

Gandhi's Swaraj in the Modern Era: Challenging Power through Satyagraha

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Mahatma Gandhi was a significant piece of a puzzle that we call the struggle for Independence. His ideas and teachings remain one of the most influential moral compasses for the world even today. His national and international impression remains remarkable. What remains in the background are his stimuli which led him to the path he is known for. Every major action of Gandhi, in the public domain, spoke of reason and logic. His thought is a culmination of influences that were profound in the ancient ideals as well as western and modern factors. The origin of his philosophy cannot be pinned down to one certain factor but is a synthesis of universal morals and religious principles. These ideals exist in several aspects, which are, socio-economic, ideological, political, private, and public. Gandhian methods find Theology as its basis. Spiritual and ritual practices relevant to the needs of society, find consideration in his philosophy. His thoughts suggest a hint of practical idealism. It doesn't promote a utopic concept of idealism but an idealism that is within the possible limits. The prominent components of his philosophy are truth (*satya*) and non-violence (*Ahimsa*), which aim to transform society and individuals simultaneously.

Gandhi based Satyagraha on the Vedantic ideals of self-realisation, ahimsa (non-violence), vegetarianism, and universal love. William Borman states that the key to his Satyagraha is rooted in the Hindu Upanishadic texts. According to Indira Carr, Gandhi's ideas on ahimsa and Satyagraha were founded on the philosophical foundations of Advaita Vedanta. Bruce Watson states that some of these ideas are found not only in traditions within Hinduism, but also in Jainism or Buddhism, particularly those about

non-violence and universal love, but Gandhi's synthesis was to politicize these ideas. His concept of satya as a civil movement, states Glyn Richards, are best understood in the context of the Hindu terminology of Dharma.

Gandhi's philosophy of non-violence and truth has left a profound impact on global history. World leaders, civil rights icons, and thinkers universally regard him as a transformative figure, utilizing his principles of Satyagraha to dismantle oppression. Gandhi's methodology of peaceful, moral aggression has served as a blueprint for historic liberation movements across the globe. His influence is explicitly traced through a diverse array of global figures and movements. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. considered Gandhi, "The greatest Christian of the modern world", and utilized Gandhian non-violent resistance to lead the civil rights movement in the United States. Similarly Mexican-American Labor leader Cesar Chavez modeled his union boycotts and strikes on Gandhi's tactics. Nelson Mandela openly credited Gandhi's pioneering of Satyagraha in South Africa as a vital influence on the movement to defeat the racial oppression. Former U.S President Barack Obama famously stated that if he could dine with any historical figure, dead or alive, he would choose Gandhi, citing him as an enduring hero. Figures like Ho Chi Minh and Aung San Suu Kyi have also cited Gandhi as a direct or indirect influence on their political struggles. The Dalai Lama expressed great admiration for Gandhi's deep understanding of human nature and his dedication to both spiritual evolution and political change. Albert Einstein called Gandhi "a role model for the generations to come". The legendary musician of the Beatles cited Gandhi as

a major influence on his advocacy for peace. He protested the Vietnam War using non-violent means, following Gandhi's example. Al Gore, former US Vice President and environmental activist credited Gandhi's concept of "truth force" (Satyagraha) as an inspiration in the global fight against climate change. Steve Jobs delivered an iconic speech standing before a portrait of Gandhi in 1997. He honoured Gandhi's rebellious spirit with the words, "Here's to the crazy ones. The misfits. The rebels... the ones who think they can change the world". Pearl S. Buck, the famous American novelist praised Gandhi after his assassination, stating, "He was right, we all knew he was right. The man who killed him knew he was right... But without violence". U Thant the Third secretary General of the United Nations admired Gandhi's teachings, saying, "His principles have universal application and eternal validity". He believed that Gandhi's philosophy still holds relevance globally. Historians will Durant placed Gandhi among the greats like Buddha and St. Francis of Assisi, praising him for leading a revolution with saintly principles, marked by forgiveness and humility. Richard Attenborough, the director of Oscar-winning film Gandhi admired the Mahatma's courage. He said, "Gandhi believed non-violence wasn't the refuge of cowards but the weapon of the brave." Louis Fischer, the Jewish-American journalist, whose biography of Gandhi inspired the film Gandhi, said after the leader's assassination, "Just an old man in a loincloth in distant India. Yet, when he died, humanity wept". George Bernard Shaw, the noble winning playwright summed up Gandhi's towering presence with the analogy, "impressions of Gandhi? You might well ask for someone's impression of the Himalayas".

For Gandhi, *Sawraj* (self-rule) and Satyagraha (truth-force) are inextricably linked, acting as the ultimate goal and the non-violent means to achieve it. He viewed them much like a mother and her offspring: one cannot exist without the other. True freedom requires nonviolent action, and nonviolent action ultimately builds toward a free, self-governing society. The connection between the two pillars of Gandhian philosophy can be broken down as follows:

- *Swaraj* is the Goal: Satyagraha is the Method: *Swaraj* is much more than mere political independence from foreign rule; it is moral and spiritual self-governance. Satyagraha, or

nonviolent resistance, is the active "soul-force" used to dismantle oppression and secure this freedom.

- The Means Shape the End: Gandhi argued that impure, violent means can never lead to a pure, just society. Because *Swaraj* requires a society rooted in justice and mutual respect, it must be pursued through the morally elevated methods of Satyagraha, which relies on love, truth, and self-suffering rather than coercion.
- Internal and External Liberation: Gandhi detailed in his seminal 1909 work, *Hind Swaraj*, that true self-rule begins internally with self-control and self-discipline. Satyagraha acts as the outward expression of this internal mastery, allowing individuals to bravely resist injustice while remaining firmly anchored in truth and nonviolence.
- No Room for Hatred: In Gandhi's philosophy, a successful Satyagraha campaign aims to convert the opponent rather than destroy them. By refusing to harbor malice, the Satyagraha process itself lays the foundation for a harmonious *Swaraj* society where all people can coexist peacefully.

For Gandhi, *Swaraj* meant far more than mere political independence from British rule. He defined it as fundamental self-rule and self-reliance, grounded in moral integrity and economic independence, where the lowliest citizen is truly free. Some of his profound quotations on the concept include:

- *Swaraj* for me means freedom for the meanest of our countrymen... I am bent upon freeing India from any yoke whatsoever.
 - The *Swaraj* of my dream is the poor man's *swaraj*.
 - My *Swaraj* is to keep intact the genius of our civilization.
 - It is *Swaraj* when we learn to rule ourselves.
 - The word *Swaraj* is a sacred word, a Vedic word, meaning self-rule and self-restraint, and not freedom from all restraint which (independence) often means.
 - Real *Swaraj* will come not by the acquisition of authority by a few, but by the acquisition of the capacity by all to resist authority when it is abused.
- Gandhi's quotes on *Swaraj* are foundational because they redefine independence not just as the absence of foreign rule, but as the moral, political, and economic

empowerment of the individual. He emphasized that true *Swaraj* is achieved only through inward freedom, self-restraint and mass capacity to resist tyranny. Gandhi's concept of *Swaraj* is highly relevant in the present world. It offers sustainable, decentralized alternatives to hyper-consumerism and top-down governance. Its core principles of self-reliance and moral responsibility provide solutions to modern global challenges through several key frameworks:

- **Ecological Sustainability:** Gandhi's critique of mass industrialization aligns directly with modern movements advocating for climate footprints. *Swaraj* emphasizes living in harmony with nature rather than exploiting it.
- **Decentralized Governance:** The Gandhian ideal of *Gram Swaraj* (village self-rule) promotes localized decision-making. Today, this is reflected in digital democracy, grassroots community movements, and the open-source software movement, which distribute power and control rather than centralizing them.
- **Economic Self-Reliance (*Swadeshi*):** *Swaraj* champions local production and consumption. In the post-pandemic era, this resonates with modern drives for localized supply chains, small-scale cottage industries, and ethical consumerism.
- **Inner Freedom and Ethics:** Beyond politics, *Swaraj* means self-control. In an age of digital addiction, algorithmic manipulation, and moral degradation, Gandhi's call for self-reflection and principled living is a vital tool for personal well-being.

Like *Swaraj*, Satyagraha remains highly relevant as a framework for nonviolent conflict resolution, civil rights, and social justice. Rather than passive acceptance, it is a potent moral weapon that uses love and voluntary suffering to appeal to the oppressor's conscience and force institutional change. It serves as a cornerstone of modern political action and conflict resolution in several key ways. As a philosophy based on Ahimsa (non-violence), Satyagraha offers a constructive way to address systemic injustices, political corruption, and human rights violations without resorting to warfare or physical aggression. The core tactics of peaceful civil disobedience pioneered in campaigns like the salt Satyagraha have fundamentally shaped modern civil rights and anti-apartheid struggles globally. By operating on the premise that one holds the absolute truth, Satyagraha

encourages dialogue, fairness, and mutual understanding to dissolve polarization. The related economic doctrine of Trusteeship advocates for the wealthy and corporations to act as stewards of resources rather than just owners, which echoes strongly in today's environmental and social governance. Many of the contemporary challenges related to war and peace, terrorism, human rights, sustainable development, climate change, socio-political unrest, and politico-administrative corruption could be faced through adoption of the Gandhian way. The twenty-first century world has much to learn from it.

Gandhi's core philosophy of *Gram Swaraj* (village self-rule) and decentralized participatory democracy inspired the 74th Amendment. His lifelong advocacy transformed village and municipal bodies from mere policy suggestions into institutions. Gandhi deeply believed that true democracy requires power to be shared by all. He advocated for villages to be self-sufficient, autonomous republics. The 73rd Amendment realized this by establishing Panchayats at the village, intermediate, and district levels, creating a constitutional framework for his vision. Rejecting top-down governance, Gandhi pushed for political and economic decentralization. The Amendments added the 11th and 12th schedules, devolving specific powers, responsibilities, and finances to local authorities to manage their own socio-economic development. Gandhi worked to eliminate caste-based discrimination and uplift weaker sections of society. The amendment directly reflects this by mandating reservations for scheduled castes, tribes, and women, ensuring that marginalized voices have a seat in local administration. While Gandhi opposed the initial draft of the constitution for failing to include Panchayats - promoting its later inclusion as a non-binding Directive Principles (Article 40) - The 73rd and 74th Amendments finally translated his dream of localized, participatory governance into a concrete legal reality.

Gandhian Philosophy revolutionized world peace by proving that non-violent resistance (Satyagraha) and active compassion (Ahimsa) are potent tools for dismantling oppression and resolving conflicts. It inspired global civil rights movements and remains essential for building lasting international harmony, fostering justice, and achieving sustainable global

progress. The impact of Gandhian thought on global peace is best understood through its foundational principles and real-world applications. Gandhi rejected outright violence and war, arguing that political and international disputes should be settled through negotiation and arbitration. His ideology dictates that a secure world can only emerge from the moral regeneration of the individual. Central to Gandhian philosophy is not just the passive absence of war, but the active pursuit of justice and reconciliation. By confronting injustice with truth rather than hatred, Satyagraha dismantles conflict at its roots. Gandhi advocated for a world federation of equal nations, linking the true welfare of one nation to the welfare of all humanity (*sarvodaya*). His principles underpin modern universal human rights frameworks.

For Gandhi, political power was not an end itself, nor was it meant to be coercive. He defined it as the, “capacity to regulate material life through national representatives”. Ultimately, Gandhi viewed true political power as residing within the people and driven by moral persuasion and voluntary cooperation, rather than the authority of a centralized state. Political power must begin with individual self-mastery. True democracy involves citizens governing themselves so that no external state hindrance is necessary. He was deeply suspicious of the modern, centralized state, viewing it as a machine that often strips individuals of their autonomy. For Gandhi, the ideal political system was a decentralized network of autonomous village communities. He was in favour of a participatory governance. Power should ripple outward from the individual and the village up to the national level, where each layer serves and empowers the inner circles rather than oppressing them. In an ideal, perfectly non-violent society, citizens would be entirely self-regulated. Because everyone would rule themselves in harmony with their neighbors, formal political power and the state would become obsolete.

Gandhi viewed a ruler not as a wielder of authority, but as a “servant of the people”. He believed true leaders must embody strict moral and ethical principles, prioritize self-sacrifice over personal gain, and lead by concrete example rather than mere command. Rulers must view leadership as voluntary subordination. The ultimate goal is serving the masses and uplifting the most vulnerable, rather than pursuing

power or status. A leader’s methods must be as pure as their goals. Gandhi insisted that a ruler resolve conflicts and govern without causing harm to any living being. There must be no gap between a leader’s words and actions. Life of a leader should be an “open book”, as consistent moral character generates natural trust and confidence among the public. Lifestyle of a ruler should be simple, free from materialistic desires. By shedding personal ego, a ruler can better connect with and empower the common people. A true ruler empowers the people to govern themselves through local self-reliance and civil responsibility, working toward *Sarvodaya* (the welfare of all).

Unlike other leaders of the world, Gandhi openly criticized the League of Nations. During his 1931 visit to Geneva, he acknowledged its mandate to prevent conflict, but stated that the League lacked the “necessary sanction”. He argued that true peace could not be maintained by organizations backed by military power, but rather by the moral regeneration of the member nations. In 1932, while advocating for a pacifist international order, Gandhi offered the League of Nations a “Peace Army” of unarmed volunteers. The idea was to interpose a human barrier between warring sides, rather than relying on guns or armed forces, revealing how Gandhi felt an international body should operate. Gandhi signed an international anti-conscription manifesto addressed to the League of Nations in 1926. The manifesto condemned all compulsory military training and militarist systems, arguing they were antithetical to genuine global peace. While the League of Nations failed to prevent World War II, Gandhi’s vision for global harmony and peaceful coexistence helped lay the philosophical groundwork for the later United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

In an era of geopolitical conflicts and asymmetric warfare, Gandhi’s principles are highly relevant. They offer a pragmatic, ethical alternative to the cycle of violence, demonstrating that nonviolent mass resistance and structured dialogue yield more sustainable, long-term peace than militaristic dominance. Gandhi’s emphasis on empathy, common humanity and dialogue provides the essential foundation for modern peace building. It is beyond doubt true that Gandhi remains acutely relevant in today’s war-torn world. His philosophies serve as a

moral compass, offering concrete, peaceful frameworks to resolve disputes, address structural inequalities, and build long-term, justice-oriented peace.

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