

ARTICLE



Gandhian Inversion of Modern Political Perception

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Abstract

The core of Gandhi's theory of politics is to show that the citizen is the true political subject and not the state. In other words, in Gandhi's mind the citizen was always above the state. As such, the political subject's decision on sovereignty becomes, for Gandhi, the true subject of political sovereignty. As a result, the Gandhian moment of politics is an effort to de-theologise and de-secularise the concept of modern politics as presented by the omnipotent sovereign of Thomas Hobbes. His ideas on ethics in politics lead Gandhi to criticise Hobbesian political authority and to disobey the state and its laws beyond the principle of fear. Gandhi's political practice is based on the taming of this fear.



Keywords

nonviolence, politics, peace culture, conflict resolution

“His physical body has left us and we shall never see him again or hear his gentle voice or run to him for counsel. But his imperishable memory and immortal message remain with us.”

Jawaharlal Nehru

Everyone knows the central ontological question: Why is there being, being rather than nothing? But there is another central philosophical question which the human race has been unable to answer: Why is there violence, violence rather than nonviolence?

Why is there so much violence in the world today? Terrorism, religious and ethnic communalism, environmental deterioration, increased economic bankruptcies and the expansion of international hostilities – all of these point to a world of global challenges and multiple threats. It is clear that in such a world, plagued by violence, we urgently need strong ethical thinking which insists on applying fundamental ethical principles in interactions between individuals and between nations and to change the war-fostering political reality. At a time when humankind is confronted with clashes of national interest, religious fundamentalism

and ethnic and racial prejudices, nonviolence can be the well-trusted means of laying the groundwork for a new cosmopolitics.

Many continue to believe that nonviolence is an ineffective instrument against dictatorships and genocide. However in the last few decades, many democratic initiatives, based on nonviolent militancy and an affirmation of human rights to help build global civil society on solid ethical foundations, could be associated with a kind of neo-Gandhian quest for peace and justice. Never in the history of the human race has nonviolence been so crucial. Nonviolence has recently evolved from a simple tactic of resistance to a cosmopolitical aim based on international application of the principles of democracy. Over the past three decades, the repercussions of global terrorism, human rights violations and environmental degradation have highlighted the need for politics of nonviolence at the global level to best deal with these problems. Global politics of nonviolence, therefore, is the task not only of governments but also of civil society, and intergovernmental, non-governmental and transnational organisations. Most importantly, the international community has the moral



obligation and duty to intervene in countries if they slide into lawlessness and cannot protect citizens from violations of human rights. Only a nonviolent society can work its way up to create institutions for development and foster inter-cultural and inter-religious harmony. In a century where terror conditions the life and mentality of at least two-thirds of humanity and violence influences our everyday culture, we cannot continue with the ostrich policy – no longer asking “whose responsibility is it?”

It would be folly to expect nonviolence to become effective and durable while the majority still thinks of politics in terms of the use of violence. It is true that, as Karl Jaspers affirmed: “In morality, moral conviction is decisive, in politics it is success.” But it is also true that there is no long-term success in politics in the absence of morality. Thus, the political is dependent on the “over-political,” which remains independent from politics. If politics does not remain dependent on the “over-political,” it may end in ruin.

That is to say, political events bring moral responsibilities, and in turn, ethical views leave their imprint on political decisions. Politics without ethics is pure exercise of power. It is only in relation with ethics that politics can be elevated to a public virtue. Terrible crimes have been committed by political practices that tried to teach and impose moral behaviour. Spiritualising politics, as Gandhi understood, is not about moralising it, but is an effort to redefine it in terms of civic responsibility in an explicit public sphere. Politics is the morally conscientious and socially responsible exercise of civic roles: nonviolence is the key to this. When we examine where we are today, given the politics and technology of violence, we can only conclude that we live in a world with no wisdom. The time has come for humanity to renew its commitment, politically, economically, and culturally to the Gandhian moment of politics.

During his lifetime, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi became a world citizen. Out of his native Gujarat and later through experiments in England and South Africa, he emerged as an original hero into the public realm of national and international visibility – a hero destined to lead his people and nation out of the bitter experience of colonial oppression into a new era of independence and freedom. Somehow Gandhi remains easier to manage and explain to future generations as an Indian hero, if we forget his criticism of modern civilisation and his search for the democratisation of modernity that had already begun in 1909 with the publication of *Hind Swaraj*. As such, evoking the powerful originality of a Gandhian moment of politics means paying acute attention to the vital and global manifestation of the democratic hope that Gandhi

represented. He had the powerful determination to identify his life and his leadership with the cause of nonviolence, called for the spiritualisation of politics and revolutionary transformation of religious and political institutions in India, and attempted to unite the elites and the masses in India and organise them into a visionary nonviolent force. These are all significant manifestations of Gandhian pluralist thinking and creation of democracy. Perhaps, then, the Gandhian moment needs to be dissociated from all attempts to manage, market or domesticate the memory of Mahatma Gandhi. With the end of the first decade of the 21st century, we need to stop holding Gandhi captive to his most amenable history so that he might help us break free and move toward a future as intercultural communities of creativity and dialogue.

Gandhi once said, “There is no hope for the aching world except through the narrow and straight path of non-violence.”¹ If we want to reap the harvest of dialogical coexistence in the future, we have to sow seeds of nonviolence. Sixty years after Gandhi’s death, we face a choice: either forge a peaceful human community in a plural world by speaking and acting to increase human solidarity, or preserve and extend the divide between communities and cultures by promoting religious and cultural prejudices and creating conflict and violence. Gandhi came to believe that the future of our global civilisation on this vulnerable globe was dependent on our ability to live together in harmony, tolerance and peace. Though he fired the spirit of nationalism and gave a clarion call to his countrymen to join him in the liberation of the motherland, Gandhi saw no difference in being a patriot and serving humanity. “Through the realisation of freedom of India,” he said, “I hope to realise and carry on the mission of brotherhood of men.”² As such, Gandhi’s search for human solidarity and intercultural dialogue was an effort to narrow the gap between the logic of “we” and “they” while seeking, revealing and displaying many voices in Indian society and around the world who expressed this common aspiration for solidarity and mutuality in all its facets: ethical, spiritual, social, economic and political. Evidently, making sense of a plural world by cutting across various boundaries posed theoretical and practical challenges for Gandhi.

Gandhi’s real challenge was to make politics and religion truthful by creating a dialogical bridge between the two. According to him, the process of fostering individual freedom and social harmony was only possible through the spiritualisation of politics and reintegration of politics within ethics. As such, Gandhi described his conception of true citizenship as “the reign of self-imposed law of moral restraint.”³ In fact, it was not the morals of a sectarian

1 Quoted in Thomas Merton (ed.) (1965), *Gandhi on Non-Violence*. New York: New Directions, p. 74.

2 *Young India*, 14 April 1929

3 M.K. Gandhi (1956). *Towards Everlasting Peace* (ed. A.T. Hingorani). Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, p. 217.



religion that, according to Gandhi, were to be fused with politics, but what Gandhi called “the highest moral law.” He referred to the two sides of his ethics as truth and non-violence. Moreover, he described a moral action as “a matter of duty” and rejected any action which was “promoted by hope of happiness in the next world.”⁴ Not surprisingly, Gandhi frequently expressed his deep conviction that politics and religion were inextricably interlinked and that their separation resembled the separation of body and blood. Unlike those in India and around the world who believed that religion and social amelioration could not unite, Gandhi refused to consider the spiritual and secular ideals as opposite poles.

Mahatma Gandhi was different from most of the spiritual giants of India such as Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo. Mahatma Gandhi put nonviolence as an absolute factor, an absolute imperative; but this was not always the case with other spiritual leaders. Sri Aurobindo, for example, used passive resistance as a means in the struggle for independence, but he was not an ardent champion of the doctrine of nonviolence. Gandhi, however, was greatly inspired by the spiritualistic nationalism of some of these gurus. He stated that Vivekananda’s influence increased his “love for his country a thousand-fold.” But Gandhi’s religion was not confined to temples, churches, books, rituals and other outer forms. It was closely related to the social and political realms. Gandhi was in this respect one of the few spiritual thinkers of his generation to also be a political leader. He once said that meditation and worship were not exclusive things to be kept locked up in a strongbox, but they must be seen in our every act.⁵ Surprisingly, what made Gandhi’s thinking unusual in a secular age was his conviction that secular politics and spiritual ethics could be harmonious. He was bold enough to consider both paradigms of politics and religion outside their traditional conceptual framework.

It was the unique achievement to invert the Hobbesian approach to politics as a universal desire for self-preservation. Gandhi essentially replaced the Hobbesian security paradigm of politics, which raises the question of the state as a political agent responsible for implementing the requirements of human security, with his own paradigm of human solidarity. Accordingly, Gandhi’s project of spiritualising politics through nonviolent action has the twin objectives of bringing about a truly democratic transformation of society and thereby securing an ethical social order. Politics, for Gandhi, was the search for the ethical, and the bare fact of surviving with the help of a sovereign was of no value to him.

Gandhi’s grammar of politics, therefore, was neither juridical nor technological and he adopted a new concept of society as a sphere of relationships of solidarity. He was quite aware of the fact that the search for human solidarity was not the same as seeking a social contract out of pragmatic self-interest. Gandhi, unlike Hobbes, did not view free society as a choice made by selfish people seeking to escape the confrontation of each against all others. For Gandhi, humans are not governed by their passions, but by their sense of self-restraint and self-suffering. “I have found,” he wrote, “that mere appeal to reason does not answer where prejudices are age-long and based on supposed religious authority. Reason has to be strengthened by suffering.”⁶ He went on to distinguish between “self-suffering” and “violence” and developed the idea that self-suffering is a proof of courage and truthfulness in nonviolent action. According to Gandhi, “Suffering is the law of human beings; war is the law of the jungle. But suffering is infinitely more powerful than the law of the jungle for converting the opponent and opening his ears, which are otherwise shut, to the voice of reason... Suffering is the badge of the human race, not the sword.”⁷ This Gandhian idea of “self-suffering” may be looked upon as open recognition of the idea of interdependence and mutuality among social beings if one understands how Gandhi tried to explain what he meant by *sarvodaya* or “welfare of all.”

As for his politics, Gandhi’s idea of service to fellow human beings is a negation of the utilitarian principle of the “greatest good for the greatest possible number,” which leaves no place for moral empathy and social self-sacrifice. Gandhi’s emphasis on self-sacrifice and the capacity for service among human beings led him to criticise modern civilisation, which, according to him, had the pursuit of power, wealth, and pleasure as its predominant goals. A civilisation as such, which referred to itself as modern, did not take heed of morality as a stepping stone and guiding force for the construction of society. Consequently, Gandhi described what he considered “true civilisation” not as a linear progression of human kind, but rather as “good conduct” or a good way of life. In Gandhi’s native Gujarati language, the word *sudharo* (civilisation) as opposed to *kudharo* (barbarism), implied that there is a higher mode of a conduct which leads to a better path of duty. This is important to note because duty has the connotation of a responsibility that is to endure under all circumstances, and it is duty that assists us in striving towards better conduct towards each other.

Gandhi saw a true civilisation as one that could attain the universal principles of morality. If a society was

4 M.K. Gandhi (1922). *Ethical Religion*. Madras: S.Ganesan, pp. 8-11.

5 *Harijan*, 20 April 1935.

6 *Young India*, March 1925.

7 Quoted in Thomas Pantham (1983). “Thinking with Mahatma: Beyond Liberal Democracy”, *Political Theory*, vol.11, No. 2, May, p. 180.



not built on the foundations of ethics or morality, it would not be sustainable. Gandhi was deeply concerned with the moral and spiritual alienation of mankind, and his criticism of modernity and his approach of greater human solidarity to the problem of politics have to be seen in the context of this fundamental question. However, two questions remained for Gandhi: first, how does one go about emancipating civilisation from the maladies it produces? And second, how is a civilisation based on ethics and morality built? The answers to these questions can be found in Gandhi's major work entitled *Hind Swaraj*, in which he attempted to reconcile the question of Indian nationalism with his theoretical vision of civilisation. It was through the usage of his conceptual trinity of *swaraj*, *satyagraha* and *swadeshi* that Gandhi sought to reconcile, both practically and theoretically, the ailment of modern civilisation with a more sustainable and truer form of civilisation.

The first of the trinity was *swaraj*, or self-rule. Gandhi believed in a political community that included self-institution and self-rule as its foundations, leading to the growth of a truer moral civilisation and a common understanding of mutuality. In Gandhi's mind, *swaraj* would bring about social transformation through small-scale, decentralised, self-organised and self-directed participatory structures of governance. The second, *satyagraha*, or truth-force, involved voluntary suffering in the process of resisting evil. As has been explained by Joan V. Bondurant, "*Satyagraha* became something more than a method of resistance to particular legal norms; it became an instrument of struggle for positive objectives and for fundamental change." The third part of the trinity, *swadeshi*, or self-sufficiency, was considered by Gandhi as a way to improve economic conditions in India through the revival of domestic-made products and production techniques. As *swaraj* laid stress on self-governance through individuals and community building, *swadeshi* underlined the spirit of neighbourliness. As for *satyagraha*, it emphasised the principle that the whole purpose of an encounter with the unjust was not to win the confrontation, but to win over the heart and mind of the "enemy." Gandhi, therefore, believed that no true self-government could be achieved if there was no reform of the individual.

On this premise, Gandhi argued that the modern state as an institution was enmeshed in violence. Gandhi's criticism was not limited to the particular colonial state he was opposing, but was aimed at the fundamental rationale of the modern sovereign state itself. The key to this was, of course, the connection between political and moral sovereignty. As such, Gandhi believed that the centre of gravity of modern politics needed to be shifted back from the idea of material power and wealth to righteousness and truthfulness. In his

criticism of modernity, Gandhi saw modern civilisation as promoting ideals of power and wealth that were based on individual self-centeredness and causing the loss of community bonds that were contrary to the moral and spiritual common good (*dharma*). Therefore, as in the Hindu concept of *purusharthas*, meaning objectives of a human being, Gandhi advocated a life of balance, achievement and fulfilment. Ultimately in Gandhi's political philosophy the two concepts of self-government and self-sufficiency are tied into his political ideal of *Rama Rajya*, the sovereignty of people based on pure moral authority.

For Gandhi, therefore, politics is a constant self-realisation, self-reflection and self-reform within the individual. It is a process of self-rule through which citizens are able to contribute to the betterment of the community. Thus it goes without saying that Gandhi's nonviolence presupposes spiritual solidarity. Contrary to those who claim that Gandhi was a reactionary, it should be noted that his criticism of modern civilisation did not mean a return to the past. It was actually a move forward in human moral progress. Clearly Gandhi not only saw the need for fundamental change in the modern world but even recognised its inevitability. That is why his ideas have inspired people around the world, among them Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King Jr. and His Holiness the Dalai Lama. King came to realise that Gandhi was the first person in history to re-invent the Christian ethic of love as "a potent instrument for social and collective transformation". It was then a short journey to unreserved acceptance of the Gandhian technique of nonviolence as the only viable means to overcome the problems faced by his people. Both King's and Gandhi's life-practices challenge our politics today: they represent a different image of human enlightenment, one that our world of violence direly needs as a method of reform.

These are truly interesting times to rethink a Gandhian moment of politics as a moral exercise of power. This is where the Gandhian spiritual approach to politics can be distinguished from the process of politicisation of politics and fundamentalist approaches to religion. Far from being utopian, the Gandhian approach can be seen as an ethical basis for the evaluation of existing political practices in today's world. As King once affirmed, "Timid supplication for justice will not solve the problem. We've got to confront the power structure massively."⁸ In Gandhi's mind, democratising politics meant not only ending British colonialism but also taking nonviolent action on coercive power relations and unjust social structures. For him, the stability of human civilisation, the democratic potential of a community and the moral dignity of individuals depended on challenging the evils of the growing gap between the haves and

8 *The Washingtonian*, February 1968, p.53, quoted in James Echols (ed.), *I Have a Dream: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Future of Multicultural America*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, p. 19.



the have-nots. Therein lies the ultimate finality and power of the Gandhian moment. It was not just Gandhi's dream for India; it is a vision for humankind, with the powerful presence of the future for democratising modernity.

Basically speaking, if we are to recognise that we are in a new era where politics can be defined essentially as reducing violence and therefore creating the passage from hostility to hospitality, we must recognise that the Gandhian view of politics is not merely "the other possibility" for our world, but "the possibility realised in the first instance."⁹ Furthermore, violence always remains, but as the Gandhian movement shows us, those who choose nonviolence must also make the effort to redefine and reconstruct politics as the transmutation of violence. For this reason, nonviolence is politics' point of departure, as well as its final goal. History bears witness, and everyday experience confirms that to make violence a political right and a moral duty is essentially a mistake. But it is also a mistake when politics becomes a vehicle for violence as soon as it is not founded on the ethical imperatives of solidarity and reciprocity. As such, nonviolence is the cornerstone of citizenship as a space of empowerment and self-government. That is why Gandhi believed in the exercise of active citizenship for a more enlightened and mature form of democracy. By this he meant that the success of democracy depends on its dialogical nature. The very essence of democracy, then, is the dialogue of citizens among themselves and the success of democracy is therefore the success of this dialogue. Therefore, the breakdown of dialogue always means a breakdown of democracy and the failure of the very foundations of the body politic.

Violence is liable to present itself as the ultimate means of expression of the anti-political. At the same time, we must understand this violence as an absence of a human environment that can foster the culture of tolerance and mutual respect. As we can see from the experience of nonviolence around the world in the past sixty years, the Gandhian idea only achieves its full existence when it is made flesh in exemplary human actions like those of King, Mandela and Tutu. Assuredly, prophetic nonviolent action is not easy in a time when the ultimate manifestation of power is military prowess. The Gandhian approach has political power because it is not just a dream, but an ethical

vision. Ethical vision can be used to evaluate, to criticise, to guide, and to transform global citizenship to a civic movement of duty and responsibility. The Gandhian moment of politics is innovative and transformative, and not simply a calculation of static interest or balance of power. What it has shown us over the past sixty years, through different experiments with nonviolence around the world, is that we are not condemned to thinking about politics in purely strategic terms or as a mere mechanism to guarantee rights. The story of Gandhian nonviolence as a conscious political idea shows us how the act of negotiating relationships in a context of politicised divergences and differences pulls all parties, the strong and the weak, to an acknowledgment of a form of mutuality and solidarity with immediate ethical consequences. As such, the Gandhian moment of politics supports the civic capacity of citizens to redefine politics in relation to its explicit commonality, its feature of mutuality and a long-term guiding feature of a just society. Furthermore, it is not only about the value of engagement in public life, but also an ethos of a common world.

A final observation: today, the retreat of politics presents us with new and urgent problems. This retreat has led to outbreaks of great intolerance and violence. To reassert the primary value of politics as the civic capacity for mutuality and reciprocity, the Gandhian moment of politics can undoubtedly play a crucial role in pluralist sensitivity of civilisation. Gandhi's work and action make it clear that, while civilisation is rendered in the plural, its significant opposite remains the unethical feature of modernity. Gandhi equated the limits of ethics with the limits of civilisation. Moreover, he tried to reconstruct the grammar of civilisation by overcoming the social and political problems of violence. What is unique and innovative about the Gandhian approach is its capacity to make the idea of politics intelligible and appealing as a sphere of self-realisation and recognition of the other. That is to say, it demonstrates the alternative possibilities embedded within nonviolent tradition while revealing to future socio-political actors of nonviolence the basic conception of human solidarity and emancipative transformation. ■

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⁹ This expression is from the French philosopher Eric Weil in his book *Logique de la Philosophie*, Paris: Vrin, 1967, p. 69.



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