



The Role of Gandhian Philosophy in Social Movements in Contemporary India

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ABSTRACT

Mahatma Gandhi, often revered as the Father of the Nation in India, espoused a philosophy that emphasized nonviolence, self-reliance, and grassroots democracy. His ideas have had a profound impact on various social movements in India, both during the struggle for independence and in the contemporary period. This paper explores the relevance and application of Gandhian philosophy in modern social movements in India, examining how his principles continue to inspire and guide efforts towards social justice, environmental sustainability, and political change.

Introduction

Mahatma Gandhi, often revered as the Father of the Nation in India, espoused a philosophy that emphasized nonviolence, self-reliance, and grassroots democracy. His ideas have had a profound impact on various social movements in India, both during the struggle for independence and in the contemporary period. This paper explores the relevance and application of Gandhian philosophy in modern social movements in India, examining how his principles continue to inspire and guide efforts towards social justice, environmental sustainability, and political change. The extent to which Gandhian

philosophy has influenced contemporary movements highlights its enduring significance and adaptability to the challenges faced by present-day society. This paper will also assess how Gandhi's ideals are interpreted and applied in the context of current socio-political dynamics, reflecting their adaptability and timelessness.

Historical Background

Gandhi's philosophy, deeply rooted in the Indian cultural and spiritual milieu, advocated for a harmonious society where individuals could live with dignity and self-respect. His principles drew from ancient Indian traditions, religious texts, and the philosophies of Western thinkers, creating a unique blend that was both deeply Indian and universally applicable. Key elements of his philosophy include:

Satyagraha (Truth Force): Satyagraha is a method of nonviolent resistance and civil disobedience that Gandhi developed and perfected. Derived from the Sanskrit words "Satya" (truth) and "Agraha" (insistence or holding firmly to), Satyagraha emphasizes the power of truth and the need to seek it through nonviolent means. Gandhi believed that truth was God and that nonviolence was the means to discover it. Satyagraha was used effectively during the Indian independence movement, notably in campaigns such as the Salt March (1930) and the Quit India Movement (1942).

Ahimsa (nonviolence): Ahimsa, or nonviolence, is the principle of not causing harm to any living being. It is a fundamental tenet of many Indian religions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism, but Gandhi expanded its application to social and political struggles. For Gandhi, ahimsa was not merely a passive state but an active force for good. He believed that true nonviolence involved not only refraining from physical violence but also harboring no ill will towards others and actively working for their welfare. This principle underpinned his entire approach to conflict resolution and social change.

Sarvodaya (Welfare of All): Sarvodaya means "universal uplift" or "progress for all." Gandhi envisioned a society where the well-being of every individual was considered and no one was left behind. This idea was influenced by John Ruskin's book *Unto This Last*, which Gandhi translated into Gujarati. Sarvodaya calls for the holistic development of society, focusing on the needs of the most vulnerable and marginalized. Gandhi's constructive program, which included initiatives like improving sanitation, promoting education, and reviving village industries, was aimed at achieving Sarvodaya.

Swaraj (self-rule): Swaraj, or self-rule, is a concept that goes beyond mere political independence. For Gandhi, true Swaraj meant self-governance at both the individual and community levels. He believed that political freedom was meaningless without economic, social, and moral freedom. Swaraj involved empowering individuals and communities to take control of their own lives, make democratic decisions, and live in harmony with nature. Gandhi's vision of Swaraj included decentralized governance, with power residing in self-sufficient village republics.

Swadeshi (self-reliance): Swadeshi, meaning "of one's own country," emphasizes local production and consumption to promote economic independence and self-reliance. Gandhi advocated for the revival of traditional Indian industries, particularly hand-spinning and weaving, to reduce dependence on British goods and promote rural employment. The spinning wheel, or charkha, became a symbol of this movement. Swadeshi was not just about economic self-sufficiency but also about fostering a sense of pride and identity rooted in one's own culture and traditions.

Gandhi's philosophy, with its emphasis on truth, nonviolence, and self-reliance, provided a comprehensive framework for addressing the social, economic, and political challenges of his time. His ideas have continued to resonate and find application in various contemporary social movements, highlighting their enduring relevance and adaptability.

Gandhian philosophy and contemporary social movements

Environmental Movements

Gandhian principles have significantly influenced contemporary environmental movements in India. The Chipko Movement, which began in the 1970s, is a prime example. Villagers in Uttarakhand embraced Gandhi's methods of nonviolent protest by hugging trees to prevent their felling, highlighting the importance of environmental conservation and community rights over natural resources. The movement's success drew global attention to sustainable development and ecological preservation, echoing Gandhi's belief in living in harmony with nature.

Chipko Movement: The Chipko Movement, initiated in the Himalayan region of Uttarakhand, began as a grassroots response to the rampant deforestation threatening the livelihoods and environment of local communities. Spearheaded by local women, who were the most affected by deforestation due to their dependence on forest resources for fuel, fodder, and water, the movement employed Gandhian

techniques of nonviolent resistance. Villagers, especially women like Gaura Devi, physically embraced trees to prevent loggers from cutting them down, a tactic reminiscent of Gandhi's peaceful civil disobedience.

The movement's name, "Chipko," meaning "to hug" or "to cling," symbolized the villagers' deep connection with the forest. By emphasizing the symbiotic relationship between humans and nature, the Chipko activists drew attention to the broader implications of deforestation, such as soil erosion, loss of biodiversity, and disruption of the water cycle. Their efforts led to a government-imposed ban on tree felling in the region, demonstrating the effectiveness of nonviolent protest in achieving environmental protection.

Appiko Movement: Inspired by the success of the Chipko Movement, the Appiko Movement emerged in the Western Ghats of Karnataka in the 1980s. Led by environmental activist Panduranga Hegde, the Appiko Movement sought to protect the dense forests of the Western Ghats from commercial logging, mining, and other destructive activities. Similar to the Chipko activists, the Appiko protesters hugged trees to prevent their destruction, highlighting the vital role of forests in maintaining ecological balance and supporting local communities.

The movement not only focused on preventing deforestation but also promoted sustainable practices such as afforestation, soil conservation, and the use of renewable energy sources. By adopting Gandhian principles, the Appiko Movement successfully raised awareness about environmental degradation and mobilized local communities to take action in defense of their natural heritage.

Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA): The Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA), led by social activists like Medha Patkar, is another significant environmental movement influenced by Gandhian philosophy. The NBA opposes the construction of large dams on the Narmada River, which threatens to displace thousands of indigenous people and submerge vast tracts of forest and agricultural land. The movement employs nonviolent resistance, including hunger strikes, sit-ins, and marches, to draw attention to the social and environmental costs of large-scale development projects.

The NBA's commitment to nonviolence and its focus on the rights of marginalized communities reflect Gandhian ideals of justice, equality, and sustainable development. The movement has brought global attention to the issue of displacement and the need for equitable and ecologically sound alternatives to

large dams. Despite facing significant challenges, the NBA continues to fight for the rights of displaced communities and the protection of the environment.

Silent Valley Movement: The Silent Valley Movement in Kerala during the 1970s and 1980s was another landmark environmental movement that drew from Gandhian principles. The movement aimed to prevent the construction of a hydroelectric dam in the Silent Valley, a pristine tropical rainforest home to unique flora and fauna. Environmentalists, scientists, and local communities united in nonviolent protest, emphasizing the need to preserve biodiversity and maintain ecological balance.

The campaign's success, resulting in the abandonment of the dam project and the declaration of Silent Valley as a national park, highlighted the effectiveness of Gandhian strategies in environmental conservation. The movement underscored the importance of protecting natural habitats and demonstrated the power of peaceful resistance to influence government policy.

Gandhian principles of nonviolence, community empowerment, and sustainable living have significantly shaped contemporary environmental movements in India. From the Chipko and Appiko movements to the Narmada Bachao Andolan and the Silent Valley Movement, activists have drawn inspiration from Gandhi's legacy to address environmental challenges and advocate for the rights of marginalized communities. These movements illustrate the enduring relevance of Gandhian philosophy in promoting ecological sustainability and social justice, offering valuable lessons for addressing the environmental crises of the modern world.

Anti-Corruption Movements

The Anna Hazare-led anti-corruption movement in 2011 is a notable instance where Gandhian philosophy played a pivotal role. Hazare, a staunch follower of Gandhi, employed fasting and peaceful protests to demand the enactment of the Jan Lokpal Bill, aimed at curbing corruption in public offices. The movement galvanized millions across the country, demonstrating the enduring power of Gandhian tactics in mobilizing public opinion and pressuring the government for legislative change.

Background and context: The anti-corruption movement led by Anna Hazare emerged against the backdrop of widespread public frustration with pervasive corruption in India. Corruption had become a pervasive issue affecting governance, public services, and economic development, undermining public

trust in institutions. Hazare, a veteran social activist known for his simplicity and dedication to Gandhian principles, became the face of the movement demanding stronger anti-corruption measures.

Gandhian Tactics: Anna Hazare's approach mirrored Gandhi's methods of nonviolent protest and civil disobedience. Central to Hazare's strategy was his use of fasting—a form of Satyagraha—to draw attention to the urgency of passing the Jan Lokpal Bill. Fasting, in the Gandhian tradition, is not merely a protest but a moral statement intended to awaken the conscience of the nation and its leaders. Hazare's fasts garnered widespread media coverage and public sympathy, leading to massive demonstrations and support across India.

Mobilization and public support: The anti-corruption movement under Hazare's leadership mobilized people from diverse backgrounds, including students, professionals, and civil society organizations. Social media played a crucial role in amplifying the movement's message and organizing protests, reflecting the widespread discontent with corruption and the demand for accountable governance. The movement's ability to transcend regional, linguistic, and socio-economic barriers underscored its broad-based appeal and resonance with Gandhi's vision of a united, principled struggle against injustice.

Impact and Legacy: The impact of the 2011 anti-corruption movement was significant in several ways:

Legislative Pressure: The sustained protests and public pressure compelled the government to take action on the Jan Lokpal Bill, though its passage was delayed and contentious.

Public Awareness: The movement raised public awareness about the corrosive effects of corruption and the need for systemic reforms to promote transparency and accountability.

Political Fallout: The movement contributed to a broader anti-incumbency sentiment and influenced electoral dynamics, with political parties compelled to address corruption as a critical issue.

Criticisms and Challenges

Despite its achievements, the movement faced criticism and challenges.

Sustainability: Critics argued that fasting as a protest method might not be sustainable or scalable for addressing systemic issues like corruption in the long term.

Political Co-option: Some viewed the movement as vulnerable to political manipulation or co-option, raising questions about its independence and effectiveness.

The Anna Hazare-led anti-corruption movement of 2011 exemplified the enduring relevance of Gandhian philosophy in mobilizing public action against corruption and demanding accountable governance. By employing nonviolent protest and fasting as tactics, Hazare harnessed Gandhi's principles to galvanize a nationwide movement for legislative reform. While the movement faced challenges and criticisms, its impact on public discourse and policy-making underscored the potency of Gandhian strategies in advocating for social change and ethical governance in contemporary India.

Social Justice and Human Rights Movements

Gandhi's commitment to social justice and equality continues to inspire movements aimed at addressing caste discrimination, gender inequality, and other forms of social injustice in India. The Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA), led by Medha Patkar, reflects Gandhian principles in its nonviolent struggle against the displacement of communities due to large dam projects. The NBA advocates for the rights of marginalized populations, promoting sustainable development and equitable resource distribution.

Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA): The Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA) is a prominent social movement that emerged in the late 1980s in response to the Indian government's plans to construct a series of large dams on the Narmada River. Led by social activist Medha Patkar and supported by local communities, the NBA has been at the forefront of advocating for the rights of those affected by displacement, particularly indigenous tribes and farmers whose lands would be submerged.

Gandhian Principles in Action: The NBA embodies Gandhian principles of nonviolent resistance (satyagraha) and community empowerment. Similar to Gandhi's approach, the movement has utilized peaceful protests, hunger strikes, and marches to draw attention to the social and environmental consequences of large dam projects. By emphasizing the rights of marginalized communities and promoting sustainable development practices, the NBA seeks to uphold Gandhian ideals of justice, equality, and dignity for all.

Advocacy for Marginalized Populations: One of the NBA's primary objectives is to protect the livelihoods and rights of marginalized populations who would be adversely affected by dam

construction. This includes tribal communities whose ancestral lands and forests are at risk of submergence, as well as farmers and fishermen whose livelihoods depend on the river ecosystem. The movement advocates for equitable compensation, resettlement with dignity, and alternative livelihood options for displaced communities, echoing Gandhi's call for Sarvodaya (welfare for all).

Sustainable Development and Environmental Conservation: In addition to advocating for human rights, the NBA promotes sustainable development practices and environmental conservation. The movement argues that large dam projects not only displace communities but also have irreversible ecological impacts, including loss of biodiversity and disruption of river ecosystems. By opposing these projects, the NBA aligns with Gandhi's belief in living in harmony with nature and respecting the environment as a vital source of life and livelihood.

Challenges and Achievements: The NBA has faced significant challenges, including legal battles, government resistance, and threats to activists' safety. Despite these challenges, the movement has achieved notable successes, including raising awareness about the social and environmental costs of large dams, influencing policy discussions, securing partial victories in limiting dam construction, and advocating for the rights of affected communities.

The Narmada Bachao Andolan exemplifies how Gandhian principles continue to inspire and guide social justice and human rights movements in contemporary India. By advocating for marginalized populations, promoting sustainable development, and employing nonviolent protest tactics, the NBA upholds Gandhi's vision of a just and equitable society. The movement's resilience and commitment to grassroots activism underscore the enduring relevance of Gandhian philosophy in addressing complex socio-economic and environmental challenges faced by marginalized communities.

Rural Development and Self-Reliance

The principles of Swaraj and Swadeshi find resonance in contemporary efforts towards rural development and self-reliance in India. The model of Gram Swaraj, or village self-governance, championed by Gandhi, has influenced numerous grassroots initiatives aimed at empowering rural communities. The Barefoot College in Rajasthan, founded by Bunker Roy, embodies Gandhian ideals by empowering rural communities through education, skill development, and sustainable technologies. The

organization trains villagers, particularly women, in various trades, fostering self-sufficiency and community-driven development.

Gram Swaraj and Village Self-Governance: Gandhi's concept of Gram Swaraj emphasized decentralized governance and local self-rule, where villages would have autonomy in decision-making and development initiatives. This idea resonated with India's rural communities, which often felt marginalized by centralized governance and urban-centric policies. Gram Swaraj encourages communities to identify their own needs, prioritize local development projects, and manage resources sustainably.

Barefoot College and Gandhian Ideals: The Barefoot College in Tilonia, Rajasthan, founded by social activist Bunker Roy, exemplifies Gandhian principles in action. The college focuses on empowering rural communities, especially women, through practical education and skill development. It offers training programs in solar engineering, water management, healthcare, and handicrafts, among others, aiming to build local capacity and promote self-reliance.

Empowering Women and Community-Driven Development: One of the Barefoot College's notable achievements is its emphasis on empowering women as change agents in their communities. The college trains illiterate and semi-literate women from rural areas, often from disadvantaged backgrounds, to become solar engineers and water technicians. These women return to their villages as skilled professionals, implementing sustainable technologies and improving local infrastructure.

Sustainable Technologies and Environmental Stewardship: The Barefoot College promotes the use of sustainable technologies, such as solar power and rainwater harvesting, to address rural development challenges. By reducing dependence on conventional energy sources and enhancing water management practices, these technologies contribute to environmental sustainability and resilience in rural communities.

Impact and Replication: The Barefoot College model has had a significant impact on rural development across India and globally. By empowering communities through education, skill development, and sustainable technologies, the college has demonstrated the potential for grassroots initiatives to catalyze socio-economic transformation. Its success has inspired similar initiatives in other parts of India and in

various developing countries, highlighting the scalability and adaptability of Gandhian principles in addressing rural poverty and promoting self-reliance.

The principles of Swaraj and Swadeshi, as championed by Gandhi, continue to inspire and guide efforts towards rural development and self-reliance in contemporary India. Initiatives such as the Barefoot College exemplify how Gandhian ideals of community empowerment, sustainable living, and decentralized governance can foster inclusive and resilient rural communities. By promoting education, skill development, and the adoption of appropriate technologies, these initiatives contribute to building a more equitable and sustainable society, rooted in the principles of self-sufficiency and community-driven development.

Nonviolent Resistance and Civil Disobedience

Gandhi's methods of nonviolent resistance and civil disobedience have been emulated in various contemporary movements, including the farmers' protests against agricultural reforms in India from 2020 to 2021. These protests demonstrated the continued relevance of nonviolent resistance as a powerful tool for challenging governmental policies and advocating for the rights of marginalized groups.

Background of the Farmers' Protests: The farmers' protests erupted in late 2020 in response to three contentious farm laws passed by the Indian government. The laws aimed to deregulate agricultural markets, allowing greater involvement of private players in agricultural trade. Farmers, particularly from Punjab, Haryana, and Uttar Pradesh, expressed concerns that these laws would undermine the Minimum Support Price (MSP) system and leave them vulnerable to exploitation by corporate interests.

Gandhian Influence: Nonviolent Resistance: The farmers' protests were characterized by their commitment to nonviolent resistance, drawing inspiration from Gandhi's principles of Satyagraha and peaceful civil disobedience. Farmers organized massive rallies, marches, and sit-ins, converging at the borders of Delhi to press for the repeal of the farm laws. Despite facing harsh weather conditions and logistical challenges, the protests remained largely peaceful, emphasizing discipline and adherence to nonviolent principles.

Sustained Protest and Public Support: One of the defining features of the farmers' protests was their duration and scale. Farmers and their supporters camped at the borders of Delhi for over a year,

maintaining pressure on the government to address their demands. The protests gained widespread public support, with solidarity marches held across India and in the global Indian diaspora. Social media played a crucial role in amplifying the farmers' message and mobilizing support, reflecting the movement's resonance with broader concerns about social justice and economic equity.

Government Response and Legislative Repeal: The farmers' protests culminated in significant political developments. Despite initial resistance from the government, which portrayed the laws as necessary reforms for agricultural modernization, sustained pressure from the protesters and growing public discontent prompted a reassessment. In November 2021, after nearly a year of protests, the Indian government announced the repeal of the three farm laws, marking a major victory for the farmers' movement and validating the efficacy of nonviolent protest in influencing policy decisions.

Challenges and Lessons Learned: The farmers' protests also highlighted challenges and lessons for future movements:

Media Narratives: The protests faced challenges in managing media narratives and countering negative portrayals by some mainstream media outlets.

Unity and Strategy: Maintaining unity and strategic cohesion among diverse farmer groups and supporters was crucial for sustaining the protests over a long period of time.

The farmers' protests against agricultural reforms in India from 2020 to 2021 underscored the enduring power of Gandhi's methods of nonviolent resistance and civil disobedience in contemporary movements. By mobilizing large-scale protests, maintaining discipline, and garnering widespread public support, the farmers demonstrated the potential of nonviolent protest to challenge unjust policies and advocate for the rights of marginalized groups. The success of the protests in securing the repeal of the farm laws reaffirmed the relevance of nonviolent resistance as a transformative force in democratic societies striving for social justice and inclusive governance.

Challenges and Criticisms of Gandhian Philosophy

While Gandhian philosophy has inspired numerous social movements, it is not without its challenges and criticisms. Some argue that Gandhi's ideals are idealistic and impractical in the face of modern-day complexities and globalized economies. Additionally, the effectiveness of nonviolent resistance in

achieving long-term systemic change is often questioned. Despite these criticisms, the core values of Gandhian philosophy—nonviolence, truth, and social justice—remain relevant and continue to inspire new generations of activists and social reformers.

Idealism vs. Practicality: One of the primary criticisms leveled against Gandhian philosophy is its perceived idealism and impracticality in addressing complex socio-economic and political issues. Critics argue that Gandhi's emphasis on nonviolence and moral persuasion may not always be effective against entrenched power structures, authoritarian regimes, or globalized economic forces driven by profit motives. In today's interconnected world, where conflicts and interests are often multifaceted and intertwined, the application of Gandhian principles can face significant challenges.

Effectiveness of Nonviolent Resistance: Another criticism concerns the effectiveness of nonviolent resistance in achieving long-term systemic change. While nonviolent movements have achieved notable successes, such as India's independence movement and the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, critics question whether nonviolence alone can address deep-rooted inequalities, structural injustices, and persistent socio-economic disparities. They argue that power dynamics and the pursuit of vested interests may necessitate more assertive or confrontational approaches to bring about substantive change.

Adaptability to Modern Contexts: Critics also highlight the need for Gandhian philosophy to adapt to modern contexts characterized by rapid technological advancements, global interdependence, and complex geopolitical realities. The principles of self-reliance (Swadeshi) and decentralized governance (Swaraj), for instance, may require reinterpretation and innovation to address contemporary challenges such as climate change, the digital divide, and global health crises.

Resilience and Relevance: Despite these challenges, the core values of Gandhian philosophy—nonviolence, truth, and social justice—continue to resonate and inspire movements for peace, justice, and human rights worldwide. Gandhi's emphasis on ethical conduct, grassroots mobilization, and the pursuit of truth as a means of social transformation provides enduring principles for addressing inequality, promoting dialogue, and fostering inclusive societies.

Inspiration for New Generations: Moreover, Gandhi's legacy serves as a beacon for new generations of activists and social reformers who seek alternative approaches to conflict resolution and social change.

Movements advocating for environmental sustainability, gender equality, indigenous rights, and democratic governance often draw inspiration from Gandhi's methods of civil disobedience, constructive programs, and community empowerment.

Gandhian philosophy faces criticisms regarding its idealism, practicality, and effectiveness in modern contexts, but its core values and principles continue to inspire and guide efforts towards social justice, nonviolence, and inclusive development. The enduring relevance of Gandhi's ideas underscores their adaptability and resilience in addressing contemporary challenges and aspirations for a more just and peaceful world. As new generations engage with and reinterpret Gandhian principles, the legacy of Mahatma Gandhi remains a potent force for positive change and ethical leadership in the pursuit of a more humane society.

Conclusion

The enduring legacy of Gandhian philosophy in contemporary India is a testament to its timeless appeal and relevance. Through environmental movements, anti-corruption campaigns, social justice struggles, rural development initiatives, and nonviolent protests, Gandhi's principles continue to guide and inspire efforts towards a more just, equitable, and sustainable society. As India navigates the challenges of the 21st century, the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi offer valuable insights and strategies for addressing the socio-political and environmental issues of our time. Gandhi's principles of nonviolence, truth, and social justice continue to serve as a moral compass and practical guide for addressing the complex challenges facing contemporary India. As the country strives towards inclusive development, environmental sustainability, and ethical governance, the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi offer timeless wisdom and actionable strategies. By embracing Gandhian ideals, India can navigate the socio-political and environmental landscapes of the 21st century with resilience, integrity, and a commitment to a more just and sustainable future.

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