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Gandhian Political Thought: Truth and Non-Violence

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Abstract

This research paper examines Mahatma Gandhi's principles of truth (Satya) and non-violence (Ahimsa) and their significance in political thought and social transformation. Gandhi considered truth and non-violence as the foundation of ethical politics, emphasizing that political action should be guided by morality, compassion, and justice rather than violence and coercion. The study explores Gandhi's conception of truth as a moral and spiritual principle that governs human conduct and promotes accountability, honesty, and transparency in social and political life. Likewise, non-violence is analysed as both a moral value and a political strategy aimed at resisting injustice without causing physical or psychological harm.

The paper further highlights the role of Satyagraha and civil disobedience in freedom movements, particularly in India's struggle for independence, demonstrating how non-violent resistance became an effective tool for social and political change. A comparative analysis with realism, liberalism, and revolutionary ideologies reveals the distinctive character of Gandhian political philosophy. The study also addresses contemporary critiques and challenges regarding the practical applicability of Gandhian principles. It concludes that Gandhi's ideas of truth and non-violence remain highly relevant in addressing modern political conflicts, promoting peaceful governance, and fostering social justice.

Keywords: Truth (Satya), Non-Violence (Ahimsa), Gandhian Philosophy, Satyagraha, Civil Disobedience, Political Thought, Social Change, Peaceful Governance

1. Introduction

Gandhi's political thought revolves around two closely interlinked concepts, truth and non-violence, which are rooted in the idea of love. Truth is considered to have a moral force or 'higher law' governing the above two concepts. Truth, non-violence, and love therefore form the core of his political philosophy which underpins his political action, and all his activities, whether social or personal in nature. Gandhi frequently mentions in his writings that truth is God, God is love, and non-violence is the greatest force at the disposal of mankind.

Truth (satya) and non-violence (ahimsa) played a crucial role in Gandhi's political thought and action, which have tremendous relevance and applicability even today at the personal and societal level. Gandhi's political thought predominantly stemmed from his spiritual view of life associated with undertones of Hindu philosophy that transcended religion and transcended geographical boundaries.

His thought on social and political matters is treated as a separate discipline of political philosophy with the term Gandhism due to the unique character of the ideas and principles (L. Ridenour, 1994) (Barua, 2017).

2. The Idea of Truth in Gandhian Thought

Satya, or truth, pervades all aspects of life and, if followed, helps achieve the broadest aspirations. In ethical matters, it manifests as moral sincerity, consistency, and non-deceptiveness. In politics, it requires personal honesty and disinterestedness, along with the quality to lead men and nations. For Gandhi, truth is the only governing principle guiding one's conduct and decisions. Since its realization is an individual and not just a social aim, it leads to the broadest social application, enabling greater accountability and transparency in social and political efforts.

Satya is not confined only to the actual correctness of statements; it needs to be matched with the lived principle. The passive acceptance of facts for mere verbal correctness even towards a foe cannot be called truth. It is much closer to honesty, mental consistency that admits no declaration of what is not, and non-deception in all forms and in all situations. In the search for truth and its insistence in thought and word, the mind has no doubts, and hence is untroubled. The college of experience needs no schoolmaster. The exceptional power of intuition toward right expression comes from perfect harmony within. Its value is attested in literature. In practical matters, it is not an end but a means, a mere effort in one direction. The obstacles are beyond control, and each effort reveals a new direction. In such decision-making there is no explanation needed. The union with satya has another unique significance. Trackless space lies between the movements of men and of the stars; yet they stand revealed as moving within perfect harmony. The two aspects of satya truths of the mind and action toward external truth are thus made sensitive to one another.

3. Non-Violence as a Political Principle

Ahimsa means absence of injury. It includes avoiding physical harm to any organism human, animal, or plant and extends to non-injury of spirit or heart. Ahimsa relates to kindness, compassion, sympathy, and caring for all life. It cannot be limited by any doctrine. Ahimsa in politics means abolishing social injustice and preventing physical or mental harm, humiliation, or degradation. As means of abolishing injustice by persuasion, political action can lead to discontent without violating ahimsa (Barua, 2017).

Ahimsa, while insisting on pro-people action, also enjoins complete abstention from injury. Ahimsa as a strategy after passive inactivity differs from passivity since it actively promotes the higher principle. Choosing means as well as ends is fundamental; both must harmonize in any action. Non-violence is compulsory in all times and all societies. Such principles remain valid though the precise strategy varies. People in distress become resentful when prevented from expressing discontent and resort to words or deeds violating ahimsa (L. Ridenour, 1994).

Conveying discontent by words not sharp enough or methods not sufficiently active is improper when, although unremarkable, rationing provisions affect one's source of income. Countering unprovoked attitudinal assault, ahimsa demands sufficient strength to employ loudly or in multi-species action without breaking the higher principle. To speak when satisfaction is unattainable signifies responsibility and equity in speech potentially damaging oneself or society.

4. Truth, Non-Violence, and Social Change

Gandhi links the concepts of truth (satya) and non-violence (ahimsa) to social reform and structural change in society. He views reforms as legitimate only if the truth leads the reformer to attend to them. A commitment to truth leads to demands for greater accountability from those in authority, a more transparent form of government, and more participatory forms of democracy (Campbell, 2019).

Non-violence can often mobilize the mass of people in their struggle against authority. Satyagraha

seeks to awaken the conscience of the oppressor and aims at securing their cooperation. It aims at capturing the public mind by seeking to convert and win over the adversary (Barua, 2017).

5. Civil Disobedience and Legal Order

Civil disobedience is defined as the refusal to obey certain laws, demands, and commands of a government or of an occupying international power. Typically, civil disobedience is characterized by the civil and nonviolent nature of the act itself; by the willingness to accept the legal penalties imposed as a consequence of the act; and by an appeal to the conscience of the legal authority to change the unjust law. With respect to Gandhian Philosophy, civil disobedience occupies a pivotal position in the triad of Truth, Non-Violence, and Law. The pivot towards law enables a careful scrutiny of civil disobedience from the vantage point of the legal order. Legitimacy as public conscience is paramount, and clearly specified criteria govern moral and ethical civil disobedience. With respect to legitimacy, Gandhian philosophy requires that civil disobedience can only be directed against a law, a certain sector of laws or statutes, or a constitutional provision on the cusp between the moral and the immoral on a scale of objective degrees.

Under the governance of a civilised legal order, three sorts of disobedience spring to mind: Anti-Imperial and Secessionist Movement; Total and Radical Change of Legal Order, and; Ameliorative and Incremental Change that Up-grades the Legal Order. A further constraint within the total legal architecture demands that such disobedience must impact the least among the entire body, human and non-human, and must afford scope opportunity for all the other elements to delicately balance in the aftermath of Ameliorative civil-disobedience action (Haksar, 2003).

6. The Role of Satyagraha in Freedom Movements

Satyagraha is a political ideology and practice that seeks to eliminate injustice through insistence on truth by non-violent means. In the twentieth century, this method gained prominence worldwide in civil and political freedom movements. Its literal meaning of "truth-force" combines the words satya (truth) and āgraha (firmness or insistence) (Adjei, 2007).

Between 1917 and 1947, in India, Gandhi applied Satyagraha techniques to the Champaran, Kheda, Non-Cooperation, Civil Disobedience, Quit India, and many other campaigns. In South Africa, he initially developed this approach through numerous campaigns for civil rights. The characteristic methods include a strategy combining political and social aims, grassroots organization with strong leadership, adherence to external discipline, and commitment to internal self-discipline. Satyagraha as the philosophy that drives Gandhi's approach is intricate and multifaceted; his implementation further demonstrates its complexity. Compared with other political approaches, Satyagraha supports a wider variety of action without resorting to violence.

7. Comparisons with Other Political Philosophies

The Gandhian notions of truth and non-violence can be contrasted with three prominent political philosophies: realism, liberalism, and evolutionism. All three theories address critical goals of political action and can co-exist or supplement one another (Barua, 2017). However, the scope of Gandhian thought is narrower because it is specifically concerned with individual, social, and political freedom without causing physical or psychological harm to any human being. Each of the three philosophies mentioned has a strong case, but when subjected to Gandhian scrutiny, they also exhibit serious shortcomings.

Realists see the acquisition of power as the primary goal of political action in the international sphere. Both moral considerations and humanitarian concerns are secondary. Even the powerful who do not act solely on the basis of power fall under suspicion of hypocrisy and deception. The realist view also informs a pessimistic assessment of human nature and of the possibility of fundamental political improvement. The limited scope of Gandhian analysis permits acknowledgment that the acquisition

of power serves as a partial tool of politics for many social units. Conflicts that express reconciled aspirations of diverse units still fall under consideration. However, the pure realist philosophy cannot be wholly adopted because an exclusive concentration on power acquisition involves consequent ruthless hazards. Gandhian opposition to falsity extends to the entire range of human experience. Hence, powerful social units that act solely on the basis of power lose the strain of sincerity and do not adhere to an element of truthfulness. Vastly influential agents commit themselves to a highly precarious path and present even the strongest units with extensive perils.

Liberal doctrines assert that social justice or equity remains the principal political goal in all societies exposed to diverse social units. Considerable divergence still occurs regarding their preferred conception of justice, yet their mutual construction of the central problem remains intact. Gandhi acknowledges the validity of this stance at the level of progressive strategies, while maintaining serious reservations regarding its elevation to cardinal status. Liberal premises increasingly dominate the focus of all conflicting ideologies. The universal framework of justice of the liberal ideal, elevated to paramount significance, disregards extensive associated social aspirations still elaborated in partial ideologies. Societies dominated by this single framework lapse into spellbound uniformity and repudiation of creativity. Gandhian thought thus presents the need for alternative efforts that do not succumb to this tendency. Revolutionary doctrine actively pursues liberation from indigenous inequalities that persist under regimes offering substantial formal political and economic freedom. Gandhian conception continues to cohere with the project in partial terms yet remains dissatisfied with to the method itself. The realization of socialism hinges upon the full acceptance of fundamental spiritual truths throughout the affected population. Gandhi repeatedly asserted that extensive misdeeds could arise even under the most otherwise exemplary form of organization without prior training in spiritual ethics. The attainment of adequacy in the preceding dimension reduces the pressing urgency for the political and economic engagement in question (L. Ridenour, 1994).

8. Challenges and Critiques

Critics question the practical viability of Gandhian principles and the consequences of their application (Campbell, 2019). Some reject non-violence, fearing it may provoke greater violence, or doubt the legitimacy of demands for civil rights by the oppressed. Others believe completely refraining from violence risks sanctioning evil or being complicit in the harm of third parties. Other critiques reject the direct political applicability of Gandhian concepts. For instance, some question whether commitment to truth, restraint from violence, or the pursuit of moral aims of social and political structures remain relevant, in contemporary situations (Barua, 2017). Defenders of Gandhian thought offer responses to each of these challenges.

9. Relevance for Modern Politics

Political situations today—still marred by conflicts, injustices, and violence—similarly call for a guiding vision like Gandhiji's, based on the twin pillars of truth and non-violence (Pontara, 2016). Many leaders fail to deliver on their promises, resulting in a decline of hope among citizens. The relationship between the state of governance and societal or economic ills has been running parallel to the decline in certain governance values that many frameworks advocate. Drawing from Gandhiji's teachings, a few insights can be drawn out that would still be applicable to today's political scenario.

Controlling falsehoods and speaking the truth may be a straightforward idea, but enacting it with greater intensity might represent a challenge for modern leaders. Similarly, presently it may appear very difficult to create relationships and have dialogue without ready resorting to violence (Barua, 2017). Today, the availability of social media channels and numerous forums allows for wider reach. A re-exploration of Gandhiji's concepts on truth and non-violence and an engagement with contemporary problems still proves valuable.

10. Conclusion

Gandhi believed that political ideologies and practices rarely brought about a desirable social order because they failed to recognize the importance of truth and non-violence. Truth and non-violence transcend any political ideology and are relevant even when faced only with self-interest. Their fundamental nature makes them universally applicable in a world where everything else—such as the economy, political system, and social structure—changes continuously. Truth and honesty are the ultimate basis for a civilization, and the test of a nation's ranking is the extent to which a nation has realized truthfulness. Through truth, man rises to maintain a perfect balance between mind and body, which will eventually evolve into God's level and suffice all of his desires. Man should not deliberately conceal, untruthfully state or exaggerate the facts that a man knows and should not only freely state the facts without concealment. In relation to human endeavours, the outside world is therefore not chaotic. The economy, political system, social structure and other important aspects of life are not really wrong by themself. Political leaders should not stick to certain political ideologies or latest political fashions in a certain political environment and are coerce to bring about a desired political order. Gandhi's method aims at causing a desire change unifying the harmonious relationship among the three elements: walk regularly in truth, honestly smuggling unpolished statement outside (Barua, 2017). Only if these three aspects are founded he should switch to other political means to realise desired changes.

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