



THE IMPACT OF GANDHIAN PHILOSOPHY ON WORLD REFORM MOVEMENTS AND PACIFIST MOVEMENTS: A STUDY OF SELECT CASES

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.70096/tssr.260405003>

Abstract

This paper attempts to locate the impact, if any, that the Gandhian philosophy of Ahimsa and Satyagraha had on reform movements and the Pacifist movements in the world. Much has already been written about the impact of Gandhian thought on India – its politics, ethics and culture. What would be interesting to note is that Gandhi's influence was/ is not confined to India alone but has intellectually and ideationally influenced the anti – Apartheid movement in South Africa and numerous Peace Movements across the globe. Of course, there are limitations or criticisms to these same Gandhian ideals internationally too which shall be discussed here. This paper also includes a brief discussion of the deep roots of pacifism that was also present in India since ancient times and found expression through certain sects of Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism. The author has used the qualitative method of analysis and has followed interpretive content analysis to write this paper.

Keywords: *anti – apartheid movement, peace movements, Gandhian views on Ahimsa and Satyagraha, Indian Knowledge Systems and Pacifism, Indian Knowledge System and Tolerance, Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*

Introduction

After the assassination of M.K. Gandhi, Lord Mountbatten remarked: “Gandhiji's death is truly a loss to mankind which sorely needs the living light of those ideals of love and tolerance for which he strove and died. In her hour of deep sorrow India is proud to have given to the world a man of his imperishable renown and is confident that his example will be a source of inspiration and strength in the fulfilment of her destiny.” On the same occasion Albert Einstein commented: “The admiration for Gandhi in all countries of the world rests on recognition, mostly sub – conscious, recognition of the fact that in our time of utter moral decadence, he was the only statesman to stand for a higher level of human relationship in the political sphere.” These remarks have been cited here as a glimpse of what eminent individuals who were not Indians thought about Gandhi and the impact of his legacy – not just for India but for humanity at large. Gandhi's mortal body was brutally violated but his ideas have continued to live on, especially in all such places where violence and intolerance has threatened humanity.

Section I: Gandhi & Pacifism / Peace Movements:

The term ‘pacifism’ was coined by French peace campaigner Emile Arnaud (1864 – 1921) and was adopted as a more humane and creative means of conflict resolution at a global level by peace activists at the Tenth Universal Peace Congress in Glasgow in 1901. The pacifist approach believes that all conflicts, including international disputes can and must be resolved using peaceful means. A pacifist is a person who is morally and practically against war and against the use of violence in any form or scale to resolve disputes of all kinds, ranging from the very individual interpersonal conflicts to local, regional, national and even international levels. Peter Brock and Thomas Paul Socknat, historians of Pacifism, define it as an ‘unconditional rejection of all forms of warfare. Jenny Teichman, a philosopher has used the term “anti-warism” to define pacifism. The faith in pacifism arises from the grounds of moral consideration, which propounds that ends do not justify means and thus an inhuman and immoral means such as war cannot lead to a morally correct end. The deontological view of pacifism is the moral justification of pacifism as the most upright and human approach to conflict resolution. The consequentialist view of pacifism looks upon the practical benefits of using peaceful means for conflict resolution as opposed to the use of coercive means at the disposal of the states as these means do not cause any physical harm or injury to person and property. The cost of war and dehumanizing consequences therein cannot justify and fruits accumulated from such violent expeditions according to pragmatic pacifism.

This thrust on peaceful and diplomatic means to resolve conflicts and resist organized violence or unjust laws has had a deep and long history in India. The term 'ahimsa' though popularized by Gandhi as his political and ethical tool, was not a new idea in India. 'Ahimsa' formed the core philosophy of certain branches of Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism. In fact, living in consonance with other members of one's community, being tolerant of mutual differences and respecting these differences as well as extending this sensitivity to nature, as a recognition of the fact that men live a 'related existence' where each and every member of a system whether sentient or non-sentient plays a crucial role in the survival and wellbeing of every other member of the system has pervaded Indian way of life since the beginning of our civilization. Gandhi was deeply influenced by this long tradition of emphasis upon peaceful coexistence and resorted to the essence of this tradition when faced with crisis and adversity in his personal and social life. Other famous proponents of pacifism have been Henry David Thoreau (*Resistance to Civil Government*, 1849), Leo Tolstoy, whose work *The Kingdom of God Is Within You*, 1894 (which deeply influenced Gandhi), Martin Luther King Jr., James Lawson, James Bevel and other such personalities who have been associated with civil rights movements, globally.

We must, at this juncture, briefly discuss the Indian civilizational influences that helped shape the Gandhian notion of Ahimsa. Patanjali's *Yoga Sūtras* delve deep into the some of core ideas that would later on form the pillars of Gandhian thought spectrum. *Ahimsā* stands first among the **yamas**, or ethical restraints discussed in the Yoga Sutra of Patanjali. The **yamas** are five in number: *ahimsā* — nonviolence; *satya* — truthfulness; *asteya* — non-stealing; *brahmacharya* — disciplined conduct; *aparigraha* — non-possessiveness. Nonviolence is not treated merely as a rule concerning warfare. It becomes a discipline of character. Pacifism, viewed from this perspective, begins with the transformation of desire, aggression, greed and possessiveness within the individual. This produces a distinctive proposition: There cannot be enduring social peace without disciplined selves. That proposition distinguishes many Indian ethical traditions from modern theories that conceive peace primarily through treaties, institutions or balances of power.

Buddhism was yet another theosophical source of non – violence in ancient India. It gave nonviolence an especially powerful philosophical formulation. The Buddha's ethics begins from the reality of *dukkha*—suffering. The first of the Five Precepts of Buddhism prohibits the taking of life. But Buddhist nonviolence involves more than refraining from killing. It is supported by: *karuṇā* — compassion; *mettā/maitrī* — loving-kindness; *upekkhā/upekṣā* — equanimity; *sīla/śīla* — ethical discipline. The Buddhism path to nirvana / moksha could be achieved only through rectifying one's karma and violence or causing injury to anyone was definitely not going to lead to moksha!

The next school of Indian thought that deeply influenced Gandhi was Jainism. For Jain ascetics, ethical life is organised around the *Mahāvratas*, or Great Vows: *Ahimsā* — nonviolence; *Satya* — truthfulness; *Asteya* — non-stealing; *Brahmacharya* — celibacy/chastity; *Aparigraha* — non-possession/non-attachment. The order is important: *ahimsā* occupies foundational status. Violence may arise not only through physical killing but from: careless behaviour; hostile intentions; possession; exploitation; anger; greed; speech. Thus, Jain nonviolence is simultaneously: physical, psychological, economic, ecological and spiritual. Even a brief and perfunctory look at the core philosophical ideas of these Indian schools of thought would be enough for us to understand how deeply rooted in them was the entire body of Gandhian thought and action.

Against this understanding of Gandhian thought, let us discuss about peace and peace movements. A peace movement refers to a social movement that prefers the use of nonviolent means of protest and resistance like diplomacy, boycotts, peace camps, moral purchasing, voting for anti-war candidates, promoting the concept and awareness about good governance that emphasizes upon instituting transparency and accountability of government to the governed, especially on questions of Government military deals and exposes vested interest of the government, supporting direct democracy, peaceful protests and such other means. There is a rich history of pacifism since the time of the ancient Greek Empire, across the globe. In recent times, especially since the end of the Second World War, the extreme nature of devastation and destruction that the world had witnessed during the course of the two World Wars, there has been a rising concern regarding the preservation of the human civilization and hence the number of pacifist movements have been on the rise.

In this regard Gandhi has been an international point of reference and reverence. His insistence upon the power of 'soul force' and 'truth force' as palpable instruments and methods of resisting organized coercive forces have inspired many peace movements and specifically anti-apartheid movements. By insisting upon 'satyagraha' Gandhi meant that no man had the right to use physical force or violence into the realm of Truth, that there were multiple interpretations of truth and each man had the right to hold on to his own perception of it. Gandhi strongly believed that since there was one Truth, in the end, all the different interpretations of Truth would appear like the different leaves of the same tree. He insisted that Truth force should be the one and only force used to overcome all differences of opinions and misunderstandings amongst men. He espoused that a small well-trained band of 'satyagrahis' could lead nonviolent non-cooperation movements successfully and in the long run would be successful in bringing about a 'change of heart' or change of stand of even the toughest of war generals. Through his personal experiences in South Africa, Gandhi became conscious of the limitations of such peaceful methods of resistance but never lost faith in the inherent humane utility of these methods. He recognized the fact the masses would not be capable of consistently sticking to peaceful resistance in the face of extreme brutalities carried out by the government and would give in to the temptation of using violent means of protest under extreme provocation. Here, he laid emphasis upon the need for a small band of trained 'satyagrahis' who would possess qualities of love, forgiveness, acceptance of all and also have the capacity to bear extreme self-suffering and self-deprivation. Such qualities in the 'satyagrahis' would permeate into the larger body of the masses and help them to sustain passive resistance. These traits of Gandhi's faith are deeply rooted in his religious beliefs. He was born into a

Vaishnava family and the influence of Jain tenets are also clearly reflected in his espousal of love of humanity, treating all men as equal, self-suffering as a means of expiation. Though critics have been quick to point out that Gandhi's faith in 'ahimsa' and truth have relevance in the specific cultural context of Indian culture, it is undeniable that the Civil Rights Movements in United States under Martin Luther King Jr. and the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa owe a lot to Gandhian ideals.

From 1893 to 1914, Gandhi stayed in South Africa and worked as an attorney and a social activist for the rights of Indians in South Africa and the discrimination carried out by the British government against the natives and all other coloured people. His experiences in South Africa made him the man he became later. Gandhi established the Natal Indian Congress in 1894 in response to the treatment meted out to him while travelling on a train from Pretoria. He was thrown off the train despite having a ticket because a White man refused to travel in the company of an Indian! Gandhi was already aware of the discrimination and extreme oppression faced by native Africans and Indians; this personal experience further sensitised him to the problem of racialism that subjected the non-Whites to extreme humiliation and indignity. He founded the Natal Indian Congress to organize peaceful resistance to the atrocities of the British government. He also established the Phoenix Farm and later the Tolstoy Farm with the aim to organize and create a common platform for all exploited and oppressed people. During the outbreak of the Boer War in 1899, Gandhi along with his followers formed an ambulance corps with a strength of eleven hundred ambulances and yet the British did nothing to reduce the discrimination against and the exploitation of the natives. Gandhi was arrested several times and each time Gandhi's resolve to develop and use 'satyagraha' as a means of protest was further strengthened. His work in South Africa for the natives was of such magnitude that he is still looked upon as a leader there and revered as a person who felt deeply the atrocities committed upon them.

Claude Markovits in his book *The Un-Gandhian Gandhi: The Life and the Afterlife of the Mahatma* has written that the African National Congress, launched its first mass movement in 1952 against apartheid under the leadership of Dr. Albert Luthuli, had been founded in 1912 on the model of the Natal Indian Congress, with which Gandhi had been very closely associated. Gandhi's influence on the anti-apartheid movement may be measured by the extent to which the former's biographers have tried to capture the works and ideas of Nelson Mandela and claimed that the latter was tremendously influenced by Gandhi. Nelson Mandela in his autobiography* has written that "Nonviolent passive resistance is effective as long as your opposition adheres to the same rules as you do." He continued, to state that "if peaceful protest is met with violence, its efficacy is at an end. For me, nonviolence was not a moral principle but a political strategy." Mandela's understanding of nonviolence was different from that of Gandhi. He did not consider violence and nonviolence to be mutually exclusive, "...it is the predominance of one or the other that labels a struggle." Despite this difference in understanding and interpretation of one of the basic tenets of protest, it is undeniable that Gandhi's influence on Mandela and his foundational contributions to the anti-apartheid movement did limit the range and use of violence in the later stages of the movement.

Section II: The Civil Rights Movement in the United States & Gandhi

Martin Luther King Jr. (1929 – 1968) led the Civil Rights Movement in the United States from 1955 to 1968 successfully, was also deeply influenced by Gandhi and his insistence on the use of 'soul force' and 'truth force' in the face of extreme violence and brutality. By his own admission, for his Civil Rights Movements in the United States "India's Gandhi was the guiding light". In Martin Luther King Jr.'s mind, Gandhi's insistence on love, tolerance, patience and continued self-suffering till there is a 'change of heart' in the opponent, was inextricably connected with Jesus' message "Love your enemy and pray for those who hurt you." He successfully used nonviolent and organized collective action to protest against racial segregation in his country. The later political campaigns and controversies notwithstanding, King Jr. realized the power of nonviolent resistance and won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964 for fighting against racial inequality through peaceful means. Martin Luther King Jr. transformed Gandhian principles within the context of racial segregation and the African-American freedom struggle. His notable works include: *Stride Toward Freedom* (1958), *Why We Can't Wait* (1964), "Letter from Birmingham Jail" (1963), *Where Do We Go from Here?* (1967), "Beyond Vietnam" (1967). Echoing Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr. had described true pacifism as: "a courageous confrontation of evil by the power of love." For King, genuine nonviolent resistance does not submit to evil; it confronts injustice without reproducing the violence it opposes. King acknowledged Gandhi's decisive influence, describing nonviolent resistance as one of the most powerful resources available to oppressed peoples seeking social justice.

While we note the recognition given to Gandhian ideals by King, important theoretical development with regards to Peace Studies was undertaken by Johan Galtung. Johan Galtung radically expanded peace theory. His essential works include: *Violence, Peace, and Peace Research* (1969) and *Peace by Peaceful Means* (1996). His greatest contribution was to demonstrate that violence cannot be reduced to only physical acts such as killing. Social systems and political institutions can systematically produce suffering through poverty, inequality, exclusion and domination. This generates the famous distinction Between Negative Peace as absence of direct / physical violence and Positive Peace as the existence of such social systems and political institutions that create and enhance justice, inclusion, dignity for all.

Besides these two illustrations of Gandhi's influence on anti-apartheid and pacifist movements numerous other leaders across the globe have acknowledged Gandhi's contributions and influences upon developing and strengthening the faith in nonviolent civil disobedience in opposing governmental brutalities and injustices. Moreover, Gandhi's belief that the means are as important as the end has also enhanced the faith in the moralist view of pacifism. A wrong means could never lead to a right end. True nonviolence entails nonviolence in thought, words and deeds. If the opponent remains unaffected by the peaceful protests of the 'satyagrahis', the latter would have to persevere patiently till he brought about a change in the attitude of the aggressor. If the

'satyagrahis' failed to achieve this, they would peacefully have to give in to the atrocities of the oppressor but under no circumstances could violence be resorted to.

Conclusion

Stanley Maron in his paper 'The Non-Universality of Satyagraha' in the book *Gandhi, India and the World* edited by Sib Narayan Ray has pointed out that Gandhi's 'satyagraha' and 'ahimsa' have utility and are effective for the Indian cultural context alone because both these ideas are derived from Indian religious beliefs and traditions. He also points out the inconsistencies in Gandhi's espousal of nonviolence when the latter suggests nonviolence to the Jews in concentration camps but in the face of an imminent Japanese attack on India preaches that India should be ready to defend itself in any manner possible. Maron also makes a very interesting comparison of the core values of Hinduism and Hebrew faith to explain why he believes that the method of 'satyagraha' was relevant to India but not to the Jews, who were grossly persecuted due to the dictatorial excesses of Hitler. He specifically mentions the fact that self-abnegation and penance have formed a very important part of traditional Hinduism as a means of self-purification and as a means to acquire desired boons from the Gods. The Hebrew tradition, on the other hand, Maron points out, expects each man to respect himself and treat himself as an equal to every other man because God has created each man as equal to another. It does not support service to a cause or to another human being at the cost of one's own self. The Hebrew faith does not insist upon its followers to stick to either violence or nonviolence but advocates that a faithful Jew shall do whatever is necessary to protect his life which is a gift from the Supreme being. Thus, he finds the Hebrew faith to be far more realistic and practical and humane as compared to the lofty ideals preached by Gandhi which presume that every mortal man has the capacity to overcome personal interests and instincts of self-preservation and behave like saints or Gods.

Maron acknowledges the fact that Gandhi contributed greatly to the perception of nonviolence as a plausible and desirable means of protest but to claim that it was universally applicable or desirable portrayed Gandhi's inability to cope with modernism and its various institutions. Gandhi was referring to traditional beliefs and faith of diverse strands of Hinduism (specifically Vaishnavism and Jainism) when he was espousing nonviolence and non-harming in all aspects of life. When he was faced with concrete institutions of coercive power like the state and its various repressive machineries like the police and the army, he battled to fit his traditional ideas into the modern context and here lay the root of his inconsistencies.

In conclusion, it may be said that despite Gandhi's recognition as one of the most influential personalities at the global level in the modern age, the applicability of all his ideas and ideals may always not be possible nor very practicable. Yet, since the end of the Second World War, there has been an effort on the part of the leading states to resort more to 'soft power' politics rather than 'hard power' politics as means of conflict resolution. More importance has been laid upon diplomacy, arbitration, mediation and negotiation to regulate relations upon nations. Globalization is also another factor responsible for shifting the focus towards soft power politics as the economies of all countries have become intertwined and interdependent and the world cannot really afford to go through any more hot wars. Yet every time a peaceful protest or civil disobedience is organized to protest against any wrong, Gandhi's faith in nonviolence is recalled and relived.

Acknowledgment: No

Author's Contribution Sanjukta Roy: Data Collection, Literature Review, Methodology, Analysis, Drafting, Referencing

Funding: No

Declaration: The author/s has/have given consent for the publication.

Competing Interest: No

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