



Gandhian Non Violence as Political Praxis: Relevance and Application in Contemporary Violent Contexts

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DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18267034>

ARTICLE DETAILS

Research Paper

Accepted: 30-12-2025

Published: 10-01-2026

Keywords:

*Peacebuilding, civil
resistance, satyagraha,
conflict transformation,
global peace, violence
mitigation, ethical
leadership.*

ABSTRACT

In an era marked by escalating political violence, ideological polarization, internal conflicts, and shrinking democratic spaces, the relevance of Gandhian non-violence as a form of political praxis demands renewed scholarly attention. In a world divided by geopolitical tension, cultural polarization, and growing domestic violence, the Gandhian philosophy of non-violence has stood as that dual core force of conflict transformation, moral and strategic. Rooted in ancient Indian ethical thought, Gandhi's non-violence has evolved into a practical methodology used in civil resistance movements worldwide. Mahatma Gandhi, known as the Father of the Nation, was a man who lived by truth and moral values. He devoted his entire life to the practice of non-violence and became one of the most influential leaders of India's freedom struggle. His non-violent movement played a major role in India winning independence from British rule in 1947—an achievement that stands out in world history because the freedom was gained without bloodshed or weapons. In honour of his contribution, Gandhi's birthday is celebrated as Gandhi Jayanti, which is also recognised globally as the International Day of Non-Violence.



Standing at the edge of the 156th birthday anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi, this article will try to analyze how the idea of non-violence was shaped in people's minds and how the idea transformed it into a guiding principle for serving humanity. It also concludes that Gandhian nonviolence is still a useful moral guide and a practical method for reducing different kinds of violence in today's divided world.

Introduction: The twenty-first century is experiencing an increase in violent conflicts, social polarization, and structural inequalities across the world. In this challenging context, the philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi has regained attention as a meaningful way to reduce conflict and promote peaceful social change (Chatterjee, 2020). Gandhi redefined non-violence not as passive resistance but as an active, disciplined, and morally grounded method of social transformation (Parel, 2006). His approach combined truth (*satya*) and non-violence (*ahimsa*) into a systematic strategy of *satyagraha*, which aimed to convert opponents through persuasion and moral pressure instead of physical force. Gandhi's methods influenced several major civil resistance movements, including the U.S. Civil Rights Movement and South African anti-apartheid struggles (Ackerman, 2000). Today, movements for democracy and human rights continue to draw inspiration from Gandhian ideas (Chenoweth, 2011). Therefore, understanding the continuing relevance of Gandhian non-violence is important for scholars and practitioners of political science, peace studies, and social activism. This paper aims to explore how Gandhi's philosophy remains applicable in an age where violence appears widespread, normalized, and politically instrumental.

Mahatma Gandhi : When Mahatma Gandhi was born, India was going through a very difficult and tiring time. The country was slowly moving from old systems towards modern changes. Gandhi was born on **October 2, 1869**, in his family home in **Porbandar**, a coastal town in Gujarat. His father was **Karamchand Gandhi**, who had four wives in his lifetime. Gandhi's mother, **Putlibai**, was Karamchand's fourth wife, because the earlier three wives had sadly died during childbirth. Gandhi was known as a very simple and humble man. He understood the difference between enjoying freedom and using power. When the Indian National Congress—which he had led at different times—began to behave like a political party seeking power, Gandhi did not agree with it. So, he quietly stepped back. He believed that true freedom meant staying honest, simple, and free from the desire for authority.

Gandhi spent the first **20 years of his adult life in South Africa**. There, he fought against the unfair laws of the British government and worked to protect the rights and dignity of both Indians and Black people. It was in South Africa that he first developed and practiced his ideas of **non-violent resistance** and **non-**



cooperation. When Gandhi returned to India in **1913** and later joined the Indian National Congress, the Indian freedom struggle was divided into two major groups. One group, led by **Bal Gangadhar Tilak**, believed in stronger, more aggressive methods. Another group outside the Congress also supported violent struggle against British rule. But Gandhi did not believe in violent methods. He strongly believed that freedom must be achieved through **non-violence**. Whenever any of his non-violent movements turned violent, Gandhi immediately stopped the movement. He believed that violence would break the moral strength of India's freedom struggle.

Theoretical Understanding of Gandhian Non-Violence :

Gandhian non-violence is grounded in the belief that all human beings share a common moral unity . Gandhi argued that violence weakens both the oppressed and the oppressor by deepening hatred and fear . Non-violence, in contrast, aims to restore relationships and encourage mutual understanding . The philosophical roots of Gandhian thought can be traced to Indian traditions such as Jainism, Buddhism, and the *Bhagavad Gita* (Chadha, 2019). Gandhi transformed these ethical principles into a political method known as *satyagraha*, which means “holding onto truth” (Parekh, 1997).

Gandhi viewed non-violence as a universal principle that applies to personal behavior, community relations, and political action. According to Gandhi, truth cannot be achieved through violent means because violence destroys the moral foundation of justice . Non-violence therefore requires self-discipline, courage, and readiness for sacrifice . Gandhi believed that the purpose of non-violent struggle is not to defeat an opponent but to win him to the side of truth. This ethical emphasis distinguishes Gandhian non-violence from strategic non-violence, which may focus solely on achieving political objectives.

Contemporary theorists argue that Gandhi's approach offers a deeper moral justification for non-violent resistance compared to purely strategic models. Gandhi maintained that non-violence is both a moral obligation and an effective method for social transformation (Chatterjee, 2020). His theory suggests that social change must combine moral reasoning with collective action . As a result, Gandhian non-violence continues to provide a philosophical foundation for modern peace studies and conflict resolution research.

Objectives of the study:

This study aims to achieve the following objectives:



1. To explain the philosophical foundations of Gandhian non-violence.
2. To explore how Gandhi translated non-violence into practical political strategies.
3. To examine the relevance of Gandhian non-violence in contemporary conflict situations.
4. To analyze how modern social movements apply non-violent principles.
5. To highlight the significance of Gandhian thought for peacebuilding and democratic governance.

Methodology :

This research uses a qualitative methodology based on secondary data analysis . The study relies on academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and scholarly reports that discuss Gandhian philosophy, non-violent movements, and peace studies. A thematic analysis approach is used to interpret the collected literature. Themes such as moral foundations, political strategies, and contemporary relevance are identified and analyzed to answer the research objectives. The method is appropriate for philosophical inquiry and conceptual analysis, which are central to this study.

Literature Review:

Scholars widely acknowledge that Gandhi transformed non-violence into a practical political method (Bondurant, 2021). Studies show that Gandhi's approach combined ethical principles with mass mobilization strategies (Iyer, 2000). (Parekh, 1997) notes that Gandhi's method required moral persuasion, truthful communication, and willingness to suffer without retaliation. (Parel, 2006) argues that Gandhi's concept of truth was dynamic and relational, shaping how he understood political conflict. (Sharp, 2012) emphasizes the strategic dimension of non-violent resistance, identifying over 190 methods of non-violent action used in political struggles. (Chenoweth, 2011) provide empirical evidence that non-violent movements are more successful than violent ones in achieving political change. Their research supports Gandhi's claim that non-violence is an effective tool for mass mobilization. (Kaur, 2017) highlights the relevance of Gandhian non-violence in addressing communal conflicts and identity politics in India. (Burrowes, 2015) shows that Gandhian ideas continue to influence global peace education. Scholars such as (Richmond, 2014) argue that non-violence contributes to sustainable peacebuilding by transforming relationships and social structures.

Reflections on Gandhi's Principles of Indian Politics:

Mahatma Gandhi's political philosophy has played a central role in shaping modern Indian political thought and democratic practice. His approach to politics was fundamentally ethical, grounded in truth,

non-violence, and moral responsibility. Gandhi viewed politics not as a struggle for power but as a field for service and self-discipline (Iyer, 2000). His political principles continue to influence academic debates on governance, democracy, and citizenship in India.

A key foundation of Gandhi's political vision was **truth (satya)**. He argued that political action must be guided by honesty, transparency, and commitment to the welfare of the people (Parel, 2006). For Gandhi, truth was not merely a moral value but a method of political engagement. He believed that truthful politics fosters public trust, which strengthens democratic legitimacy. Gandhi urged political leaders to cultivate personal integrity, insisting that the moral character of leaders shapes the moral health of the nation (Bondurant, 2021).

Another central principle was **non-violence (ahimsa)**, which Gandhi saw as the most powerful tool for political transformation. He argued that violence cannot produce lasting justice because it deepens fear, hatred, and social divisions (Chadha, 2019). In contrast, non-violence has the potential to transform relationships and appeal to the conscience of the opponent. Gandhi used non-violent resistance—through civil disobedience, non-cooperation, and peaceful protest—to mobilize ordinary people in political participation without resorting to force. His methods demonstrated that non-violence can be both morally grounded and strategically effective.



Photo 1- Gandhi's role in nationalist movement; source-Edurev

Gandhi also emphasized the idea of **swaraj (self-rule)**. Although often understood as political independence from colonial domination, Gandhi redefined swaraj as self-control, responsible citizenship, and ethical governance (Parekh, 1997). He envisioned a decentralized political order in which villages served as basic units of democracy, empowering local communities in decision-making. Gandhi believed that political freedom was incomplete without the moral and social empowerment of citizens.



A further aspect of Gandhi's political thought was his insistence on **communal harmony**. He saw India's religious and cultural diversity as a source of strength and argued that political unity must be built on mutual respect and tolerance (Kaur, 2017). Gandhi consistently condemned communal violence and worked to promote dialogue between religious communities. His commitment to harmony highlights his belief that politics cannot be separated from ethical conduct and respect for human dignity.

In contemporary India, Gandhi's principles remain highly relevant. Issues such as corruption, political polarization, communal tension, and economic inequality reveal the need for ethical leadership and moral political practices (Chatterjee, 2020). Gandhi's emphasis on non-violence provides valuable guidance for peaceful public movements, while his vision of *swaraj* resonates with ongoing debates about local governance and participatory democracy. His ideas remind citizens and leaders that politics must be oriented toward justice, inclusiveness, and the common good.

Discussion and Analysis:

The analysis of Gandhian non-violence shows that its continuing relevance lies in the way it addresses both moral principles and structural conditions that produce violence in society (Iyer, 2000). Gandhi's approach treats violence not merely as isolated acts but as a symptom of deeper social, economic, and political relationships that must be transformed if peace is to be lasting (Parel, 2006). This dual focus—on inner moral transformation and outer structural change—gives Gandhian non-violence a unique analytical strength that remains useful for scholars and practitioners today (Bondurant, 2021). In contexts of rising political polarization, Gandhi's emphasis on dialogue, empathy, and the moral conversion of adversaries offers concrete techniques to repair civic bonds that have been weakened by tribal politics and social fragmentation (Chadha, 2019). By insisting that opponents be won over by reason and moral appeal rather than defeated by force, Gandhian practice helps to create conditions in which justice can be sustained after a conflict has ended (Burrowes, 2015).

Empirical research on civil resistance supports Gandhi's claim that non-violent movements often achieve more durable political outcomes than violent insurgencies because they tend to mobilize broader segments of society (Chenoweth, 2011). Non-violent campaigns lower the entry costs for participation, enabling women, students, workers, and middle-class citizens to join and thereby widen the movement's social base (Chenoweth, 2011). This inclusiveness both weakens the authority of repressive regimes and strengthens the post-conflict legitimacy of the social order that emerges, which is consistent with Gandhi's insistence on mass moral participation rather than elite-led coups. Because non-violent



movements expose and exploit the dependency of regimes on public cooperation—ranging from the police to bureaucrats and economic actors—they create opportunities for change without destroying the institutional capacity needed for governance afterwards.

Gandhi's insistence on self-discipline and non-retaliation plays a practical role in preventing cycles of revenge that typically follow violent confrontations (Parekh, 1997). When activists refuse to respond to provocation with violence, they reduce the opportunity for the state or opponents to justify massive repression, and they protect the movement's moral credibility in the eyes of neutral observers (Bondurant, 2021). This moral credibility is an asset in democratic and semi-democratic settings where international opinion, media coverage, and domestic civil society can influence outcomes (Richmond, 2014). Moreover, the principle of willingly accepting suffering—central to Gandhi's method—can shift the symbolic balance of a conflict by portraying the resisting population as the authors of moral sacrifice rather than as aggressors, which often produces sympathy and political pressure on the opponent (Iyer, 2000).

At the same time, Gandhian non-violence is not merely an ethical posture; it requires organizational capacities, strategic planning, and discipline that modern movements must build if they are to succeed. Gandhi's campaigns combined symbolic acts of resistance with careful training in tactics such as boycotts, strikes, mass fasts, and creative forms of civil disobedience that were coordinated to maximize social disruption while minimizing physical harm (Bondurant, 2021). Contemporary movements that adapt these techniques succeed when they couple clear goals, effective communication strategies, and decentralized networks that allow local initiative while maintaining coherent non-violent discipline (Chenoweth, 2011). Thus, adopting Gandhian principles today means investing not only in moral education but also in practical capacities for collective action and non-violent contingency planning (Burrowes, 2015).

Gandhi's framework is also valuable for peacebuilding because it foregrounds the repair of relationships as an objective of political change rather than treating regime change as an end in itself (Parel, 2006). Post-conflict reconstruction that follows violent overthrow often leaves deep wounds and organizational vacuums that can regenerate violence; by contrast, non-violent transitions oriented by Gandhian ideals aim to produce reconciliation mechanisms, public truth-telling, and community-level healing that reduce the risk of relapse (Richmond, 2014). In multi-ethnic or multi-religious societies, Gandhi's focus on respect for difference and moral persuasion can be adapted into policies of inclusive dialogue and local power-sharing that address grievances before they escalate (Kaur, 2017). Consequently, Gandhian non-



violence offers conceptual tools for designing social institutions that both constrain violence and encourage cooperative problem-solving (Burrowes, 2015).

Critics argue that non-violent methods are sometimes less effective against highly repressive regimes that do not depend on public cooperation or that are willing to use extreme force. Gandhi himself acknowledged limits and emphasized context-specific judgment about tactics (Iyer, 2000). Modern scholarship responds by identifying conditions under which non-violent action is more likely to succeed—such as the presence of cross-class support, divisions within coercive institutions, and the ability to attract international attention—and by stressing hybrid approaches that combine non-violent mass mobilization with legal, economic, or diplomatic levers (Chenoweth, 2011). These refinements build on Gandhi's original intuition by making the strategic deployment of non-violence more empirically grounded while preserving its core ethical commitments.

Finally, Gandhian non-violence contributes to democratic culture by shaping civic virtues that sustain pluralism over time (Steger, 2012). Habits of truthfulness, voluntary simplicity, and respect for opponents can temper the excesses of populist politics and help create a public ethos where disagreement is channeled into constructive contestation rather than destructive conflict (Chadha, 2019). In summary, Gandhian non-violence remains relevant because it simultaneously offers a moral vision for personal and collective conduct, practical methods for effective and inclusive political action, and institutional insights for designing post-conflict societies that are less prone to renewed violence (Iyer, 2000).

Satyagraha in Gandhi's Political Philosophy:

Mahatma Gandhi's political philosophy is deeply rooted in the idea of *Satyagraha*, a word that means "holding on to truth." For Gandhi, truth was not only a moral value but also a guiding principle for personal life, social change, and political action. He believed that truth and non-violence were inseparable. According to him, one cannot search for truth through violent means, because violence destroys the moral strength needed for discovering real truth.

Gandhi's understanding of human nature played an important role in his idea of Satyagraha. He believed that every human being has two sides: a higher spiritual side and a lower selfish side. The higher side pulls us towards love, truth, compassion, and self-discipline. The lower side attracts us toward anger, greed, and harmful actions. Gandhi felt that by listening to the "inner voice" or conscience, a person could nurture the higher side of their nature and live a more truthful and peaceful life.



Gandhi's dream for India, which he called *Ramarajya*, was a society based on justice, equality, and moral values. It was not merely a political goal; it was a social and spiritual vision. In this ideal society, people would enjoy self-rule (*Swaraj*) not only in a political sense but also in a personal sense. True freedom, Gandhi said, begins within the individual. A person who cannot control their own desires is not truly free. Therefore, self-discipline, simplicity, and moral strength were essential for the freedom he imagined.

Another important part of his vision was *Swadeshi*, or local self-reliance. Gandhi believed that people should use local resources and support local communities. This was his answer to the growing industrialism and materialism of the modern world. He believed modern industrial civilisation created greed, inequality, and violence. Instead, he promoted village-based economies, small industries, and simple living. For him, progress did not mean large factories or luxurious lifestyles but healthy communities built on cooperation and compassion.

Gandhi also recognised many obstacles that stood in the way of building *Ramarajya*. Some obstacles were psychological, such as anger, hatred, untouchability, and the human tendency toward violence. Others were structural, such as poverty, industrial exploitation, unemployment, and the destructive effects of imperialism. Gandhi believed these problems could not be solved by violence or force. They required moral transformation and the active participation of ordinary people.

This is where Satyagraha became most important. Gandhi described Satyagraha as a powerful method of non-violent action. It required great courage, discipline, and willingness to suffer for a just cause. The aim of Satyagraha was not to defeat the opponent but to change their heart. Gandhi believed that patient suffering and moral appeal could touch the conscience of even the toughest opponent. Instead of forcing change through fear, Satyagraha tried to bring about change through truth and love.

Gandhi also introduced the idea of *civil disobedience*, which means peacefully refusing to obey unjust laws. However, he drew a line between aggressive and defensive civil disobedience. Aggressive civil disobedience was used to challenge a system as a whole, while defensive civil disobedience was used only when a law violated a person's dignity or conscience. Gandhi believed that only people who truly respected the law and had strong self-discipline should take part in civil disobedience.

Another important idea in Gandhi's philosophy was the creation of *Satyagraha brigades* or "peace armies." These were groups of trained volunteers committed to non-violence. Their work was mainly constructive—promoting harmony, preventing riots, helping communities, and spreading the message of



peace. Gandhi believed that such peace brigades could one day replace military armies and defend the nation without using violence.

Gandhi's idea of Satyagraha forms the centre of his political thought. It combines truth, non-violence, self-discipline, and social responsibility. For Gandhi, political change could not be separated from moral change. A peaceful society could only be built by peaceful means. His philosophy continues to inspire movements for justice, freedom, and human rights across the world. Even today, Satyagraha reminds us that courage, truth, and non-violence can be powerful tools for transforming society. (Salla, 1993)

Gandhian Non-Violence in Practice: Historical and Contemporary Illustrations:

Gandhian non-violence, or *ahimsa*, is both a moral discipline and a practical method of social and political action. Gandhi treated non-violence not as passive avoidance of harm but as an active tool to transform unjust systems, heal communities, and rebuild relationships based on dignity. Although rooted in India's ancient ethical traditions, Gandhi re-interpreted non-violence in a modern political context, proving that moral force could challenge organized violence, racial oppression, and colonial power (Chadha, 2019). Today, Gandhian non-violence continues to influence civil resistance movements, peacebuilding strategies, and democratic struggles across the world. This section provides a detailed examination of how Gandhian non-violence has been practiced historically and how it continues to shape contemporary movements.

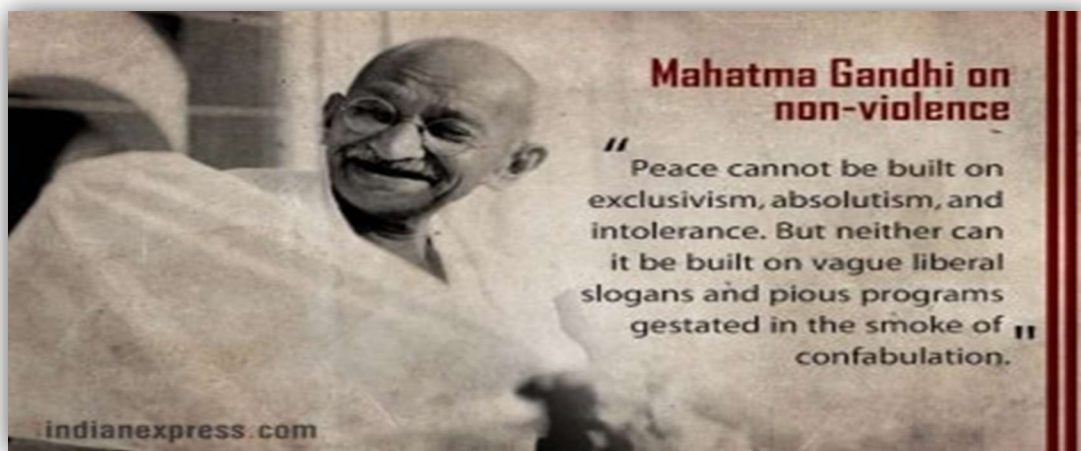


Photo 2- Mahatma Gandhi on Non-Violence; Source: Indianexpress.com



Historical Illustrations of Gandhian Non-Violence-

1. The South African Experiment (1893–1914)

Gandhi's practical experiments with non-violence began in South Africa, where he worked as a lawyer and community organizer for two decades. He witnessed intense racial discrimination against Indians and Africans, which led him to develop *satyagraha*—a disciplined form of non-violent resistance rooted in truth, self-suffering, and moral courage (Parekh, 1997). The campaigns included strikes, marches, burning discriminatory registration passes, and courting imprisonment rather than cooperating with unjust laws. Gandhi proved that oppressed communities could confront colonial authorities without violence, relying on unity and moral pressure to generate political change.

2. Non-Cooperation Movement (1920–22)

After returning to India, Gandhi turned non-violence into a mass political strategy. The Non-Cooperation Movement mobilized millions to boycott British schools, foreign cloth, and government institutions. Gandhi believed that British rule survived not because of military strength alone, but because Indians cooperated with it. By withdrawing cooperation, the people could morally and economically weaken the empire. Even though the movement was suspended after violent incidents, it established non-violence as a legitimate and powerful political force.

3. The Salt Satyagraha (1930)

“Satyagraha is like a Banyan tree with innumerable branches. Civil disobedience is one such branch, satya (truth) and ahimsa (nonviolence) together make the parent trunk from which all innumerable branches shoot out...We must fearlessly spread the doctrine of satya and ahimsa and then, and not till then, shall we be able to undertake mass satyagraha.”

The Salt March is one of the clearest demonstrations of Gandhian non-violence in practice. Gandhi walked 240 miles to Dandi to make salt illegally, defying the British monopoly. The march inspired nationwide civil disobedience: refusal to pay taxes, mass picketing, and peaceful occupation of salt works. What made the campaign revolutionary was the willingness of volunteers to endure beatings without retaliation. American journalist Webb Miller famously recorded how unarmed protesters were struck down by British soldiers but did not resist. This spectacle of disciplined suffering generated global sympathy and delegitimized colonial authority.



4. Quit India Movement (1942)

Although more confrontational, Quit India remained rooted in Gandhi's vision of non-violent mass struggle. Gandhi demanded an immediate end to British rule, arguing that true independence could not emerge from wartime violence. Even after the movement suffered repression and scattered violence, Gandhi insisted that non-violence was not merely a tactic but the foundation of India's democratic future.

Contemporary Illustrations of Gandhian Non-Violence:

Gandhian ideas continue to shape global struggles for justice, democracy, and human rights. Although adapted to changing social realities, the basic principles remain influential.

1. The Civil Rights Movement in the United States

Martin Luther King Jr. explicitly drew from Gandhi's philosophy. King framed non-violence as a form of "courageous confrontation" that aimed to win the opponent's friendship. Campaigns in Montgomery, Birmingham, and Selma used boycotts, sit-ins, and marches—clear applications of satyagraha. The moral appeal, public suffering, and disciplined refusal to retaliate mobilized national opinion and pushed the U.S. government to pass civil rights legislation.

2 .Anti-Apartheid Movement in South Africa

Although the anti-apartheid struggle later included armed resistance, its early phase was shaped by Gandhian strategies of civil disobedience. Leaders like Nelson Mandela and Albert Luthuli acknowledged Gandhi's influence, especially in campaigns such as the Defiance Movement of 1952. Boycotts, strikes, and peaceful mass protests helped erode the legitimacy of apartheid internationally.

3 .Dalit and Social Justice Movements in India

B. R. Ambedkar and Gandhi disagreed on many issues, yet contemporary Dalit movements continue to use non-violent marches, symbolic acts, and public demonstrations to challenge caste oppression. Protest traditions like the Mahad Satyagraha and more recent Dalit mobilizations retain elements of satyagraha's ethical protest.



4 .Environmental and Climate Justice Movements

Modern environmental campaigns often use non-violent strategies: sit-ins, road blockades, hunger strikes, and symbolic marches. The Chipko Movement (1973), where villagers hugged trees to prevent deforestation, is a direct example of Gandhian environmental satyagraha. Contemporary climate activists worldwide adopt similar tactics to protect ecological rights.

5. Women's Peace Movements

Women's groups in India, Sri Lanka, Liberia, and elsewhere have adapted Gandhian methods to protest gender-based violence, war, and political exclusion. Liberia's Women of Peace Movement used silent sit-ins and non-violent blockades to pressure warring factions, contributing to the end of civil war. These actions reflect Gandhi's belief in the moral strength of peaceful collective action.

6. Global Non-Violent Resistance Movements

Research shows that from 1900 to 2006, non-violent campaigns were twice as successful as violent ones in achieving political change (Chenoweth, 2011). Movements in Serbia (2000), Tunisia (2011), and Hong Kong (2019) have used strikes, boycotts, mass mobilization, and symbolic defiance—tactics directly linked to Gandhian practice.

Conclusion:

Gandhi's philosophy of non-violence remains a powerful tool to address violence in contemporary society. The principles of truth, compassion, and non-injury continue to offer ethical guidance for individuals and communities . Modern civil resistance research shows that non-violence is more effective than violent methods in achieving political change. Gandhian non-violence therefore provides both a moral framework and a practical method for transforming conflicts in a violent age . As societies face rising tensions and social divisions, Gandhi's ideas remain a relevant and timely resource for building peace and justice.

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