

# The Intellectual Legacy of Mahatma Gandhi: Relevance of Gandhian Thought in Contemporary India

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## 1. Introduction

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, widely revered as the Father of the Nation, was not only a political leader who led India to freedom but also an intellectual giant whose moral philosophy, spiritual worldview, and socio-political doctrines left an indelible mark on Indian society and the global conscience. His doctrine of *Satyagraha* (truth-force), commitment to *Ahimsa* (non-violence), ideal of *Swaraj* (self-rule), and vision of *Sarvodaya* (welfare of all) together form a body of thought that transcends the temporal boundaries of colonial India and continues to offer solutions to contemporary dilemmas.

Gandhi's political vision was inseparable from his ethical and spiritual convictions. He did not merely campaign for India's independence from British rule; he sought a transformation of the Indian soul through the purification of public life, self-discipline, and active citizenship. His leadership emerged not from rhetorical nationalism but from a sustained engagement with human suffering, injustice, and the deep-seated inequalities that had shaped Indian society for centuries. Gandhi insisted that freedom was not only political, but also personal, economic, social, and moral.

He was deeply influenced by a diverse range of philosophical and religious traditions. The Bhagavad Gita, Jainism's emphasis on non-violence, Christianity's message of love and forgiveness, Leo Tolstoy's Christian anarchism, John Ruskin's critique of industrial capitalism, and Henry David Thoreau's idea of civil disobedience all contributed to his evolving thought. Yet, Gandhi synthesized these influences within a distinctly Indian cultural and ethical framework, rooted in simplicity, truth, and self-restraint.

What makes Gandhi unique among modern political thinkers is his unwavering emphasis on *means* as well as *ends*. He believed that unjust means could never produce just outcomes, and that ethical action in politics was not only possible but essential. His insistence on moral coherence in both private and public life set him apart from many contemporary revolutionaries and reformers. In his view, the personal was political, and vice versa.

In the Indian context, Gandhi's legacy is deeply etched into the constitutional imagination, social movements, rural development programs, and the continuing discourse on equality, justice, and non-violence. Internationally, his methods inspired civil rights leaders like Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela, and Cesar Chavez, and continue to influence peace activists, environmentalists, and human rights advocates around the world.

Today, India stands at a complex crossroads. While it has made strides in economic growth and technological advancement, it continues to struggle with widening socio-economic gaps, communal tensions, erosion of democratic institutions, ecological crises, and a growing sense of ethical drift in public life. In such a landscape, Gandhi's intellectual and ethical legacy acquires renewed relevance. His insistence on truth,

justice, non-violence, and the dignity of all human beings offers not only a critique of modern excesses but also a vision of alternative futures rooted in compassion, sustainability, and human solidarity.

This research paper seeks to explore the core tenets of Gandhian thought and examine their applicability to present-day India. It analyzes how Gandhi's ideals can inform democratic values, sustainable development, social harmony, and ethical governance in the 21st century. Rather than treating Gandhi as a historical relic, the paper approaches his philosophy as a living tradition — one that continues to challenge, inspire, and guide our efforts toward a just and humane society.

## **2. Foundations of Gandhian Thought**

Gandhi's intellectual legacy cannot be separated from his moral vision. His thought is best understood not as a static doctrine, but as a dynamic and evolving philosophy of life that was simultaneously rooted in spiritual awareness and practical action. He believed that individual and societal transformation must begin with ethical self-discipline and a relentless pursuit of truth. Unlike many political thinkers who emphasized statecraft and institutional design, Gandhi sought to change the world by first transforming the inner life of individuals. His philosophy was fundamentally ethical, deeply humanistic, and grounded in everyday realities. It represented a bold attempt to spiritualize politics without renouncing social responsibility.

### **2.1 Truth (Satya)**

For Gandhi, truth was the cornerstone of all thought and action. But his idea of truth was not confined to empirical or logical accuracy; rather, it was an absolute moral and spiritual principle — synonymous with God. "Truth is God" was the inversion of the more traditional saying "God is Truth," reflecting his belief that the pursuit of truth was the most authentic form of spiritual practice. He held that truth had to be pursued through non-violence, humility, and self-purification. Truth was not just a goal but also a method. Every political act, every protest, and every reform initiative, in Gandhi's view, had to pass the test of moral truth. This insistence on truth made his political philosophy radically ethical, often at odds with the prevailing notion of politics as a realm of expediency and compromise.

Gandhi also acknowledged that human beings, being fallible, could only approximate truth. Therefore, he insisted that tolerance, open-mindedness, and humility were essential in both private and public life. His concept of truth was thus not authoritarian but dialogic — inviting constant introspection and debate.

### **2.2 Non-Violence (Ahimsa)**

Ahimsa, or non-violence, was not a tactic for Gandhi; it was a way of life. Drawing from Jainism, Buddhism, and the teachings of Jesus Christ, Gandhi developed a notion of non-violence that was active rather than passive. He viewed violence as not merely physical harm but also as the domination, humiliation, or exploitation of others. Ahimsa meant a deep respect for all forms of life and an unyielding commitment to avoid causing harm, even in thought or speech.

Gandhi believed that lasting change could only emerge from non-violent methods because violence perpetuated cycles of revenge, fear, and hatred. He argued that violence might bring temporary results but always at the cost of moral authority. His doctrine of Satyagraha — the force born of truth and non-violence — became the hallmark of India's independence movement. In resisting British rule, Gandhi urged Indians not to hate the British, but to resist unjust laws through civil disobedience, love, and moral firmness. This approach transformed the struggle for independence into a moral awakening for the nation and set a global precedent for ethical resistance movements.

### **2.3 Swaraj (Self-Rule)**

Swaraj is one of the most misunderstood yet central concepts in Gandhian thought. For Gandhi, Swaraj did not merely imply political independence from British rule. It was a deeper idea of self-rule — encompassing individual self-mastery, moral autonomy, and social responsibility. Gandhi believed that true freedom came when individuals governed their desires, practiced self-restraint, and acted in harmony with others.

At the political level, Swaraj meant decentralized governance, where power would reside in the smallest units of society — the villages. He envisioned every village as a self-sufficient republic, managing its own affairs

through participatory democracy and collective responsibility. This contrasted sharply with the modern state's centralized and bureaucratic structures. Gandhi's Swaraj was thus a fusion of political decentralization and moral self-realization. It called for an ethical citizenry that could hold itself and its leaders accountable. Gandhi's emphasis on local economies, rural development, and simple living was a natural extension of his Swaraj ideal. He argued that a society based on consumption, competition, and conquest could never produce true freedom. Only a society grounded in cooperation, self-reliance, and community could.

#### **2.4 Sarvodaya (Welfare of All)**

The concept of Sarvodaya — or the upliftment of all — reflected Gandhi's aspiration for a just and inclusive society. First introduced to him through John Ruskin's book *Unto This Last*, Sarvodaya for Gandhi meant ensuring the well-being of every individual, especially the weakest and most marginalized. It was an ethical ideal that rejected both capitalist individualism and statist socialism in favor of a model grounded in mutual service and shared responsibility.

Sarvodaya emphasized that true progress was not measured by GDP or industrial output, but by how the poorest and most vulnerable members of society were treated. Gandhi often used the test of "the last person" — asking whether a particular action would benefit the person who stood at the bottom of the social hierarchy. This principle, later adopted by Indian policymakers as *Antyodaya*, became a cornerstone of various social welfare and rural development programs.

In practice, Sarvodaya inspired Gandhi's constructive program, which included campaigns for hygiene, education, khadi (homespun cloth), and the eradication of untouchability. These were not mere acts of social work but essential steps toward building an equitable and self-sustaining society.

#### **2.5 Trusteeship**

To address the growing inequality produced by capitalism, Gandhi proposed the principle of trusteeship — a uniquely moral response to the question of wealth and property. Rather than advocating for the abolition of private property through force, Gandhi called upon the wealthy to treat their surplus wealth as a trust for the benefit of society. The idea was that economic resources should be used not for personal luxury but for the upliftment of all, especially the poor.

Trusteeship was Gandhi's attempt to reconcile the individual's right to property with the collective good. He believed that voluntary renunciation, guided by moral responsibility, could prevent class conflict and economic exploitation. Although this idea was criticized by some for being idealistic and unpragmatic, it represented Gandhi's faith in the transformative potential of conscience and moral persuasion.

In the contemporary world, trusteeship finds echoes in the idea of corporate social responsibility, ethical business practices, and philanthropic capitalism. It remains a powerful reminder that economics, when severed from ethics, leads to imbalance and injustice.

### **3. Relevance of Gandhian Thought in Contemporary India**

Despite remarkable strides in economic growth, digital advancement, and institutional development, India today confronts a series of interconnected challenges—ranging from political corruption, religious polarization, environmental degradation, and educational inadequacies to increasing inequality and social fragmentation. In this evolving national landscape, Mahatma Gandhi's ideas offer not only ethical guidance but also practical strategies for building a more just, sustainable, and compassionate society.

Gandhian thought, with its holistic integration of ethics, politics, and economics, provides a unique framework for addressing these multifaceted problems. His commitment to moral politics, grassroots democracy, and human dignity resonates deeply in a time when mechanistic governance models often fail to respond to human needs and social justice.

#### **3.1 Gandhian Ethics and Political Culture**

One of the most urgent concerns in contemporary Indian politics is the erosion of ethical standards. The growing acceptance of corruption, criminalization of politics, and the decline of ideological clarity have created a vacuum of trust between the citizenry and elected representatives. Gandhi's vision of politics as an arena for selfless service, honesty, and truth-telling stands in stark contrast to today's realpolitik.

His insistence on moral authority over legalistic coercion, and his call for transparency, simplicity, and public accountability in leadership, offer timeless lessons. Gandhi believed that political reform could only begin with personal transformation. He urged leaders to embody the change they wished to see in society. Furthermore, Gandhi's concept of *gram swaraj* holds renewed significance in the age of bureaucratic centralization. His dream of village republics governed by participatory democracy and local self-reliance aligns closely with the decentralization goals of the Indian Constitution, particularly as outlined in the Panchayati Raj system. In an age dominated by top-down governance, Gandhian ideas encourage a bottom-up political culture where local communities have real control over development, planning, and resources.

### **3.2 Non-Violence and Social Harmony**

India continues to struggle with deep-seated social divisions based on caste, religion, and gender. Communal riots, hate crimes, and identity-based violence are stark reminders of how fragile social cohesion can be. Gandhi's philosophy of *Ahimsa* provides a powerful moral and strategic tool to counter such trends.

He advocated for interfaith understanding, social inclusion, and communal harmony long before these became central to political discourse. Gandhi believed that genuine peace could not be achieved through law and order alone, but through the transformation of hearts and minds. His personal efforts to bridge Hindu-Muslim divides, and his relentless work to eradicate untouchability, reflect a profound commitment to social justice and national unity.

His *constructive program* aimed at creating a harmonious and self-reliant society through education, sanitation, rural development, and equality of all communities. In a context where societal mistrust is being deepened by political manipulation and media sensationalism, Gandhi's message of universal brotherhood and civic love holds enduring value.

### **3.3 Sustainable Development and Environment**

In an era marked by ecological crises—climate change, deforestation, air and water pollution, and the over-exploitation of resources—Gandhi's warning about the dangers of unchecked materialism and industrial excess appears prophetic. He famously cautioned that “the Earth has enough for everyone's need, but not for everyone's greed,” highlighting the moral roots of environmental degradation.

Gandhi advocated for an economic model rooted in *local self-sufficiency*, *minimalism*, and *harmony with nature*. His preference for cottage industries, organic agriculture, and appropriate technologies aligns closely with current sustainability paradigms. Concepts such as *eco-villages*, *slow living*, and *circular economies* reflect the same ethical principles that Gandhi espoused a century ago.

While some argue that Gandhian economics may be unfit for large-scale industrial economies, its underlying philosophy of conservation, interdependence, and restraint offers a compelling critique of consumer capitalism. In a world rapidly approaching environmental tipping points, Gandhian thought can provide both direction and inspiration for sustainable policymaking.

### **3.4 Education and Character Building**

India's educational system, though vastly expanded, continues to grapple with challenges such as rote learning, unemployability, lack of values-based education, and urban-rural disparity. Gandhi's educational philosophy, *Nai Talim*, envisioned a holistic model of learning that integrated the head, heart, and hand. It emphasized skill-based, experiential learning rooted in one's own environment and culture.

His approach aimed not just at producing literate individuals, but at shaping morally conscious, socially responsible, and economically self-reliant citizens. He believed that education must begin with character formation and civic responsibility, not merely with textbook knowledge. In a society increasingly defined by competition, alienation, and moral confusion, his ideas about value education and the dignity of labor are more relevant than ever.



Gandhi also championed women's empowerment, not merely through political participation but through their ethical and spiritual leadership. His belief in women as equal partners in nation-building was revolutionary in its time and continues to inspire movements for gender justice today.

### **3.5 Global Peace and Diplomacy**

Gandhi's legacy is not confined to India. His ideas of *non-violence*, *civil disobedience*, and *moral diplomacy* have influenced global figures and movements, from the American Civil Rights Movement to South Africa's anti-apartheid struggle. In today's geopolitics, marked by armed conflicts, nuclear threats, and authoritarian regimes, Gandhi's principles of peaceful negotiation, conflict resolution, and mutual respect offer viable alternatives.

India's foreign policy, often guided by *non-alignment*, *peacekeeping*, and *South-South cooperation*, can benefit from a more conscious integration of Gandhian principles. As a rising global power, India can project *soft power* through dialogue, peacebuilding, and humanitarian initiatives, reflecting the very ideals Gandhi lived and died for.

## **4. Criticisms and Limitations**

While Gandhi's ideas have found enduring admiration, they are not immune to criticism. Many scholars and activists, both in his time and today, have questioned the feasibility and comprehensiveness of his vision. One of the most prominent criticisms pertains to his economic philosophy. Gandhi's rejection of large-scale industrialization and emphasis on rural economies have been seen as impractical in a rapidly urbanizing and globalized world. Critics argue that such an approach could hinder technological innovation, job creation, and infrastructural development necessary for a modern nation-state.

His skepticism toward modern science and machinery has also drawn criticism. Though Gandhi supported appropriate technology suited to the local context, his discomfort with modernity is sometimes interpreted as a romanticized return to a pre-industrial past.

Feminist scholars have interrogated Gandhi's views on women and sexuality. His personal experiments with celibacy, and his comments on women's roles, though well-intentioned, have been viewed as patriarchal and intrusive. Similarly, while Gandhi advocated for women's dignity and education, he often defined their empowerment in terms of sacrifice, service, and spiritual strength, rather than equal agency in all spheres.

Perhaps the most serious critique came from B. R. Ambedkar, who accused Gandhi of perpetuating the caste system under the guise of reform. Ambedkar believed that Gandhi's emphasis on Hindu unity often came at the cost of real emancipation for Dalits. Though Gandhi fought against untouchability and promoted Harijan welfare, his reluctance to reject the *varna* system altogether alienated many anti-caste activists.

Despite these criticisms, most scholars agree that Gandhi's contributions must be evaluated in the historical context of his time. His sincerity, personal sacrifice, and unflinching commitment to truth, justice, and non-violence have earned him respect across ideological lines. Moreover, many of the criticisms themselves have emerged within a democratic space shaped in part by the very values Gandhi promoted — dialogue, dissent, and ethical introspection.

## **5. Reimagining Gandhism in the 21st Century**

The enduring strength of Gandhian philosophy lies not in its rigid dogma but in its capacity for renewal, reinterpretation, and relevance across changing historical contexts. Gandhi himself was a dynamic thinker who emphasized continual self-reflection, experimentation, and adaptation. He did not intend for his ideas to be frozen in time; rather, he encouraged future generations to reinterpret his principles in light of contemporary realities. Thus, engaging with Gandhian thought in the 21st century does not mean mimicking his methods verbatim, but rather applying the ethical essence of his philosophy to emerging global challenges. As the world grapples with the consequences of climate change, data capitalism, inequality, and authoritarianism, Gandhism offers a deeply moral and humanistic lens through which to imagine just and sustainable alternatives. Several contemporary developments can be seen as fertile grounds for the resurgence of Gandhian ethics in new forms.

### 5.1 Digital Swaraj

In the digital age, the concept of *Swaraj* (self-rule) can be reimagined in terms of *digital autonomy*. The increasing concentration of data in the hands of corporations and governments has raised concerns about surveillance, privacy, and manipulation. Gandhi's vision of self-governance and decentralization can inspire a framework where digital rights are respected, and technological infrastructures are democratized.

*Digital Swaraj* would emphasize data sovereignty, digital literacy, open-source platforms, and community-owned digital commons. Just as Gandhi encouraged citizens to spin their own cloth and be self-reliant in production, today's citizens can be empowered to understand, control, and innovate their own digital ecosystems. Initiatives such as decentralized internet networks, privacy-respecting tools, and community-driven platforms echo Gandhian ideals of autonomy, transparency, and participatory control.

### 5.2 Green Gandhism and Climate Justice

The environmental crisis of the 21st century is perhaps the most pressing global challenge, one that Gandhi prophetically warned against. His minimalist lifestyle, insistence on voluntary simplicity, and critique of industrial civilization make him a forerunner of ecological consciousness. Today, a *Green Gandhism* could provide an ethical foundation for the climate justice movement.

Gandhian thought can inform climate activism through its emphasis on ecological balance, moral responsibility, and intergenerational equity. Concepts such as *sustainable agriculture*, *slow development*, *eco-villages*, and *local self-sufficiency* are rooted in his economic vision. Urban planning guided by Gandhian principles would prioritize green spaces, walkability, and community-centric living. His ideas also resonate with *eco-spirituality*, which sees the Earth not merely as a resource but as a living, sacred entity deserving of care and reverence.

Gandhi's ethical stance — that all consumption must be tempered by need and not greed — directly challenges consumerist culture and offers a spiritual critique of capitalist excess.

### 5.3 Participatory Economics and Ethical Enterprise

Gandhi's model of *trusteeship*, while utopian in some respects, remains highly relevant in the face of widening income inequality and corporate monopolization. In the modern context, this can be transformed into models of *participatory economics* where wealth creation and distribution are tied to community welfare, ethical conduct, and environmental responsibility.

New forms of economic enterprise — such as social businesses, worker-owned cooperatives, ethical banking, and benefit corporations — echo Gandhi's belief that business should serve society, not exploit it. These models aim to blend profitability with purpose, much like Gandhi envisioned a system where the wealthy act as trustees of their surplus, voluntarily contributing to the collective good.

Moreover, movements for *universal basic income*, *livelihood-centric development*, and *solidarity economies* can draw inspiration from Gandhi's Sarvodaya framework — ensuring the upliftment of all, especially the most marginalized.

### 5.4 Non-Violent Resistance in Contemporary Movements

Gandhi's method of *Satyagraha* has inspired countless non-violent resistance movements across the world, and it continues to be a powerful tool against injustice, authoritarianism, and environmental degradation. Movements such as *Fridays for Future*, *Extinction Rebellion*, *Occupy Wall Street*, and protests against racial and gender violence have adopted strategies rooted in non-violent civil disobedience.

Gandhi's insistence on discipline, sacrifice, and truth in protest offers a deeper moral compass that many modern movements can learn from. His idea of winning over opponents rather than defeating them introduces a humane dimension to resistance, prioritizing reconciliation and transformation over conflict and coercion.

In India, non-violent farmer protests, anti-corruption campaigns, and environmental justice movements continue to draw from the Gandhian tradition, reminding the nation of the strength of peaceful dissent. These movements underscore the ongoing relevance of Satyagraha in confronting injustice without abandoning ethics.

Gandhi's ideas remain profoundly relevant, not because they offer ready-made solutions, but because they ask the most important questions: How should we live? What is the moral basis of power? Can development be humane and just? Can politics be truthful? Reimagining Gandhism in the 21st century is not about nostalgia but about innovation rooted in ethics. It requires bold imagination, moral courage, and a renewed commitment to justice — qualities Gandhi cultivated in both thought and action.

## 6. Conclusion

Mahatma Gandhi's intellectual legacy transcends the boundaries of time, geography, and ideological divisions. He was not merely a political strategist or spiritual leader, but a thinker whose ideas formed a holistic vision of human development — one that blended ethics with politics, economy with morality, and personal transformation with social change. In the rapidly shifting landscape of the 21st century, where societies are increasingly marked by inequality, environmental crisis, polarization, and a sense of ethical void, Gandhi's thought emerges not as a nostalgic remembrance, but as a framework for sustainable, inclusive, and just futures.

India today stands at a paradoxical crossroads. It is a nation of technological innovation and democratic resilience, but also one where social divisions, environmental degradation, and ethical challenges persist. In this duality, Gandhi's philosophy provides more than inspiration — it provides guidance. His belief in *Swaraj* as moral self-rule urges citizens to reflect on their responsibilities, not just their rights. His call for *Sarvodaya*, the upliftment of all, reminds us that development must include the most marginalized. His insistence on *Ahimsa* teaches us that real strength lies in compassion, patience, and peace.

Gandhi's principles also offer direction in our global dilemmas. His critique of materialism, warning against the pursuit of unbridled consumerism, resonates amidst climate breakdown. His model of trusteeship speaks powerfully in an era of wealth inequality and corporate overreach. His trust in civil society, local governance, and non-violent action offers enduring relevance in a time of institutional crisis and political disenchantment. Importantly, Gandhi did not claim infallibility; he invited criticism, self-correction, and reinterpretation. He asked his followers to think independently and to adapt his ideas to the needs of their own time. Therefore, engaging with Gandhian thought today is not about mechanically applying old formulas, but about embodying the ethical spirit of his philosophy in new ways — through digital justice, climate responsibility, inclusive economics, and moral politics.

In a world fraught with conflict, alienation, and ecological collapse, Gandhi's life and thought challenge us to rethink what it truly means to be free, just, and human. They ask us to rediscover the soul of democracy — one based not only on institutions, but on conscience. They remind us that politics devoid of ethics is hollow, and development without dignity is incomplete.

As India and the world confront an increasingly uncertain future, revisiting Gandhian ideals may not only be relevant — it may be imperative. Gandhi's message — of truth over deception, peace over violence, service over selfishness — continues to light a path toward a more humane and equitable world. The question that remains is whether we have the courage, wisdom, and resolve to walk that path.

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