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Rooted in Dharma: The Enduring Influence of Gandhi's Philosophy on India's Social Order

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Abstract:
Since the early 20th century, the philosophy of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, which is based on the ancient Indian principle of Dharma, has had a great impact on the social organization of India. The continuing importance of Gandhian thought in the development of Indian civil society, political culture, and socioeconomic institutions is explored in this paper. This paper analyses the long-term impacts of Gandhian notions of Ahimsa (non-violence), Satya (truth), Sarvodaya (welfare of all), Swaraj (self-rule), and Swadeshi (self-sufficiency) on the fabric of Indian civil society, political culture, and socioeconomic institutions. The paper is based upon a detailed analysis of the Constitution of India, Census of India reports, and Planning Commission reports of the past five decades (1951-2011) and uses this analysis to examine how the Gandhian philosophy influenced constitutional provisions, legislative changes, and grassroots organizations from independence to the present. Gandhi's struggle for the eradication of untouchability, the Bhoodan land reform movement, the Chipko environmental movement, and the anti-corruption movement of the early twenty-first century are highlighted as examples of Dharmic praxis. The paper suggests that modernisation and globalization have diminished some elements of Gandhi's vision, but the ethical grammar of Dharma remains vital to the social consciousness in India, notably in situations of inequity, ecological harm, and civic engagement. The results validate the relevance of Gandhi's ideology in contemporary India as a doctrine that keeps coming to the fore within the quest for a just and harmonious social order.

Keywords: Gandhi, Dharma, Ahimsa, Sarvodaya, Swaraj, Indian social order, non-violence, social movements, untouchability, Swadeshi.

1. Introduction

Religious tradition, moral philosophy, and political action have always been the thread that has bound India's social fabric. Of all the thinkers that have contributed to the social imagination of the nation, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi is a unique one whose philosophy, inspired by the ancient Indian notion of Dharma, transformed the course of a civilization at a crucial moment in history. Gandhi was not only a political leader, but also a visionary who defined the ideals of a good society, which was built on the principles of moral law, self-discipline, social responsibility, and communal harmony.

The Sanskrit word for dharma is dhri, meaning 'to hold' or 'to sustain' and signifies cosmic order as well as moral obligation. Dharma, in the Gandhian sense, is not a religion or a dogma but a way of life which is to be realized through the two principles of Ahimsa (non-violence) and Satya (truth). Satyagraha—truth-force—was the practical application of this Dharmic consciousness, a way of social change that did not involve physical violence, but relied instead on moral persuasion (Gandhi, 1927).

This paper examines the impact of Gandhi's Dharmic philosophy in various fields: the caste system and the movement against untouchability, economic life and Sarvodaya, Swadeshi, civic involvement and democratic self-governance, and ecology of social movements from the mid-twentieth century to the early

twenty-first century. The time period for this analysis ranges from Gandhi's early political writings (ca. From 1909 to the present day (ca. 2014), to the present anti-corruption movements that were inspired by his legacy. 2013, focusing on changes in social development indicators in empirical data from census reports and government policy documents.

The importance of this enquiry is not just to understand, but also to be urgently needed. In a society facing a myriad of social problems such as inequality, communal tension, environmental degradation, and democratic accountability, doubts about the operativeness of Gandhi's moral philosophy, whether Dharma 'holds' the social order, or not, becomes once again a case of concern. This paper traces the genealogy of Gandhian influence over the past six decades in post-independence India in order to illustrate that the perseverance of this philosophy is not an accident, but rather rooted in the strong moral structure of its philosophy and its connection with the pluralistic civilizational ethos of India (Parel, 2006).

2. The theoretical framework is Gandhi's Dharmic Philosophy

Gandhi's philosophical house stands on a series of interrelated moral ideas, each of which contains an integral meaning that makes part of a Dharma way of life for an individual and for groups of people. Though the ideas and ideals come from Hindu, Jain, Christian, and Tolstoyan sources, they were integrated into a coherent ethical system which Gandhi applied to the governance of self and society (Iyer, 1973).

Truth is the highest in this system of philosophy, and it is Satya, elevated to a near-metaphysical status by Gandhi. Truth for Gandhi was not just the accuracy of a proposition; it was the nature of ultimate reality: 'God is Truth' (Gandhi 1927, p. 34) and 'Truth is God'. This ontological basis of ethics in truth endowed the moral character of Gandhism with its uncompromising sense. Ahimsa is a value very close to Satya, and Gandhi knew that it was not mere passivity, but the active love and care for all living beings. Socially, Ahimsa called for a rejection of structural violence – poverty, exploitation, and casteism – alongside violence in the body (Iyer, 1973).

The economic aspect of Gandhi's Dharma vision was provided by Sarvodaya, which Gandhi coined from the phrase 'welfare of all' used by John Ruskin in Unto This Last (1860). Gandhi stood opposed to the utilitarian calculation of the greatest good for the greatest number, however, placing emphasis on the welfare of each person, especially the weakest and the most marginalized (Kumarappa, 1945). Swaraj—self-rule—was manifest at both the personal and political level: self-discipline was an essential requirement of political independence, and political independence was dependent on personal self-discipline and economic and moral autonomy at the village level (Gandhi, 1909). The actual weapon of this economic Swaraj was Swadeshi (loving one's own product), which meant that the decisions to buy and use local produce were connected to the national quest for self-reliance (Gandhi, 1921).

Table 1 systematically captures these core Gandhian concepts, their underpinning, social domains they engage with, and key proponents who have developed or applied them.

Table 1- Core Gandhian Concepts, Principles, and Social Applications

Gandhian Concept	Core Principle	Social Domain	Key Proponent
Ahimsa	Non-violence in thought, word, and deed	Conflict Resolution	Gandhi (1920)
Satya	Truth is the highest moral duty	Governance & Ethics	Gandhi (1927)
Sarvodaya	Welfare and upliftment of all	Economic Order	Kumarappa (1945)

Gandhian Concept	Core Principle	Social Domain	Key Proponent
Swaraj	Self-rule at the individual & collective level	Political Freedom	Gandhi (1909)
Swadeshi	Local self-sufficiency and economic dignity	Rural Development	Gandhi (1921)
Brahmacharya	Celibacy and self-discipline	Personal Ethics	Gandhi (1940)
Daridranarayan	God dwells in the poor; service to the poor is service to God	Social Justice	Gandhi (1933)

Note. Sources: Gandhi (1909, 1921, 1927, 1933, 1940); Kumarappa (1945); compiled by the author.

3. Caste, Untouchability, and the Gandhian Social Reform

The most controversial and significant aspect of Gandhi's interaction with the social structure of India was his views on caste and untouchability. Gandhi's views on caste changed considerably. In his early writings, he accepted a purified version of varna (the four-fold division of the Hindu society according to occupational duties), and he rejected the hereditary rigidity that had become part of jati (caste as a birth-based social category). By the 1930s, however, he had come to an irrevocable decision to condemn the untouchability in all its forms and altogether (Zelliot, 1992).

Gandhi called the untouchables 'Harijan' or children of God, thereby affirming their dignity and placing them at the heart of the moral community of Dharma. He established his Harijan Sevak Sangh (Association for the Service of Harijans) in 1932, which launched temple entry campaigns, social welfare programmes, and literacy initiatives throughout India. Gandhi's fasts unto death, like the famous Poona Fast of September 1932, were used as tools for the imposition of social change through Dharmic persuasion rather than legislative coercion (Ambedkar, 1945).

Gandhi's social reform is also highlighted by his conflict with B.R. Ambedkar, the chief of the Dalit political movement. Ambedkar asserted that Gandhi's strategy left Hindu caste in place, but mitigated its worst features, and that social equality could be attained only by the destruction of caste, not its rehabilitation (Ambedkar 1936/2014). This debate is not over yet, but it is still an active arena of contestation in Indian social thought, and it has continued to be the site of intensely active questions since Gandhi's time.

The constitutional measures of independent India, especially Article 14, Article 15, Article 16, and Article 17 of the Constitution (1950), which guaranteed equality, banned caste discrimination, and abolished untouchability, are also imbued with the social reform impact of the Gandhian movement, while also being a product of Ambedkar's radical jurisprudence. These provisions were strengthened by the Untouchability (Offences) Act of 1955, which was the first time that Gandhi's anti-caste moral stance was formally put into the law in India.

4. Sarvodaya, Swadeshi, and the Gandhian Economic Order

Gandhi's attack on industrial capitalism was as basic as his attack on political imperialism. He saw the sin of concentration of wealth, the alienation of labour, and the ruination of the village self-sufficiency as his eyes were fixed on the destruction of the social fabric of India. The Charkha—spinning wheel—was not

just a symbol of resistance to British textile imports; it was also a symbol of Swadeshi economics and moral life and material production (Gandhi, 1921). The uniform of the independence movement was "homespun cloth" or Khadi, symbolizing unity with the downtrodden rural population and economic independence.

The most ambitious institutionalisation of Sarvodaya economics after independence was the Bhoodan movement (land gift) that Vinoba Bhave started in 1951. Bhave was inspired by Gandhi's moral philosophy and walked across India in a bid to enlist the cooperation of landowners who would voluntarily give land to the landless. By 1961, the total amount of land donated amounted to about 4.2 million acres, but many acres became legally disputed and unsuitable for farming (Kumarappa, 1961). The most radical institutional dimension of Sarvodaya was the Gramdan (village gift), which involved entire villages committing themselves to the communal ownership of land, and which was expanded to some 2,200 villages by 1975.

The Khadi and Village Industries Commission (KVIC) was established in 1956 by the Government of India under the Khadi and Village Industries Commission Act, which codified the concept of Swadeshi economics and made it a part of planned development. The relevance of village industries and the enormous magnitude of operation of Gandhian economic institutions in modern India are well reflected in the increase in KVIC production from around ₹4 crore in 1951 to more than ₹26,000 crore in 2011, as is evident from Table 3 (KVIC, 2014).

5. Non-Violence, Social Movements, and the Gandhian Tradition

The most obvious and extensively reported aspect of Gandhi's continuing impact on the social fabric of India was the resurgence of non-violent social movements explicitly based on Satyagraha. These have ranged from conservation to anti-corruption campaigns, from the rights of tribal people to empowerment of women, and are a living tradition of Dharmic political action, which has periodically revitalized civic life in India.

The movement of the early 1970s, known as the Chipko, involved the villagers of the Himalayas, particularly women, who took to the arms of trees to block the commercial logging of trees and developed their principles from the Gandhian movement of Ahimsa and environmental care. The Forest (Conservation) Act of 1980 proved the success of non-violent direct action in achieving tangible legislative outcomes even in a post-independence developmental state (Guha, 1989). In the same way, Nav Nirman (1974) in Gujarat used Gandhian civil disobedience techniques to get the government to take responsibility for the government, which led to the dissolution of the Gujarat Legislative Assembly.

The anti-corruption movement, which was spearheaded by Anna Hazare (2011-2013), was a consciously Gandhian movement that used the tactics of fasting, public mobilisation, and non-violence to persuade the Government of India to take action on the Lokpal Bill. Hazare's hunger strikes on the Ramliia grounds in New Delhi were a deliberate attempt to imitate Gandhi's moral theatre of suffering as political persuasion, being an act of political persuasion that continues to resonate in contemporary India's democratic culture (Patel, 2013).

Table 2 offers a comparative analysis of the major social movements in India that have been based on Gandhian philosophy, covering their period, the elements of Gandhism that they mobilized, and the main achievements of these movements.

Table 2- Major Indian Social Movements Influenced by Gandhian Philosophy (1932–2013)

Social Movement	Period	Gandhian Element	Outcome / Impact
Harijan Welfare Movement	1932–1948	Daridranarayan, Equality	Abolition of Untouchability Act, 1955
Bhoodan Movement	1951–1964	Sarvodaya, Voluntary Giving	4.2 million acres redistributed (Kumarappa, 1961)
Vinoba Bhave's Gramdan	1955–1975	Swaraj, Village Self-Rule	~2,200 Gramdan villages by 1975
Nav Nirman Movement	1974–1975	Satyagraha, Non-cooperation	Gujarat Assembly dissolved (Shah, 2004)
Chipko Movement	1973–1980	Ahimsa, Environmental Duty	Forest conservation legislation, 1980
Anna Hazare Movement	2011–2013	Satyagraha, Transparency	Lokpal Bill passed in Parliament, 2013

Note. Sources: Ambedkar (1945); Kumarappa (1961); Shah (2004); Guha (1989); Patel (2013); compiled by the author.

6. Gandhian Philosophy and India's Democratic Culture

This idea of Gandhi's was more than mere political independence from the British Crown. He said that true Swaraj would come when every individual citizen was changed into a better man and a better citizen, which is what he called the 'kingdom of God within'. Gandhi's idea of village republics (Gram Swaraj), which were units of self-governance with citizens directly ruling and running their affairs through dialogue and consensus, expressed this internal aspect of political freedom.

The Panchayati Raj system, as promoted by the Constitution under the 73rd Amendment in 1992, is the most important institutionalization of Gandhi's concept of Gram Swaraj. The Amendment decentralized administrative and fiscal powers to elected village councils, which was in line with Gandhi's principle that political freedom should be rooted in local autonomy (Mathew, 1995).

Table 3 further serves as a useful reminder of the extent of the democratization of Indian public life over the past decades since independence. This trend of increased democratic participation of previously marginalised social groups—Dalits, Adivasis, women, and the rural poor—is deeply marked by the mobilization of these groups, and reflects the process of voter turnout rising from 45.7% in 1951 to 66.4% in 2011. The movement towards pluralization in democracy, which Gandhi promoted by advocating for self-organization and associational life, is reflected in the number of registered political parties, rising from 14 in 1951 to 1,593 in 2011 (Election Commission of India, 2014).

The literacy rate in the country, especially among the members of the Scheduled Castes, has registered a tremendous improvement from 10.3% in 1951 to 66.1% in 2011 (Census of India 2011). The achievement

of all this was due to several policy decisions, but was heavily dependent on Gandhi's basic premise that education and self-improvement were moral obligations and essential for real Swaraj.

Table 3- Selected Social Development Indicators in India, 1951–2011

Indicator	1951	1971	1991	2011
Literacy Rate (%)	18.3	34.5	52.2	74.0
Scheduled Caste Literacy Rate (%)	10.3	22.7	37.4	66.1
Rural Population Below Poverty Line (%)	~65.0	~56.0	36.4	25.7
Voter Turnout in General Elections (%)	45.7	55.3	56.7	66.4
No. of Registered Political Parties	14	30	113	1,593
Khadi & Village Industries Production (₹ Crore)	~4.0	~124.0	~1,245.0	~26,109.0

Note. Sources: Census of India (1951, 1971, 1991, 2011); Planning Commission of India (2013); Election Commission of India (2014); KVIC (2014); compiled by the author.

7. Challenges to the Gandhian Vision in Contemporary India

Gandhi's philosophical contribution is still present in the social discourse of India, but has come under severe stress from other ideologies and the dynamics of the rapidly modernizing economy. Urbanization, consumerism, and social fragmentation are taking place at a rapid pace in India since the liberalisation of the economy in 1991, which are hard to reconcile with Gandhi's vision of village-centred self-sufficiency. The post-liberalization India, as demonstrated by an upward trend in the Gini coefficient from 0.32 in 1983 to 0.37 in 2010 (World Bank, 2015), is far from the idea of 'Sarvodaya' of equitable welfare.

What complicates the story of Gandhian moral progress is the continued existence of caste discrimination, communal violence, and gender inequality. Ambedkar's critique still holds: the process of transformation has been uneven, and the incidence of violence against the Dalit communities, as seen in the reports of the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB, 2014), suggests that the Dharmic vision of social change, which Gandhi spoke about, has yet to be realised.

The integrity of the Gandhian legacy is threatened also by Hindu nationalist movements that attribute to India some degree of continuity with Gandhi's focus on Hindu civilizational values, but deny him religious pluralism and Ahimsa. Due to the appropriation and distortion of the symbols of Gandhi by various political groups, a contestation of memory has resulted, in which the transformative radicalism of his original vision is often lost (Nandy, 1983).

Yet the use of Gandhian terms and methods in Indian social movements, from environment to anti-corruption, indicates that the Dharmic culture of politics has a special vitality in India, far beyond rhetoric and nostalgia. Gandhi's philosophy deals with timeless aspects of human nature, such as the lure of violence, the possibility of corruption of power, and the necessity of unity, and it is precisely this

timelessness that accounts for its continued relevance in the course of India's social transformation (Parel, 2006).

8. Conclusion

This paper has illustrated how the philosophy of dharma of Gandhi has remained a force for change in India's social landscape in the past 70 years of the post-independence era. The constitutional ban on untouchability, the voluntary land transfers championed by the Bhoodan movement, the protest of the Chipko forest defenders, and the hunger strike of the Jantar Mantar protesters in 2011 are all examples of the Gandhian tradition that continues to energise Indian civic life, offering a "moral grammar" and a set of "politics of action."

The findings of this paper are based on empirical evidence that substantiates both material and moral aspects of Gandhian influence; for instance, literacy improvement among the marginalised communities, the development of participatory democratic structures, the development of big Khadi and village industries, etc. These are not just symbolic successes, but concrete changes in India's society, as partial as they are contested.

This paper has also noted the tensions and constraints in the Gandhian tradition; it is an uneasy mixture with the caste system, is somewhat incompatible with the need for accelerated economic growth, and is subject to appropriation by those who are not interested in its core principles of non-violence, truth, and the welfare of all. There is a dialogue going on between Gandhi and Ambedkar, between Sarvodaya economics and market liberalism, between Gram Swaraj and centralized state planning that is yet to be solved and productive.

The metaphor of roots is invoked in this paper: a philosophy rooted in the deep soil of the civilizational tradition, growing from ancient dharmic sources and stretching for the light of the modern democratic aspiration. That Gandhi's philosophy lives on in the social order in India is not because it has been realized, but because some of the questions it has raised—concerning violence and truth, poverty and dignity, and the nature of individual moral transformation and social change—are questions that all complex societies must constantly ask themselves. Gandhi's Dharmic vision is in this way not an end, but an ongoing discourse, a discourse that has yet to come to a finish.

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