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Dr. Sanjeev Kumar Mishra
PM Shri Kendriya Vidyalaya
Gole Market, Delhi Ministry of
Education, Govt. of India,
Delhi, India

Mahatma Gandhi and his philosophy: A philosophical Idealist

Sanjeev Kumar Mishra

Abstract

Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy is centred on two core principles: truth and non-violence. For Gandhi, the significance of non-violence, or ahimsa, rests on two key beliefs. First, he argued that if all life is interconnected as part of a Divine Reality, then any act of violence against another is ultimately self-destructive. Hurting others disrupts this universal harmony, which is governed by the law of love. Second, Gandhi believed that ahimsa is the strongest force in existence. If violence (himsa) were stronger, humanity would have destroyed itself long ago, preventing any progress. While global justice remains a distant ideal, the survival and progress of humanity reflect the enduring power of love and non-violence.

Keywords: Mahatma Gandhi, philosophy, truth, non-violence, ahimsa, divine reality

Introduction

Peace and harmony are crucial elements of human existence, and Gandhian philosophy seeks to promote universal values like these alongside coexistence. India, as a nation that has long championed the ideals of brotherhood, holds the potential to address global challenges using truth and non-violence.

Gandhian philosophy evolved through Mahatma Gandhi's experiences with religion and society, first in South Africa (1893-1914) and later in India. It represents a collection of ideas inspired by Gandhi's mission, vision, and work for Indian independence. His thoughts were deeply influenced by philosophers like Leo Tolstoy, Henry David Thoreau, and John Ruskin. While Gandhian philosophy is not as systematically structured as Marxism—which focuses primarily on nature and society—it integrates elements of Indian, Eastern, and Western philosophical traditions. Four main pillars define it:

1. **Truth (Satya):** The foundation of all actions.
2. **Non-violence (Ahimsa):** A commitment to peace.
3. **Sarvodaya:** The welfare of all.
4. **Satyagraha:** A peaceful protest rooted in the power of truth and firmness.

Although Gandhian philosophy is rooted in idealism, it also adopts practical elements, especially through Sarvodaya and Satyagraha. By emphasizing these principles, Gandhi's philosophy is best described as "practical idealism," blending spiritual values with actionable practices to create a better society.

It is widely believed that all humans began as brutes but evolved into more humane and divine beings through social progress. In this context, Gandhi asserted that non-violence is the natural law for human beings, while violence is the law of brutes. He believed that human nature is shaped by society and the experiences it brings in day-to-day life.

Philosophers have categorized human mindsets into four broad types: idealists, materialists, pessimists, and optimists. Gandhi, however, aligned himself with idealism and optimism, believing in the inherent goodness of humanity. For him, the survival of human beings in society required adapting to different circumstances, often adopting unique approaches to address challenges. He also recognized that the root of evil often stemmed from humanity's will to gain power, either directly or indirectly, to achieve personal goals.

Gandhi was ahead of his time in proposing a unique view of human nature, emphasizing non-violence, compassion, and interconnectedness. As a voracious reader, he delved deeply into the works of philosophers and thinkers across disciplines such as biology, physics,

Corresponding Author:
Dr. Sanjeev Kumar Mishra
PM Shri Kendriya Vidyalaya
Gole Market, Delhi Ministry of
Education, Govt. of India,
Delhi, India

psychology, social sciences, and philosophy (Varma Vishwanath Prasad, 1961:343) ^[10]. His studies illuminated the complexities of human nature and the intricate dynamics of social existence.

Over the course of history, both human nature and societal conditions have evolved significantly, transforming continuously through historical and social development. Gandhi highlighted the importance of human freedom and individual dignity, earning recognition as a passionate advocate for these ideals.

Although his views on human nature might seem speculative and straightforward, Gandhi believed it was a mix of both good and evil. This balance, he argued, underscores the complexity of human existence and the potential for growth through non-violence and truth.

Gandhi strongly opposed the state-centric ideas of Marxism, instead placing greater emphasis on individual freedom. This focus on personal liberty earned him the label of an anarchist by some. He believed that all people have the potential for goodness once evil is removed from their actions and intentions.

Gandhi's early life, up to the age of 13 or 14, was unremarkable and marked by struggles. However, the latter part of his life was extraordinary, showcasing an outstanding character. He is often regarded as the third great figure of Indian history, after Lord Buddha and Emperor Ashoka.

In Gandhi's view, human existence is divided between two worlds: the natural world and the social world. To thrive, individuals must maintain a balance between the two. His perspective on human nature emphasized the universal self over the individual self, rooting his philosophy in truth and non-violence.

While Gandhi was not a systematic academic thinker in fields like metaphysics or political philosophy, he was an inspired teacher and spiritual guide, akin to figures like Socrates and Buddha. Unlike scholars such as Shankara or Kant, Gandhi expressed the results of his profound personal experiences and realizations of truth.

From 1908 onward, Gandhi's writings exhibit a remarkable consistency, with a unified theme and minimal contradictions. His message is especially significant in today's world, where the values of humanity are under attack by the destructive forces of war and weapons of mass destruction. Gandhi's call for peace, truth, and non-violence remains a powerful reminder of the enduring importance of human dignity and universal values.

Gandhi can be seen as a modern-day Plato or Cicero, championing a spiritual and moral approach to political challenges. Between 1893 and 1914, he made remarkable contributions to the fight for racial equality in South Africa. While his efforts initially focused on improving the condition of Indians there, his struggle was far from a narrow, nationalistic battle. Instead, it was grounded in a universal truth: all people are free and equal. This message deeply inspired Rev. C.F. Andrews, a renowned Christian of the century, who became one of Gandhi's most loyal followers during the South Africa Satyagraha movement (Girani Singh, 2020:196) ^[4].

From 1915 to 1948, Gandhi dedicated his life to India's freedom struggle. Yet, he was far more than just a liberator of a nation. While his patriotism places him among the likes of George Washington, Giuseppe Mazzini, and Dr. Sun Yat-sen, his influence transcended the political independence of

400 million Indians. Gandhi's philosophy, which emphasized the unification of emotions and the integration of personality through a creative, nonviolent, spiritual life, resonates deeply with millions worldwide who struggle with feelings of unrest, frustration, and despair.

Gandhi's life was a living testament to the profound truths of the Bhagavad Gita and other great spiritual texts. He proved that even a single grain of truth holds far greater power than mountains of falsehoods. His message continues to inspire those seeking harmony, peace, and a deeper understanding of humanity's spiritual potential.

The Bhagavad Gita serves as the foundation of Gandhian philosophy, often referred to as its "Bible." Gandhian thought rests on four key pillars: truth, non-violence, satyagraha, and sarvodaya (welfare of all). Alongside truth, three other essential values—goodness, love, and beauty—distinguish Gandhian philosophy from Marxist and other ideologies. These principles solidify Gandhi's place as one of the greatest philosophical idealists of the 20th century.

Objectives of the Study

1. Explore the content and implications of Gandhian thought across various aspects of life.
2. Analyze the nature of social institutions and relationships through the lens of Gandhian philosophy.
3. Review popular movements and programs inspired by Gandhian ideals, aimed at achieving a social order rooted in his approach to non-violent change.
4. Conduct interdisciplinary research on Gandhian philosophy to address contemporary issues.
5. Encourage the adoption of Gandhian perspectives to foster progress, equality, and justice.
6. Publish materials that enhance understanding of Mahatma Gandhi's values for different audiences.
7. Organize activities to promote Gandhian ideals and philosophy.

Importance of the Study

Gandhian philosophy is deeply intertwined with the essence of human society. Gandhi's teachings remain relevant as a guiding force for harmonious coexistence on Earth. His philosophy provides a framework for addressing modern societal challenges while upholding the values of truth, non-violence, and universal welfare.

Methodology

This work primarily draws on secondary sources, including historical research, exploration, descriptive analysis, and review of literature. It also incorporates personal insights from selected authors to provide a comprehensive understanding of Gandhian philosophy.

Relevance of Gandhism

Gandhian views and philosophy remain highly relevant today for several reasons, especially in the face of modern complexities. One of Gandhi's most quoted statements is:

"I have nothing new to teach the world. Truth and non-violence are as old as the hills and rivers. I am not a philosopher but a kama yogi."

He passionately advocated for Rama Rajya, a system where the interests of both princes and paupers are equally protected—a stark contrast to the communist principle of Praja Raj. Rama Rajya symbolizes divine rule, the kingdom of God, where sovereignty is based on moral authority.

Gandhi's vision of Rama Rajya ensures that everyone, regardless of status, is granted equal rights.

From these insights, it's evident that Gandhian philosophy is deeply rooted in social and spiritual foundations, emphasizing truth and non-violence. Even in today's complex, modern society, his ideals continue to hold significance and influence.

Gandhi firmly believed that non-violence is always successful when practiced sincerely. This belief inspired countless social activists and freedom fighters, including figures like Vinoba Bhave, Jayaprakash Narayan, Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela, and Aung San Suu Kyi, who embraced his principles to achieve their goals.

Furthermore, the United Nations has declared Gandhi's birthday as Non-Violence Day, and every year, at least two or three books are published about him across the globe. His ideas are consistently discussed in seminars and intellectual forums worldwide, cementing his place as an enduring influence in global thought.

In every corner of the world, Gandhian philosophy continues to resonate deeply in the hearts and minds of people. His teachings remain timeless, offering guidance and inspiration for future generations.

Historical Background of Gandhian Philosophy

It is well known that every great thinker or philosopher is deeply influenced by the circumstances and environment in which they live. For example, Plato was disturbed by the decline of democracy in Greek city-states and proposed an ideal state as a solution. Similarly, Karl Marx drew inspiration from the Industrial Revolution and the plight of the working class to write extensively on their suffering and the need for revolution. Mahatma Gandhi, too, was shaped by the events and influences of his time (Das P.G., 2011:226)^[2].

Several key factors contributed to the development of Gandhian philosophy:

1. Indian Philosophy and Culture

Gandhi's thought was profoundly shaped by Indian civilisation, culture, history, and religion. While these elements are distinct, together they form the core of Indian philosophy. Despite receiving a Western liberal education, Gandhi never abandoned his Indian roots. His personal life reflected a deep adherence to Indian traditions and values, which gradually permeated his worldview and philosophy.

2. Morality and Ethics

Gandhi's ideas and philosophy were heavily influenced by morality and ethics. Unlike Machiavelli, who separated politics from morality and religion, Gandhi believed these elements were inseparable. For him, politics was deeply interwoven with ethical and spiritual principles, aligning his philosophy more closely with Plato and Aristotle. This fusion of politics, morality, and religion gave his political philosophy a distinct and unique character.

3. Western Thinkers

Gandhi was significantly inspired by three Western thinkers: Leo Tolstoy, John Ruskin, and Henry David Thoreau. Tolstoy's *The Kingdom of God is Within You*, Ruskin's *Unto This Last*, and Thoreau's essay *Civil Disobedience* left a lasting impact on his ideas. He also drew insights from Eastern anarchist philosophy, which resonated with his own beliefs.

4. Sympathy for the Oppressed

Gandhi shared a deep empathy for the common people and the oppressed, a sentiment that echoes Marxist philosophy. While there were stark differences between Marx and Gandhi, they both sought a society free from exploitation, inequality, and misery. Gandhi envisioned a world where everyone, including the downtrodden, could live with dignity.

5. British Colonial Rule

Gandhi's experiences under British rule further shaped his political philosophy. His time in South Africa exposed him to the oppressive nature of colonialism, and upon returning to India in 1915, he found similar injustices. These encounters deepened his skepticism of Western political systems, particularly their state structures, bureaucracies, and claims to sovereignty.

Statement of the Problem

The body of literature on Gandhi spans various genres, including biographical, socio-political, economic, and cultural studies. However, these works often explore only specific aspects of his philosophy. There remains a need for a more integrated approach that comprehensively examines the interconnectedness of his ideas and their application to contemporary challenges.

The journey of Mahatma Gandhi took a significant turn—from an advocate of armed struggle to a leader of the Indian freedom movement, standing firmly against British colonialism and the exploitation of people by those in power. This transformation is not only fascinating but also inspires a deep study of his crucial role in addressing socio-political and economic challenges during his time. The present study, titled "*Mahatma Gandhi and His Philosophy - A Philosophical Idealist*", seeks to explore this dynamic legacy, setting itself apart from earlier works on Gandhi and his activities.

Review of Literature

Most writings on Mahatma Gandhi, including books, journals, research papers, and pamphlets, emphasize the tumultuous period he witnessed during British colonial rule in India. Gandhi is revered in India not just as a freedom fighter but as a leader whose philosophy spanned economics, politics, religion, and social issues that plagued the nation. He was one of the most influential figures of his time, with a personality that left a lasting impact on people across the country.

While Gandhi may not have been a traditional political scientist or philosopher like Plato, Aristotle, Rousseau, Hegel, or Marx, his views on the state, governance, and related concepts are deeply rooted in Indian traditions, history, and culture. His political thought was shaped by this philosophical foundation, guided by principles such as truth, non-violence, and social justice.

In *Modern Political Theory* (2011) by P.G. Das^[3], it is noted that Gandhi's exposure to various literatures led him to engage with thinkers like Leo Tolstoy and John Ruskin. These intellectual influences ignited his philosophical idealism, which he believed was essential for achieving Indian independence. Gandhi's vision of a mass movement rooted in Satyagraha was the driving force behind India's liberation from colonial rule, offering a non-violent, moral path to freedom.

Different Facets of Gandhi as a Philosophical Idealist

His Education and Early Works

Mahatma Gandhi's life was deeply influenced by his upbringing and education. His father, Karamchand Gandhi, served as the Dewan (chief minister) of Porbandar, while his mother, Putlibai, was a devout and religious woman known for her fasting practices. Gandhi admired her intelligence and unwavering faith, which later shaped his own spiritual journey.

Gandhi began his education at the age of seven in Rajkot, where he displayed traits of honesty and shyness. A notable incident during a school inspection highlighted his integrity: when a teacher prompted him to copy the word "kettle," Gandhi refused, as dishonesty was against his nature. His dedication to hard work earned him prizes and scholarships during his time in high school.

At the age of 13, Gandhi entered into an arranged marriage with Kasturbai Makherji Kapadia. Despite having no say in the matter, Kasturbai, a spiritual and supportive partner, played a significant role in Gandhi's life. By 17, he had passed his matriculation exams and enrolled at Samaldas College in Bhavnagar. Later, he was advised to study law to prepare for a position as Dewan, which led him to travel to England in 1888.

During his time in England, Gandhi immersed himself in the study of Roman and English law while also exploring various religious texts, which broadened his worldview. A Christian friend introduced him to the teachings of Christianity, fostering his secular perspective that would later define his leadership style.

After qualifying as a barrister, Gandhi returned to India in 1891 and began practicing law in Bombay and Kathiawar. However, his shy temperament and uncompromising honesty made success in the legal profession challenging.

Shaping His Ideals in South Africa

In 1893, Gandhi took a one-year legal assignment in South Africa, representing the cousin of a businessman, Haji Abdullah. What began as a professional endeavor transformed into a 21-year mission to combat injustice, racial discrimination, and class divisions. His experiences in South Africa shaped his political views, ethics, and belief in non-violence.

Gandhi's South African journey was pivotal; he later reflected that while he was born in India, it was in South Africa that he truly "found himself." His time there saw the evolution of his philosophy of Satyagraha—the principle of non-violent resistance. He realized that peaceful protests required disciplined and trained individuals, whom he called satyagrahis or non-violent soldiers.

Leadership in India

After his return to India in 1914, Gandhi's ideas of peaceful agitation gained momentum. In 1920, he was elected President of the All India Home Rule League. With India's freedom still out of reach, he initiated a nationwide Satyagraha campaign of non-cooperation, urging Indians to resist British rule through peaceful, non-violent means.

Gandhi's journey, from a shy student to a global leader advocating truth and non-violence, exemplifies the transformation of an individual into a philosophical idealist committed to justice, equality, and human dignity.

Gandhi embarked on an experiment of mass civil disobedience at Bardoli in 1922. However, the campaign

had to be suspended due to the outbreak of violence at Chauri Chaura. During his time at Sabarmati Ashram, located on the banks of the Sabarmati river, Gandhi embraced the Marxist ideology: "From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs." He established the Sabarmati Ashram in Ahmedabad, Gujarat, as a center to propagate the principles of Truth and Non-Violence.

Eventually, the Sabarmati Ashram was transformed into the Harijan Sevak Sangh, an organization dedicated to serving the downtrodden, whom Gandhi referred to as Harijan or "people of God." He donated the ashram to this cause, emphasizing the welfare of the marginalized.

Gandhi actively participated in three nationalist movements with local economic demands between 1917 and 1918: the Champaran Satyagraha in Bihar in 1917, the Kheda Satyagraha in Gujarat in 1917, and the Ahmedabad Mill Strike in Gujarat in 1918. In 1919, Gandhi joined the broader nationalist movement, emerging as the most powerful leader within the Indian National Congress. Through his policy of non-violent Satyagraha, he led various forms of resistance movements such as Non-Cooperation, Civil Disobedience, and Quit India, culminating in India's independence.

Mahatma Gandhi remains an outstanding figure in both Indian and world history. He was a pivotal leader in India's national liberation and freedom movement and one of the rare historical figures who significantly contributed to the global revolutionary process. Throughout his life, he carried the dialectical contradictions produced by colonialism and imperialism in the colonial world. Despite various criticisms and portrayals, Gandhi's role in India's freedom struggle has often been misrepresented or exaggerated. Right-wing reactionaries have attempted to undermine his legacy, accusing him of compromising the nation's interests—an evaluation that lacks historical grounding.

Metaphysical Idealism

The core of Gandhism is grounded in the conception of God or an omnipresent fundamental spiritual reality—a 'living light' that encompasses everything. This reality can be referred to as Sachchidananda, Brahman, Rama, or simply Truth. According to Gandhi, God is a self-existent, all-knowing force that pervades everything in the world, providing a universal moral and spiritual foundation.

Gandhi inherited a strong belief in the existence of a deeper spiritual reality from his family, particularly through his devout mother. His engagement with the writings of Tolstoy, his studies on Buddha's life, the Gita, and his interactions with Raychand Bhai, further strengthened his moral convictions. Gandhi was a metaphysical idealist, yet not aligned with the Samkarite school. Unlike the Samkarite concept of an undifferentiated absolute, Gandhi believed in a personal and responsive God, one who listens to the prayers of the devotee (Pant Suresh Chandra, 1967:235) ^[9].

His views are similar to those of the theistic interpreters of Vedanta. For Gandhi, spiritual truth was not attained through dialectical reasoning or conceptual understanding, but through personal spiritual experience, disciplined living, and persistent effort to realize the norm of truth. Thus, we observe a synthesis of Vedantic spiritual metaphysics and Jain-Buddhistic-Vaishnava ethics of Ahimsa in his philosophy. While the concept of Ahimsa is present in the Upanishads, Yoga philosophy, and the Gita, Jainism and Buddhism placed a significant emphasis on it.

Gandhi emphasized experience as the starting point of any philosophy. He believed that the more disciplined he became, the closer he came to the realization of truth. His thought contained a note of radical individualism, stressing the sanctity of personal experience of truth. Great mystics and religious teachers throughout history have attested to the inward experience of eternal values and real existence. However, Gandhi did not negate rational argument and practical observation. He saw himself as a true scientist in the sense that he continually experimented with truth, refining his propositions through repeated observations.

This scientific and rational approach was applicable only to the realm of social and political existence. His faith in a fundamental truth arose not from external arguments or observations, but from spiritual intuition and inner conviction. Prayer was central to Gandhi's personality—he believed he could live without food, but not without prayer. Prayer represented the soul's expression of longing for the supreme spirit. The act of prayer was a daily homage to the divine. Faith in the omnipotent majesty and kindness of God was essential for the Satyagrahi. This faith provided immense strength in the face of earthly power and adversity. The only weapon of the Satyagrahi is God" (Varma Vishwanath Prasad, 1961:275) ^[10]. A living faith in God as the unfailing protector instills fearlessness. Gandhi was not a traditional philosopher of history, but through the reconstruction of his scattered ideas into a philosophy of history, we observe that he accepts theological determinism. He believed, "Nothing can happen but by His will expressed in His eternal changeless law, which is He" (Mukti H.R., 1996:445) ^[8]. For Gandhi, God signifies an unchanging and living law. The great prophets, through their austerities, offer mankind a glimpse of this divine law. Gandhi maintained that literally not a leaf moves without the sanction of the divine.

Carrying theological determinism to its extreme, one could fall into the philosophy of occasionalism. However, Gandhi believed that, in the ultimate sense, God or truth as the final reality and supreme determinant governs all things and movements in the world. Yet, determinism in Gandhi's view applies only to the final explanation of events. It never descended into fatalism, as Gandhi was a strong proponent of the strenuous activism and energism of the Gita. His entire life was marked by ceaseless actions, all inspired by the vision of a spiritual whole that gave a higher meaning to his roles as a social worker, journalist, political leader, and moral prophet. Thus, Gandhi combined a faith in the supremacy of God with an insistence on constant, purposeful action.

Ethical Absolutism

Gandhi accepted metaphysical idealism, and thus believed in the supremacy of ethical values and sarvodaya (welfare for all). His approach to ethics was absolute, guided by the principles of truth, non-violence, and universal selflessness. The philosophy of sarvodaya is based on the concept of the unity of existence. It embodies a perpetual fight against cruelty toward both humans and animals. This philosophy traces its roots to the famous mantra from the Yajurveda—"Isavasyamidam Sarvam"—which states that the entire universe is permeated by the supreme God. According to Gandhi, socialism, even communism, is implicit in this mantra. This idealistic philosophy necessarily upholds the values of eternal truth and justice, teaching universal love as

the only law of life. It refuses to be satisfied with the progress and well-being of a class or nation alone but advocates for the emancipation and realization of the good for all living beings.

The Gandhian theory of ethical absolutism finds its foundation in the Vedic concept of Rita—the doctrine that encompasses cosmic and moral ordinances that govern both men and gods. Gandhi accepted this Vedic insight, along with the Buddhist belief in a moral order, and the philosophical contributions of Hindu thinkers like Patanjali, who emphasized ethics beyond relativism of space and time. Gandhi's life experience deeply convinced him of the superior efficacy of moral norms. He interpreted history through the progressive vindication of Ahimsa—a doctrine central to his philosophy. "It is my firm faith that man is by nature going higher," he wrote. Ahimsa, for Gandhi, was far from mere acquiescence to evil or weakness; it symbolized the resolute strength of the heroic soul that refuses to harm others, as every living creature is fundamentally one with oneself. Ahimsa represented supreme moral and spiritual strength.

"Meticulous care for the rights of the least among us is the sine qua non of non-violence" (Varma Vishwanath Prasad, 1961:335) ^[10]. For Gandhi, the aspirant for truth must endure all types of suffering. Ahimsa means infinite love, which in turn signifies an infinite capacity for suffering. Gandhi regarded truth and non-violence as absolutely binding. "Non-violence is the first article of my faith. It is also the last article of my creed." The satyagrahi, or truth-seeker, must make endless efforts toward the realization of truth through non-violence. Historical figures like Jesus Christ, Raja Harishchandra, and Prahlad exemplified this law of pure suffering. Non-violence, for Gandhi, is the strongest force.

It is a force of the subtlest kind. Real non-violence is a powerful force that can be wielded against the most formidable governments.

Conclusion

Mahatma Gandhi stands as the greatest messenger and apostle of peace in the modern world, following the footsteps of figures like Lord Buddha and Christ. His philosophy of peace is rooted in truth, non-violence, gender equality, social justice, and sustainable development, among other principles. World peace is envisioned as an ideal of freedom, harmony, and happiness among individuals and nations alike. Gandhi, at his core, was a peace-loving individual, emphasizing non-violence as the means and truth as the end to achieve global peace. He believed that the ends and means are interlinked—one of the fundamental tenets of Gandhian philosophy.

Gandhi further articulated that the philosophy of peace and non-violence are the two pillars of any peace process that uphold the dignity and welfare of humanity. These principles are inseparable; peace must be the outcome of any action grounded in non-violence or protest to resolve disputes, fostering harmony and social cohesion across the globe.

In truth, the most significant contribution of M.K. Gandhi to the contemporary world is his message of global peace, built on non-violence. In conclusion, Gandhian philosophy remains deeply relevant and influential in shaping the values and aspirations of people worldwide.

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