its goal is "conversion rather than coercion," which sets it apart from passive resistance. Expanding on this, Iyer (1973) explores the deeper spiritual foundations of Satyagraha, suggesting that truth is the ultimate principle, nonviolence is the path to realising truth, and suffering becomes the means of persuasion. Later, Dalton (1993) places Gandhi's ideas in a broader context, showing how Satyagraha fits into global theories of mass resistance and highlighting Gandhi's role in shaping the worldwide nonviolent movement. The theme of nonviolence has remained central in scholarly debates. Parekh (1991) emphasises that Gandhi redefined nonviolence as an active moral commitment, applying it not only to politics but also to economics and everyday relationships. Nanda (1985) adds that Gandhi's ethics and politics are inseparable—nonviolence, for him, was never just a strategy but a way of seeing and engaging with the world.

There is considerable debate among scholars about whether Gandhi's principles of non-violence can be implemented in modern nation-states. For example, Jack (2000) argues that non-violence is morally admirable but not politically viable in the context of global violence. Brown (1989) examines Swaraj historically, arguing that it enabled the democratisation of Indian nationalism by linking personal ethics with political participation. Hardiman (2003) situates Swaraj within the subaltern movement to show how Gandhi's appeal or message affected peasants and marginalised groups. Sarvodaya, or "upliftment of all", has been analysed primarily through the unity of Gandhi's philosophy with Ruskin and Tolstoy. Nanda (1985) notes that Sarvodaya represents Gandhi's attempt to transcend both capitalism and Marxist socialism by rejecting the competing consciousness and class conflict. Kumarappa, a close associate of Gandhi, expanded these ideas into a systematic economic philosophy, which scholars use to understand the Gandhian economic critique of industrialisation. Scholars such as Bhattacharya (2010) have reinterpreted Sarvodaya in the context of sustainable development, arguing that Gandhi anticipated many contemporary concerns about ecological balance, ethical consumption, and decentralised production.

Gandhi's concept of trusteeship has been the subject of considerable debate. Chatterjee (1983) argues that trusteeship sought to control capital morally without dismantling the class structure, consistent with Gandhi's belief in coercive moral persuasion. However, critics, including Marxist scholars such as Desai (1998), have claimed that trusteeship is unrealistic

because it relies on voluntary morality among the elite. Scholars have consistently highlighted Gandhi's integration of spirituality with politics. Parekh (1991) has stressed that Gandhi's "religion" refers to universal ethics rather than communal beliefs, a crucial point for understanding his approach to communal harmony. Gandhi's defence of minority rights, his participation in the Khilafat Movement, and his efforts during communal riots are often studied from this perspective. Critics such as Madan (1997) argue that Gandhi's religious vocabulary complicates secular nationalism. Others, such as Parekh, say that Gandhi advocated a principled rather than a spiritual presence of religion in public life. One of the most controversial areas of Gandhian thought is the reform of caste. Ambedkar's criticism remains central: he accused Gandhi of supporting the caste system and offering patriarchal solutions (Ambedkar, 1945). Scholars such as Zeliot (1992) and Omved (2004) have extensively explored this debate, comparing Gandhi's Harijan movement with Ambedkar's call for the structural abolition of caste.

Feminist scholars are divided in their views. Many credits Gandhi with organising thousands of women and redefining feminist political organisations, while others argue that she reinforced traditional gender roles. Martin Luther King Jr.'s embrace of Gandhian nonviolence has inspired scholarship worldwide. Writers such as Jack (2000) and Dalton (1993) locate Gandhi within the international theory of civil resistance. Similarly, Gandhi's relevance to environmentalism, peace studies, and grassroots democracy has extended his scholarly footprint beyond South Asia. Recent 21st-century scholarly bodies—such as Hardiman (2003), Bhattacharya (2010), and Parel (2000)—have shown renewed interest in Gandhian philosophy in light of global crises, including environmental degradation, inequality, and the decline of moral trust in politics.

Research Questions

1. What are the key philosophical and ethical principles underlying Gandhi's concepts of ahimsa and Satyagraha?
2. How does Gandhi distinguish Satyagraha from passive resistance, and what implications does this distinction have for political action?
3. In what ways does Gandhi connect truth, nonviolence, and suffering as interdependent elements of his political thought?
4. How did Gandhi's ideology influence global theories and practices of nonviolent resistance?
5. To what extent can Gandhi's reinterpretation of nonviolence be applied to contemporary political, economic, and social contexts?

Research Methodology

The research will use a qualitative, interpretative, and historical method to examine Mahatma Gandhi's political ideologies. Because Gandhi's ideas arise from a combination of his philosophy, social activism, and history, qualitative methods allow for greater depth of understanding of their foundations.

1. Research Design

This research is based on textual and thematic analysis of primary and secondary sources. It will systematically interpret Gandhiji's own writings - such as Hind Swaraj, speeches, letters and Young India and Harijan - to identify key political concepts including truth, non-violence, Swaraj and Satyagraha.

2. Sources of Data

Primary sources: Gandhi's published works, collected writings, speeches, and autobiographical reflections.

Secondary sources: Scholarly books, journal articles, biographies, and critical analyses by political theorists and historians.

3. Analytical Framework

The analysis uses thematic coding to categorise recurring philosophical and political ideas. The ideas are interpreted within their historical context, particularly within colonial India and the global anti-colonial movement. A comparative perspective is also applied to assess Gandhi's ideas in relation to liberalism, socialism, and modern democratic theory.

4. Scope and Limitations

This study focuses on Gandhi's major political principles rather than his personal life or religious practices, although these elements influence the analysis. The study does not attempt to test Gandhi's theories empirically but instead aims to interpret and synthesise existing scholarship.

Satyagraha as moral-political resistance

Gandhi's political ideology is a combination of his ethical beliefs and practical strategies. Unlike Western political thought and radical political theory, Gandhi offers an entirely different model of political thought. The central belief of Gandhi's philosophy is that a valid moral truth should shape all political action.

Gandhi introduced the concept of Satyagraha while leading the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa and later applied it extensively in India. Gandhiji believed that Satyagraha is a coherent philosophy of life and a philosophy of truth. Unlike violent movements aimed at defeating the opponent, Satyagraha seeks to change the opponent's conscience through self-sacrifice and self-tolerance. The Satyagraha will not be greedy for wealth and will not cause harm. Satyagraha, literally "holding fast to the truth," is the cornerstone of Gandhiji's political philosophy. In Hind Swaraj (1909), he defined Satyagraha as a force arising from adherence to truth and refusal to cooperate with injustice (Gandhi, 1909). In contrast to passive resistance, Satyagraha directed an active non-violent movement based on moral courage rather than physical force. Gandhiji believed that actual political authority derives from the consent of the ruled and therefore has the right to withdraw cooperation from unjust power (Gandhi, 1920). Thus, Satyagraha functioned not only as a strategy but also as a transformative moral discipline aimed at bringing about justice and truth rather than defeating the oppressive adversary. According to Varma (1959),

> The Gandian theory of Satyagraha or dynamic soul-force, thus, is based on the acceptance of the concept of suffering for the vindication of truth and justice. Satyagraha is, in its inmost essence, an attempt at self-purification through suffering. It signifies a genuine, intense and sincere quest for the vindication of Truth, which is God through suffering. It is, hence, based on an invincible belief in the ultimate triumph of divine justice (p.171).

Scholars such as Parekh (1997) have noted that Gandhiji's concept of *satyagraha* was "the expression of morality and integrity rather than the use of force", which makes it practically distinct from traditional revolutionary tactics. Judith Brown says that Gandhiji's Satyagraha was based on self-purification and moral discipline (especially truthfulness, detachment, and courage), and he saw political action as inseparable from internal change (Brown, 1989, p. 74).

Ahimsa (Nonviolence) - as a political strategy and a moral imperative

According to Kurtz (2008), Gandhi viewed non-violence not only as a political force but also as a core belief and virtue. He developed this concept as a "Supreme Duty" that guided both the individual's actions and society's collective efforts in pursuit of Truth (Gandhi, 1927). Gandhi's non-violent philosophy is sometimes mistakenly viewed as passive; however, he believed it requires strength, discipline, and the ability to suffer for one's beliefs. Gandhi also considered that utilising violence, regardless of its justification, was an act of criminality that corrupted political movements (Iyer, 1973). Additionally, Gandhi believed that moral consideration must

be linked to the political goals of the current movement. This belief remains a key distinction between Gandhi's thought and both liberal revisionism and revolutionary Marxism, which allowed for coercive violence under certain conditions. For Gandhi,

> *ahimsa* was the path to the doctrine of noninjury. It involved a resolve not to harm anything. It was not just a matter of not killing anyone, but a positive state of love. *Ahimsa* was the natural expression of Gandhi's deep spiritual commitment, but it also had a practical dimension in several ways (p. 841).

The approach Gandhi introduced was to unite the masses by exposing the injustices of colonisation and alleviating suffering by integrating ethics into political action. He expressed this metaphorically when he stated that "politics without ethics is dead"(Gandhi, 1939, p. 44). To build a just political system, he believed that politics must be based on the principles of Truth, Ahimsa (non-violence) and moral integrity. He rejected the idea of using questionable methods to reach noble ends because the means compromise both the political and social end goals; he declared that "The means are like a seed, while the ends are like a tree; the end exists within the means"(Gandhi, cited in Parel, 2000, p. 163). He based all of his movements from Non-Cooperation to Civil Disobedience upon a devotion to the practice of the principles of Ahimsa (non-violence) and Satya (truth). According to him, the true political leader must embody these characteristics: Truthful, Self-Disciplined, Humble, and Devoted to Public Service (Fisher, 1954, p. 290). He reiterated many times that those who seek power for their own sake will destroy both democracy and Society; therefore, the true leader must grow in inner purity through self-restraint, simplicity, and service to others (Gandhi, 1927, p. 78).

While many critics have labelled Gandhi's way of doing politics as "idealistic" or "unrealistic," he claimed that a viable political system could not be sustained without grounding itself on the moral values of an entire society rather than being based on the threat of force, or on strategic measures (Iyer, 1993, p. 128). Gandhi believed that principled politics fostered an atmosphere of democracy, encouraging a system of government accountable to the people through trust and the promotion of social and communal harmony. Gandhi's philosophy of principled politics challenged the prevailing power-based model, emphasising the need for moral discipline, truthful conduct, non-violence, and genuine service to the people as means for significant and lasting social change.

Mahatma Gandhi believed that civil disobedience and non-cooperation were philosophical principles grounded in a person's right to resist unjust laws. Gandhi asserted that when laws violate a human being's dignity or a society's morals, it is sinful to obey them (Gandhi, p. 34). He saw these unjust laws as not being founded on public consent and, therefore, it was legitimate to practice civil disobedience and non-cooperation with

government oppression. Gandhi firmly believed that all civil disobedience movements should be carried out publicly and that the government should be notified beforehand so the actions taken could be timely. Transparency would allow civil disobedience to be distinguished from criminal behaviour. The focus of the movement was not on destroying the judicial system, but rather on demonstrating a lack of trust in the legislative process and a desire for reform. Gandhi believed that punishment "purifies the struggle" and protects against the degenerate acts that arise from anger and hatred towards the authorities (Gandhi, p. 58). The act of punishing represents the moral contrast between the actions of peaceful protestors and those of oppressive authorities. For Gandhi, civil disobedience would serve not only as a political means to effect change but also as a moral avenue to awaken the conscience of the community and the oppressor. Through disciplined nonviolence and suffering, those who oppress people become aware of the injustices they have inflicted on the oppressed.

The Non-Cooperation Movement was a means of resisting the law through refusal to cooperate with it. Gandhi urged individuals to stop financially, materially, and morally supporting oppressive state systems by boycotting imported goods, withdrawing children from British-run schools and institutions, working for the colonial authorities illegally, and not paying non-authorised taxes (Gandhi, 1920, p. 17). Non-cooperation, through the use of non-violence and moral persuasion, elevated resistance to such an extent that it became a formidable tool for transforming society. Several historians have offered severe criticism of Gandhi and his Non-Co-operation Movement (1920 to 1922), particularly regarding strategy and the outcomes. Judith Brown (1977, pp. 158-160) asserted that Gandhi's promise that the Indian people were prepared to implement disciplined non-violent protests was exaggerated; outbreaks of violence during the Non-Cooperation Movement, e.g., the Chauri Chaura incident, were evidence of his inability to control the 'grassroots' nature of Indian activism. R.J. Moore (1988, pp. 42-43) suggested that Gandhi's focus on moral persuasion rather than formally organising political activism for his party diluted the long-term effect of the Non-Cooperation Movement on Indian politics. Other scholars, most notably those advocating reform of the Indian Congress Party, suggested that the stop-and-go approach to the Non-Cooperation Movement was instrumental in several ways: Firstly, by removing support from the Congress Party, the decision led to disenchantment with members of the Congress Leadership. Secondly, the decision to halt support for the movement also led to disillusionment among those willing to support it and weakened the Congress Party overall (Brown, 1977, p. 165). B.R. Nanda (1994, pp. 115-118) noted that while maintaining an unequivocal opposition to violence was essential, suspending the Non-Cooperation Movement caused serious grievances among other Congress Leaders, who saw the overall action as impulsive

and as hurting the party's future viability. Other authors expressed doubts about the socio-economic effect of the Non-Cooperation Movement.

Self-Government as Moral and Political Independence (Swaraj)

Gandhi believed that the idea of Swaraj went beyond the typical notion of national independence. In his book Hind Swaraj, Gandhi stated that genuine self-governance must start with self-control, and that without this inner discipline, political independence is of no value (Gandhi, 1909/1910, p. 9). Politically, Gandhi envisioned a decentralised structure of governance; that is, he believed that villages would be independent republics that would prevent the state-run large bureaucracies that would evolve from modern industrial civilisation (Parel, 2000, as cited in Reflections on Hind Swaraj, p. 186). According to Gandhi, Swaraj was not simply an individual's ideal but an ideal shared by all people, arising from virtuous actions, people's participation at the local level, and governing according to principles. Gandhi wanted to end the caste system as part of a broader effort to achieve social reconstruction through service, accountability, and self-sacrifice. Gandhi pointed out that the foundation for establishing the self-rule of India must come from individual discipline, moral conduct, and mastery of the instincts and desires (Gandhi, 1909/1946, p. 63). He warned that should this country fall to the establishment of a system of centralised bureaucracy or industrialism, the injustices perpetrated on India by the West would be repeated (Parel, 2000, p. 145).

Sarvodaya -Vision for an Ideal Society

Another aspect of Gandhi's principle-based politics is a servant-oriented notion of leadership. This idea is demonstrated through Gandhi's idea of "Sarvodaya," or the welfare of all. He stated that politics should be less about power and instead be more focused on helping those in the community facing the most significant socio-economic challenges (Parel, 2000, p. 170). As such, this belief had a considerable influence on Gandhi's support of the workers' rights movement, developing the rural economy (as opposed to the urban), working for a more equitable society, and eradicating untouchability. Gandhi rejected political practices based on deception, coercion and manipulation (propaganda). For Gandhi, truthfulness in both word and action forms the foundation of moral authority. For example, during the Salt Campaign, Gandhi instructed his followers to never lie to their opponents, never harm them, and never exploit the masses for personal gain (Fisher, 1954, p. 245). He believed that any political struggle should be conducted clearly and honestly with self-control.

The distrust Gandhi had of centralized governments is founded in his conviction that Bureaucratic Power distanced leaders from people; he expected to see a political system where every village could be independent - (a full sovereignty, free from outside sources for its own necessary 'life'), but still dependent (for many things) on some other village (Gandhi, Chapter 4: My View of Village Rule – 1948, p.500). In Gandhi's vision of this model, the town would be responsible for running its own water/educational/theatrical/and cooperative enterprises (Gandhi, 1948, p.500). Each ideal town would also create a Panchayat of five members, elected from a pool including both males and females, who would together serve as the legislature, judiciary, and executive (Gandhi, 1948, p. 500). The essence of Gandhi's philosophy regarding the law of Non-violence could not be overlooked. The statutes of Satyagraha, or non-cooperation, would bind individuals and local governments rather than a system of punitive force to enforce the laws (Gandhi, 1948, p.500). Economically, Gandhi saw the danger that large-scale industrialisation posed to the widening wealth gap and to worker exploitation. He believed the solution to this problem was to move back to a decentralized rural economy that was based on the Production/Independence of rural communities; he stated: "Non-violence... can be supported by means of the establishment of independent villages and the growth of rural economies... both of which will negate exploitation and by extension negating violence." (Gandhi: The All-Everyday and Daily Work: 4th November 1939, p. 331).

At the heart of Gandhi's political philosophy was his ideal of Sarvodaya (welfare of all), which he based on John Ruskin's 'Unto This Last'; he translated this book into Gujarati and took this concept to be the foundation of his thinking on social justice (Translator's note, as cited in Ruskin, p. 77). Gandhi believed that real progress could only come to an entire society when the lowest and weakest people, whom he referred to as "the last man", are raised (Gandhi, cited by Balaji, n.d.). For Gandhi, morality and economics were the same - he presented the concept of trusteeship where a person with extra wealth is a trustee of that wealth for all members of society, and that every person has to perform "bread labour" to establish the dignity of work (Gandhi, The All-Pervading Village Service, p. 104).

Politically, the concept of Sarvodaya reinforced Gandhi's conviction that rural communities. The idea of Sarvodaya not only reinforced Mahatma Gandhi's view that power should be held primarily by rural communities, but it also represented a broader moral vision that included both cooperative living and the principle of non-violence. For Gandhi, Gram Swaraj was more than a plan to decentralise government; it was a vision based upon cooperative living, non-violence and collective responsibility. In his own words, "True democracy is authority established at the local level and social organisations based on moral principles, not upon political expediency" (Gandhi, 1948, p. 500). The decentralisation of

Government, an economic life oriented by morals, and Welfare for all, as advocated by Gandhi, influenced many of the reform movements after Independence. An example of this is the Bhoodan Movement, started by Vinoba Bhave, to promote voluntary land distribution and local self-sufficiency. Scholars believe that the Bhoodan Movement as a whole is similar to (Gandhi's) ethical reason and Political Philosophy, specifically the idea of enabling the growth of Grassroots and Building communities through Community Development (Gandhi, 1948, p. 500).

Trusteeship and the Principle of Economic Equality

The concept of trusteeship was a means of resolving class conflict through nonviolence. It encourages co-operation between workers and industrialists over property rights versus social responsibility. Wealthy business leaders, entrepreneurs, and landlords should view themselves not merely as owners of their wealth, but as trustees of it for society. Hence, according to Gandhi, anything beyond what satisfies an individual's essential needs should be used for the benefit of all, as it becomes morally owned by the community (Gandhi as cited in Parel, 2000, p. 115). Thus, trusteeship stands opposed to capitalism's extreme individualism and socialism's extreme collectivism in the ownership of government property. Economic wealth derives from the cooperative efforts of all people in society and should thus be used for the collective welfare of all. Instead of providing goodwill to the community, traditional charitable organisations supported the patriarchal structures that created unequal power relations for the beneficiaries of their charity. Therefore, trusteeship builds on the moral obligation and social responsibility of owners of the wealth. Owners of wealth must ensure that they pay fair wages and provide just and humane conditions for those who work for them. Furthermore, they are obliged to invest in the community's needs.

Gandhiji's philosophy was based on the use of non-violent tactics (ahimsa). He feared that extreme economic and social inequalities would spark violent uprisings by social classes and groups (Gandhi, 1935, p. 41). While Marxists advocate that a violent revolution is the means to end the exploitation of the proletariat and build a socialist society, Gandhiji recommended a non-violent method to achieve economic equality without resorting to violence and thereby perpetuating oppression in the name of creating wealth. The alternative method of achieving this, envisioned by Gandhiji, was through a system of trusteeship, with wealthy people serving as caretakers of their riches for the purpose of helping to improve the economic condition of people less fortunate than themselves, and to provide these people with opportunities to improve their economic condition through non-violent means. Gandhiji opposed the system of trusteeship because of the tendency of state socialism to centralise power in the hands of the government. He believed that centralising economic

resources in the hands of the government would enable it to govern through bureaucratic means, contrary to the principles of individual liberty (Parel, 2000, p. 120). In contrast, Gandhiji proposed a system of trusteeship that would support his overarching vision of Swaraj, based on decentralisation, local control, and moral accountability as the foundations of both the economic and political frameworks. The majority of those who have critiqued this system of trusteeship have found it unrealistic because it relies on the ethical improvement of the affluent. Gandhiji was aware that the capitalist system had limitations; nonetheless, he believed that economic systems should be based on an ethical foundation and that it would take as long as necessary for that to occur (Iyer, 1993, p. 102). In addition, it was implied that if a voluntary trusteeship did not work, the government could introduce laws to regulate wealth, but only if all other options had been exhausted (Gandhi, 1940, p. 101).

Communal Harmony and Inclusive Nationalism

Gandhi believed in pluralism and inter-religious coexistence rather than communal nationalism. Developing Hindu-Muslim unity was central to Gandhi's political philosophy and provided the foundation for his vision of building an Indian nation. Gandhi believed that true independence in India could not come until all religious communities were united in a profound psychological, sociological, and political unity. In fact, Gandhi believed that "Swaraj is impossible without Hindu-Muslim unity" (Gandhi, 1921, p. 56). Gandhi continuously used this belief to motivate his political campaigns, personal behaviours, and social philosophies throughout the Indian independence movement. Gandhi did not see the principle of communal harmony as a tool for political power; instead, he viewed it as a moral and spiritual imperative for a pluralistic country like India. According to Gandhi, India's ability to unite people of many religions into a common national identity gave it strength. He warned that without this unity, the British would use the difference in religion among the Indian population to continue their exploitation and dominance of India (Parel, 2000, p. 142). Gandhi's approach to communal harmony was grounded in moral and spiritual obligation rather than in seeking political power, given India's inherent pluralism. Gandhi stressed that communities needed to rebuild trust through everyday public life – common festivals, joint political activities, and empathy for each other's cultural values (Iyer, 1993, p. 77). It was this belief that motivated his decision to support the Khilafat movement with Muslim leaders, demonstrating his commitment to interfaith solidarity (Fisher, 1954, p. 203).

Gandhiji's basic principles rejected the use of religious identity for political gain, because morality demanded that the traditions of each religion be respected (Gandhi, 1931, p. 89). The doctrine of "*sarva dharma sambhava*" – of equal respect for all paths to God - formed the foundation of

his social philosophy. He himself fasted during communal riots because he believed that moral action could soften ugly sentiments and bring peace. His fasts, both in 1924 and in 1947–48, were to challenge the moral consciences of Hindus as well as Muslims (Fischer, 1954, p. 331). Political hostility and setbacks notwithstanding, he remained convinced that communal amity was vital to the moral, as well as the political, future of India. "Independence that is not based on unity will weaken and create conflict," he cautioned.

Minimal State theory

Mahatma Gandhi's vision of the minimal state was a result of his inherent scepticism about centralised political power and its potential for oppressive coercion. He contended that when the state was too powerful, it ultimately created dependence, corruption, and moral decadence that undermined both personal independence and communal responsibility. According to Gandhi, "the state is the violence and organised" (Gandhi, 1935, p. 72). The alternative that Gandhi envisioned was a non-coercive, decentralised order founded on Swaraj, which he considered to be an all-encompassing form of self-rule. Swaraj was not merely about liberation from colonial rule; it was a moral standard that meant the individual and the local community took care of themselves in a principled and responsible way (Parel, 2000, p. 194). Local decision-making, Gandhi advocated, "would guarantee transparency and responsiveness and make it responsive to the local communities' particular requirements" (Iyer, 1993, p. 167). Where political authority was a natural outgrowth of moral consensus rather than an imposed superstructure, coercion might naturally decline. He argued that the primary function of the state should be to uphold justice, protect fundamental rights, and facilitate local self-government, rather than to dominate the moral or economic lives of its citizens (Fisher, 1954, p.315). "Real Swaraj will come not through the seizure of power by a few but through the acquisition of all powers to prevent the abuse of power" (Gandhi, 1927, p. 91). Gandhiji wanted to establish a classless, stateless democracy. In Gandhiji's words, a stateless and non-violent democracy was Ramrajya, where the sovereignty of the moral authority of the people would be established and the state, as a structure of violence, would end (Varma, 1959, p. 127).

Gandhiji feared that centralised political systems – capitalist, colonial or socialist – tended towards hierarchy and oppression. He criticised both Western liberal democracies and Marxist regimes because they concentrated authority at the top, turning citizens into instruments of bureaucratic or ideological control (Parel, 2000, p.198). He warned that even well-intentioned centralisation risked stifling dissent and weakening citizens' capacity for self-determination and moral authority. To counter these dangers, Gandhi advocated the establishment of Gram Swaraj – a

federation of self-sufficient village republics – as the basis of governance, in which each village would function as a "complete republic" (Gandhi, 1962, p.7). The town would handle essential matters, including sanitation, water management, conflict resolution, and economic cooperation through autonomy, while coordinating with other villages as needed (Iyer, 1993, p. 170). Gandhi's minimal state theory combined moral self-reform with a decentralised political structure. Social reform was also an integral part of Gandhiji's political philosophy. He repeatedly emphasised that political freedom was meaningless unless social evils such as untouchability were removed. In Harijan, he described untouchability as "a blot on Hinduism" and argued that its abolition was essential for a morally reborn nation (Gandhi, 1933, p. 4). Gandhiji's efforts to transform social practices expanded the nationalist movement into a broader moral struggle that involved ordinary citizens across caste and class lines (Chatterjee, 1983, p. 112). Consistent with the belief that personal and political ethics should be compatible, Gandhi adopted a lifestyle of simplicity, manual labour, fasting, and self-discipline, which Iyer (1973) identifies as integral to his efforts to bridge moral ideals with political action (p. 56).

Relevance of Gandhi's Nonviolence in the Contemporary World

Gandhi's formulation of nonviolence (*ahimsa*) and *satyagraha* represents a critical intervention in modern political thought by reconceptualising power as relational and contingent on popular consent rather than on coercive force. Gandhi maintained that domination persists through everyday compliance and that disciplined non-cooperation could delegitimise unjust authority (Gandhi, 1938/2001, p. 34). This understanding has had a lasting influence on global resistance practices, ranging from the U.S. civil rights movement to contemporary mobilisations against authoritarianism and democratic erosion. Martin Luther King Jr.'s adaptation of Gandhian nonviolence demonstrated its capacity to expose contradictions within liberal capitalist democracies, particularly racialised economic exploitation (King, 1963/2010, p. 18). Nelson Mandela similarly acknowledged Gandhi's influence while emphasising that nonviolence must be understood as a strategic choice rather than a moral absolute, particularly under conditions of extreme repression (Mandela, 1994, p. 235). Hannah Arendt's distinction between power and violence further clarifies Gandhi's relevance, as she argues that power derives from collective action and legitimacy, whereas violence signals the erosion of political authority (Arendt, 1970, p. 56).

From Marxist and postcolonial perspectives, however, Gandhian nonviolence remains deeply contested. Gramsci's concept of hegemony parallels Gandhi's emphasis on moral leadership and ideological struggle,

highlighting how domination is sustained culturally as well as materially (Gramsci, 1971, p. 210). However, drawing on Marx's analysis of capitalist exploitation (Marx, 1990, p. 342), Indian Marxist historians argue that Gandhian politics often constrained radical class transformation. Irfan Habib contends that Gandhi mobilised peasants and workers while simultaneously moderating their demands, facilitating a bourgeois-led transition that preserved capitalist relations (Habib, 2010, p. 112). Aijaz Ahmad similarly critiques Gandhian moral universalism for its failure to confront imperialism and the structural violence embedded in global capitalism (Ahmad, 2000, p. 98). Ranajit Guha's subaltern critique further underscores how elite nationalist narratives of nonviolence marginalised autonomous popular resistance, thereby limiting the transformative potential of mass movements (Guha, 1983, p. 40). More radical critiques emerge from Frantz Fanon, who argues that nonviolence in colonial contexts risks stabilising oppressive structures by prioritising moral reconciliation over material liberation (Fanon, 1963, p. 94). Reinhold Niebuhr similarly warns against ethical idealism in politics, emphasising that entrenched power structures are rarely dismantled through moral appeals alone (Niebuhr, 1932, p. 112). In the contemporary global order — marked by neoliberal capitalism and surveillance states — these critiques gain renewed significance, as structural power increasingly operates beyond the reach of moral persuasion.

Although Gandhian nonviolent resistance remains an effective vehicle for challenging oppressive regimes and provides an ethical basis for opposition to oppression, Marxist and subaltern theorists, among others, criticise Gandhian philosophy's ability to address the systems of oppression arising from capitalism. This article asserts that through placing Gandhi's conception of nonviolent resistance into a materialist context in which one considers class systems, the impact of imperial power, and the specific historical conditions within which an individual's life, the usefulness of Gandhi's ideas in today's environment becomes apparent in both a theoretical and practical sense.

Conclusion

Gandhiji created an entirely new way of viewing political problems by bringing together three major strands of thought: the moral, the national and the economic. All three parts have their source in the fundamental understanding that the same Creator creates every person and should treat each other as such. Therefore, all humans are entitled to live free from fear and to grow, learn, and develop into individuals who can serve humanity effectively while simultaneously governing themselves and serving their community. Through the concept of Satyagraha (truth-force), Gandhiji demonstrated that political transformation could be achieved without violence. He also expanded the idea of freedom by defining Swaraj (self-

rule) in terms of personal discipline, social responsibility and decentralised governance. His economic ideas included the concepts of trusteeship and Sarvodaya (universal uplift). Total Economic Justice is the defining principle of Gandhiji's financial philosophy. Some aspects of his critique of industrialisation are still heavily debated by economists and sociologists today. Gandhi's political ideology offers a timeless model for pursuing justice and peace at the national and global levels. Gandhi's ideas about how to practice morally based politics, how important it is to find ways to get people of different faiths to live together in peace, and how to treat everyone equally are highly relevant today, as are his economic philosophies. Gandhi's legacy continues to be one of a practical example of justice and peace, both nationally and globally.

By advocating nonviolent resistance to oppression through Satyagraha, Mahatma Gandhi altered how people perceive and wield moral authority in society and politics. His view of society and politics represents an integrated philosophical and ethical approach that gives meaning to all human beings' quest for freedom (·*Swaraj*), regardless of their race, place of origin or social class. At the same time, however, many scholars, educators, and practitioners have debated, critiqued, and/or reinterpreted his ideas regarding the application and meaning of Satyagraha; in many instances, the basic tenets of Gandhi's philosophy were misunderstood, if not rejected entirely. Nonetheless, many contemporary movements for civil rights, peace, environmental sustainability, and active participation in democratic processes would trace their philosophies to Mahatma Gandhi. In addition to creating a strategy for improving one's circumstances through political activism, Mahatma Gandhi also created a new framework (or language) of ethical standards for politicians and people involved in the business of politics. He defined power as a moral and, thus, ethical authority and resistance as a means of reconciliation. The concept of Swaraj expanded the definition of freedom from being just self-rule (as understood since before the first century) to also include self-authority (Swaraj). Constructive Work stressed that social change was part of political change and that Gandhi's economic view (his concept of Sarvodaya) and the Trustee concept supported the just distribution of resources as the foundation for co-operation and peace. Many movements for civil rights, environmental protection, social justice, and peace are influenced by the ideas of Mahatma Gandhi. In an age of violence, oppression, and ecological destruction, Gandhi created an ideology that depended on the moral compass of political leaders, along with their commitment to telling the truth and acting with compassion and bravery.

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