



Gandhian Philosophy And Mass Mobilization in India's Struggle for Independence

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Abstract:

This article explores the philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi and its role in mobilizing millions of Indians during the struggle for independence. It examines the foundations of Gandhian thought, including non-violence, truth, self-discipline, and swadeshi, and how these principles guided early experiments in satyagraha in South Africa and India. The study highlights major mass movements led by Gandhi, such as the Non-Cooperation Movement, Civil Disobedience Movement, and Quit India Movement, showing how symbolic actions, public demonstrations, grassroots organization, and the inclusion of women and marginalized communities strengthened the freedom struggle. The article also reflects on the political, social, and international impact of Gandhian philosophy, as well as the challenges and limitations of sustaining non-violence. Finally, it draws lessons for modern social movements, ethical leadership, and collective action, emphasizing the enduring relevance of Gandhi's ideas.

Keywords: Gandhian Philosophy, Non-Violence, Satyagraha, Mass Mobilization, Indian Independence.

Introduction:

India's struggle for independence was one of the longest and most remarkable movements in modern history. For nearly two hundred years, India was under British colonial rule, during which people faced economic exploitation, heavy taxation, discriminatory laws, and restrictions on trade and education (Chandra et al., 2009). Different communities, including farmers, industrial workers, students, and tribal groups, experienced widespread poverty and social oppression (Bipan Chandra, 1989). Over the years, resistance to British rule took many forms. While some groups adopted armed revolts and revolutionary activities, others relied on petitions, constitutional methods, and social reform movements to challenge colonial authority (Sarkar, 1983). These prolonged struggles gradually fostered a sense of unity and national consciousness among Indians who aspired to shape their own political destiny (Metcalf & Metcalf, 2012).

In this struggle, Mahatma Gandhi emerged as a central figure. Gandhi was not only a political leader but also a philosopher and moral guide. He introduced a distinctive method of resistance grounded in non-violence (*ahimsa*), truth (*satya*), and self-discipline (*tapasya*) (Gandhi, 1927). Unlike earlier approaches that depended mainly on violence or elite political negotiations, Gandhi encouraged mass participation through peaceful means. He believed that social and political change could be achieved through moral courage, collective effort, and adherence to truth (Dalton, 2012). Gandhi's ideas were deeply influenced by Indian philosophical traditions such as the *Bhagavad Gita* and Jain ethics, as well as by Western thinkers like Leo Tolstoy and Henry David Thoreau (Parekh, 1997). His vision of a free India extended beyond political

independence to include social harmony, economic self-reliance, and ethical reconstruction of society (Brown, 1998).

The main objective of this article is to explore Gandhi's philosophy and its impact on mobilizing the masses during India's struggle for independence. It seeks to examine how his principles of non-violence, truth, and self-discipline inspired millions of Indians to participate actively in the freedom movement (Hardiman, 2003). The article also analyzes the strategies Gandhi employed to organize people across villages, towns, and cities, and how his leadership unified diverse social groups, including women, workers, and peasants (Forbes, 1996; Shah, 2002). By understanding Gandhi's philosophy and its practical application, this study highlights how moral ideals combined with collective action became a powerful force in India's journey toward freedom.

Foundations of Gandhian Philosophy

Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy formed the backbone of India's struggle for independence. His ideas were not limited to politics; they represented a comprehensive way of life that integrated ethics, spirituality, and social responsibility (Parekh, 1997). Gandhi believed that true freedom could not be achieved merely by ending British rule; instead, individuals and society had to undergo moral, social, and economic transformation for independence to be meaningful and lasting (Brown, 1998). The foundations of his philosophy—non-violence, truth, self-discipline, and self-reliance—guided both his personal conduct and his leadership of mass movements during the freedom struggle (Dalton, 2012).

The principle of non-violence (*ahimsa*) was central to Gandhi's philosophy. In Indian thought, *ahimsa* had long been an important ethical value, particularly in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism, emphasizing compassion, restraint, and respect for all living beings (Chatterjee, 1983). Gandhi expanded this traditional moral principle into a political strategy by applying it to collective resistance and social action. He argued that violence only perpetuated cycles of hatred and injustice, whereas non-violence had the moral strength to challenge oppression without dehumanizing the opponent (Gandhi, 1927). By refusing to cooperate with unjust laws and institutions, people could resist colonial domination while preserving their ethical integrity. This approach made the freedom struggle more inclusive, enabling men and women of all ages and social backgrounds to participate safely and meaningfully (Hardiman, 2003).

Truth, when combined with non-violence, formed the core principle of *satyagraha*, meaning "holding firmly to truth." Gandhi viewed truth not merely as factual accuracy but as a moral and spiritual force capable of guiding human conduct (Gandhi, 1938). *Satyagraha* demanded courage, patience, and self-restraint, as it required individuals to oppose injustice without resorting to violence or coercion. Through this method, Gandhi sought to appeal to the conscience of the oppressor and awaken a sense of moral responsibility in society (Dalton, 2012). He demonstrated that moral courage could rival physical force in achieving political and social change. *Satyagraha* became the guiding principle of major movements such as the Champaran and Kheda struggles, the Salt Satyagraha, and the Quit India Movement (Sarkar, 1983).

Self-discipline and *swadeshi* were also vital components of Gandhi's philosophy. Self-discipline emphasized simplicity, control over desires, and the prioritization of moral and spiritual values over material comfort. Gandhi believed that personal discipline strengthened individual character and prepared people for sustained resistance against injustice (Brown, 1998). *Swadeshi*, or economic self-reliance, urged Indians to produce and consume indigenous goods instead of British imports. This principle had both economic and symbolic significance, as activities such as spinning khadi and supporting village industries fostered dignity, unity, and national self-respect (Chandra et al., 2009). *Swadeshi* linked individual responsibility with collective freedom, demonstrating that national independence depended on everyday personal choices.

Gandhi's philosophy was shaped by diverse religious and philosophical influences. The *Bhagavad Gita* taught him the value of duty (*dharma*) and selfless action (*nishkama karma*), while Jainism reinforced his

commitment to non-violence and ascetic discipline (Parekh, 1997). He was also influenced by Western thinkers such as Leo Tolstoy, whose writings on non-violent resistance and moral truth resonated deeply with Gandhi's own beliefs (Dalton, 2012). By blending these influences with his lived experiences, Gandhi developed a philosophy that was both universal in appeal and deeply rooted in Indian cultural traditions. This philosophy guided not only political resistance but also social reform, ethical living, and efforts to uplift the poor and marginalized sections of society (Hardiman, 2003).

Early Experiments in Satyagraha

Before leading India's freedom struggle, Mahatma Gandhi tested and refined his ideas of non-violence, truth, and mass mobilization through practical experiments. These early efforts were significant because they demonstrated how ordinary people could resist injustice without resorting to violence. Gandhi's approach combined moral courage with strategic planning and emphasized empowering people to fight for their rights while maintaining dignity, discipline, and unity (Parekh, 1997). Two of the most important phases of these experiments were his work in South Africa and his campaigns in Champaran and Kheda in India.

Gandhi's stay in South Africa from 1893 to 1914 marked the first stage in the practical application of *satyagraha*. During this period, Indian immigrants were subjected to severe racial discrimination. They were treated as second-class citizens, compelled to carry identification passes, denied civil rights, and frequently exposed to humiliation and violence (Brown, 1998). Gandhi personally experienced these injustices, which motivated him to organize the Indian community against discriminatory laws. He urged Indians to resist unjust regulations peacefully through petitions, public meetings, and non-cooperation with oppressive laws. Gandhi emphasized that deliberate and non-violent disobedience of unjust laws represented moral strength rather than weakness (Gandhi, 1927). Although these movements were limited in scale, they demonstrated the effectiveness of disciplined non-violence in exerting moral pressure on authorities. The experiences Gandhi gained in South Africa—particularly in organizing communities, building collective solidarity, and enforcing strict non-violent discipline—later became the foundation of his leadership in India (Hardiman, 2003).

After returning to India, Gandhi applied these principles on a broader scale during the Champaran and Kheda satyagrahas. The Champaran movement of 1917 began when Gandhi visited the Champaran district of Bihar, where peasants were forced by European planters to cultivate indigo under the oppressive *tinkathia* system. Farmers were compelled to sell their produce at extremely low prices, leading to severe economic distress, while colonial authorities remained indifferent to their suffering (Sarkar, 1983). Gandhi lived among the peasants, listened to their grievances, and encouraged them to resist exploitation through peaceful means. He organized meetings, collected testimonies, and negotiated with colonial officials, eventually securing relief for the farmers. The Champaran satyagraha proved that even poor and largely illiterate peasants could be mobilized through moral leadership and organized non-violent resistance (Chandra et al., 2009).

The Kheda satyagraha of 1918 in Gujarat addressed another form of agrarian injustice. Due to crop failures caused by floods and famine, peasants in Kheda were unable to pay land revenue. Despite the crisis, the British government insisted on full tax collection and denied relief (Brown, 1998). Gandhi advised the farmers to withhold tax payments peacefully until their demands were heard, stressing unity, discipline, and non-violence. The movement brought together peasants across caste and community lines and demonstrated that organized non-violent resistance could overcome fear and administrative coercion (Hardiman, 2003). The success of the Kheda satyagraha further strengthened Gandhi's belief that ethical leadership, patience, and collective discipline were essential for mass mobilization.

These early experiments in *satyagraha* provided Gandhi with crucial lessons for leading nationwide movements. He realized that people responded positively to leadership that respected their dignity, that disciplined organization was vital for sustaining non-violent protest, and that moral courage could exert

powerful pressure on oppressive systems (Parekh, 1997). The experiences of Champaran and Kheda also demonstrated that non-violent action was not passive; rather, it required careful planning, active participation, and personal sacrifice. Gandhi's success in these movements inspired confidence among millions of Indians and laid the groundwork for later mass movements such as the Non-Cooperation Movement, the Civil Disobedience Movement, and the Quit India Movement (Sarkar, 1983).

Gandhian Mass Movements in India

After testing his ideas through early experiments such as the Champaran and Kheda campaigns, Mahatma Gandhi applied his principles of non-violence and *satyagraha* to mobilize millions of Indians across the country. These movements were distinctive because they involved people from diverse social classes, religions, and regions, transforming the freedom struggle into a truly national movement (Chandra et al., 2009). Gandhi's methods emphasized peaceful resistance, moral courage, and collective participation. The major Gandhian movements—the Non-Cooperation Movement, the Civil Disobedience Movement, and the Quit India Movement—built upon the lessons of earlier struggles and progressively expanded mass involvement in innovative ways (Sarkar, 1983).

The Non-Cooperation Movement (1920–1922) was the first nationwide mass movement led by Gandhi. It emerged in response to the Jallianwala Bagh massacre of 1919 and widespread disillusionment with British promises made after World War I (Brown, 1998). Gandhi called upon Indians to boycott British institutions such as government schools, colleges, courts, and offices. He also urged people to reject British-manufactured goods and promote *swadeshi*, particularly the use of hand-spun *khadi* cloth (Gandhi, 1921). Students, workers, peasants, and professionals participated enthusiastically. The boycott was not merely economic but symbolic, representing a rejection of colonial domination and an assertion of national dignity. Across towns and villages, political awareness increased as volunteers educated people about their rights and duties. Although the movement was suspended after outbreaks of violence, it successfully united millions of Indians and demonstrated the immense potential of mass non-violent resistance (Chandra et al., 2009).

The Civil Disobedience Movement (1930–1934) marked another crucial phase in India's freedom struggle. Gandhi launched this movement to challenge the British monopoly on salt, a basic necessity used by all sections of society. The Salt March of 1930 became the most iconic event of the movement. Gandhi and his followers marched over 240 miles from Sabarmati Ashram to Dandi, where they deliberately violated the salt law by making salt from seawater (Dalton, 2012). This symbolic act inspired millions across India to engage in similar acts of peaceful defiance. People refused to pay taxes, broke unjust laws, and boycotted British institutions. The movement spread rapidly to both urban and rural areas, with women, students, workers, and peasants participating in large numbers. It demonstrated that disciplined non-violent resistance could seriously undermine colonial authority and generate strong pressure for political reform (Hardiman, 2003).

The Quit India Movement, launched in 1942 during World War II, represented Gandhi's most direct and uncompromising demand for complete independence. With Britain deeply engaged in the war, Gandhi called for the immediate withdrawal of British rule from India (Sarkar, 1983). The movement encouraged widespread civil disobedience, strikes, protests, and non-cooperation with colonial authorities. Participation was extensive across cities, towns, and villages. Although major leaders such as Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru were arrested at the outset, the movement continued spontaneously in many regions. Ordinary citizens, including students, women, and workers, organized demonstrations, disrupted communication networks, and defied colonial administration. Despite harsh repression and violent crackdowns, the Quit India Movement clearly revealed the determination and unity of the Indian people and signaled that British rule could no longer be sustained (Brown, 1998).

These Gandhian mass movements fundamentally transformed India's struggle for independence. They demonstrated that political change could be achieved through moral courage, disciplined organization, and

collective action rather than violence. Gandhi's leadership inspired ordinary people to become active agents in shaping their nation's future. The movements also strengthened social cohesion by encouraging cooperation across religious, caste, and regional divisions (Parekh, 1997). By linking ethical principles with practical political action, Gandhi developed a method of resistance that was peaceful, inclusive, and effective. The legacy of these movements continues to influence social and political activism in India and across the world.

Strategies of Mass Mobilization

One of the most remarkable aspects of Mahatma Gandhi's leadership was his ability to mobilize millions of people across India for the freedom struggle without relying on force or coercion. Instead, he employed innovative strategies that connected ordinary people to the movement, gave them a sense of purpose, and empowered them to act peacefully yet decisively (Parekh, 1997). Gandhi's methods combined symbolic action, mass communication, inclusion of women and marginalized groups, and grassroots organization. Together, these strategies transformed a political struggle into a broad-based social movement that reached every corner of the country (Chandra et al., 2009).

Symbolic actions and public demonstrations lay at the core of Gandhi's mobilization strategy. These actions were deliberately simple, accessible, and deeply meaningful. The Salt March of 1930 serves as the most powerful example. By walking over 240 miles to the sea and making salt in defiance of colonial law, Gandhi converted an everyday necessity into a potent symbol of resistance (Dalton, 2012). The injustice of the British salt monopoly was easily understood by the masses, inspiring people across India to engage in civil disobedience in their own local contexts. Other practices such as picketing shops selling foreign goods, organizing *hartals* (strikes), and conducting peaceful processions also became effective tools of protest. Gandhi further used speeches, newspapers, and pamphlets to spread political awareness and educate people about their rights and responsibilities (Hardiman, 2003). He believed that informed participants were more likely to remain disciplined and committed. Thus, symbolic actions functioned not only as political statements but also as instruments to awaken consciousness, build courage, and foster unity across regions and communities (Brown, 1998).

The inclusion of women and marginalized communities was another crucial aspect of Gandhi's strategy. Gandhi firmly believed that the freedom movement would remain incomplete if it excluded large sections of society. Women leaders such as Sarojini Naidu and Kasturba Gandhi played prominent roles in marches, protests, and organizational activities, inspiring countless other women to step into public life (Forbes, 1996). Their participation challenged traditional gender norms and reinforced the idea that the struggle for freedom belonged to all. Gandhi also actively involved peasants, workers, and tribal communities by visiting villages, listening to their grievances, and helping them recognize the connection between colonial rule and their everyday hardships (Hardiman, 2003). Through this inclusive approach, the national movement was transformed from an elite or urban-centered initiative into a mass movement that reflected the aspirations of ordinary Indians across social and economic divisions (Sarkar, 1983).

Grassroots organization formed another vital pillar of Gandhi's mobilization efforts. Gandhi understood that lasting movements required strong local leadership and sustained community participation. Village-level committees, *khadi* production centers, and local councils became important spaces for political discussion and social reform (Chandra et al., 2009). Villagers were encouraged to spin their own cloth, support local industries, and practice self-governance based on fairness and cooperation. These initiatives were not merely economic or administrative in nature; they were deeply political, aimed at fostering self-reliance, strengthening community bonds, and preparing people for active participation in the freedom struggle (Parekh, 1997). By rooting the movement in everyday life, Gandhi ensured its resilience and continuity beyond individual campaigns or protests.

These strategies of mass mobilization reflected Gandhi's profound understanding of human psychology and social organization. He recognized that fear, apathy, and ignorance could weaken collective action. By integrating symbolic protest, political education, social inclusion, and grassroots organization, Gandhi developed a method of resistance that was ethical, peaceful, and sustainable (Dalton, 2012). His strategies not only challenged British colonial authority but also empowered millions of Indians to recognize their collective strength and participate actively in shaping a shared vision of freedom. The enduring relevance of these methods continues to inspire social and political movements worldwide, demonstrating how moral leadership and popular participation can bring about meaningful and lasting change (Brown, 1998).

Impact of Gandhian Philosophy

Gandhi's philosophy of non-violence, truth, and self-discipline had a profound and lasting impact on India's struggle for independence. It shaped the political, social, and cultural life of the nation and inspired millions of people to participate actively in the freedom movement. His ideas influenced not only political strategies but also transformed how Indians viewed themselves, their society, and their moral responsibilities (Parekh, 1997). The impact of Gandhian philosophy can be broadly understood in three major areas: political achievements, social and cultural transformation, and international influence.

Politically, Gandhi's philosophy expanded participation in the freedom struggle on an unprecedented scale. Groups that had previously remained outside formal politics—such as peasants, industrial workers, students, women, and tribal communities—became active participants in movements like the Non-Cooperation Movement, the Civil Disobedience Movement, and the Quit India Movement (Chandra et al., 2009). Gandhi's emphasis on disciplined, non-violent mass mobilization placed sustained moral and political pressure on the British colonial administration. The colonial government could no longer ignore the collective voice of millions of Indians acting in an organized and peaceful manner. This pressure contributed to constitutional reforms, negotiations, and discussions regarding self-governance and India's political future (Sarkar, 1983). Gandhi demonstrated that ordinary citizens, united by moral courage and ethical leadership, could influence political outcomes and challenge the authority of a powerful imperial state (Brown, 1998).

The social and cultural impact of Gandhian philosophy was equally significant. Gandhi consistently emphasized unity across caste, class, religion, and region, encouraging Indians to identify themselves as members of one nation rather than as divided communities (Hardiman, 2003). He actively campaigned against social evils such as untouchability and promoted values of equality, dignity, and self-respect. His stress on ethical living, simplicity, and personal discipline inspired people to adopt principled lifestyles rooted in responsibility and service (Parekh, 1997). By closely linking social reform with political struggle, Gandhi encouraged Indians to transform their society even as they fought for independence. This integration of moral reform with political action helped create a culture in which freedom was understood not merely as political power but as social justice and ethical responsibility (Brown, 1998).

Gandhi's philosophy also exerted a powerful influence beyond India's borders. His methods of non-violent resistance and civil disobedience inspired global movements against injustice and oppression. Leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr. in the United States, Nelson Mandela in South Africa, and Aung San Suu Kyi in Myanmar acknowledged the influence of Gandhian principles in their struggles for civil rights and freedom (Dalton, 2012). Gandhi's emphasis on truth, moral courage, and peaceful protest demonstrated that meaningful social and political change could be achieved without violence. This international impact underscored the universal relevance of Gandhian philosophy and positioned India's freedom struggle as a moral and political model for oppressed people worldwide (Hardiman, 2003).

Critiques and Limitations

While Gandhi's philosophy of non-violence and satyagraha had a profound impact on India's struggle for independence, it was not without challenges and criticisms. Leading a mass movement based on ethical

principles was an extraordinary task, and Gandhi often faced difficulties in applying his ideals in complex social and political situations. Examining the critiques and limitations of his approach helps us understand both the strengths and the practical challenges of Gandhian methods.

One of the main challenges Gandhi faced was sustaining non-violence during mass uprisings. When millions of people took part in movements like the Non-Cooperation Movement, the Civil Disobedience Movement, and the Quit India Movement, it was not always possible to control every individual or group. Some protests turned violent despite Gandhi's strict instructions for peaceful resistance. In certain regions, frustration, anger, and retaliation led to clashes with the police or destruction of property. Gandhi himself often had to call off movements to prevent bloodshed, as happened with the suspension of the Non-Cooperation Movement after violent incidents in 1922. These situations revealed the difficulty of maintaining absolute non-violence in large-scale movements, especially when people were oppressed and provoked by colonial authorities.

Another area of criticism was Gandhi's occasional conflicts with revolutionary and radical groups. While Gandhi promoted non-violent protest, there were many Indians who believed that only direct or armed action could force the British to leave. Groups led by leaders such as Bhagat Singh, Chandrasekhar Azad, and Subhas Chandra Bose adopted revolutionary strategies that sometimes clashed with Gandhian methods. These differences created tension within the freedom movement. Gandhi's insistence on moral discipline and non-violence was sometimes seen by radicals as slow or impractical. They argued that urgent action was necessary to challenge British authority. Although Gandhi's approach eventually gained widespread success, the debates between non-violent and revolutionary strategies highlighted the difficulty of uniting all Indians under a single method of resistance.

A further limitation of Gandhian philosophy was its partial effectiveness in addressing communal tensions and social inequalities. Gandhi worked tirelessly to promote unity across religious, caste, and class lines, and he campaigned against untouchability and social discrimination. He encouraged dialogue and mutual respect between Hindus and Muslims. Despite his efforts, communal tensions sometimes escalated, particularly in the 1940s, contributing to divisions that ultimately led to the partition of India in 1947. Social inequalities, such as poverty and caste-based discrimination, remained deeply rooted in society, and Gandhi's moral appeals and voluntary reforms could not fully eliminate them. While his philosophy created awareness and inspired positive change, it depended heavily on voluntary participation and personal transformation, which could not always solve structural and systemic problems.

These critiques and limitations do not diminish the significance of Gandhi's contribution but rather highlight the practical challenges of applying moral and ethical principles in a large, diverse, and politically complex country. Gandhi's approach required patience, discipline, and mass participation, and it sometimes clashed with urgent political demands, radical strategies, or deeply entrenched social issues. Understanding these challenges helps us appreciate the extraordinary nature of his leadership and the courage required to sustain a non-violent struggle in the face of oppression, violence, and social complexity.

Conclusion

Gandhi's philosophy transformed India's struggle for independence into something far greater than a political fight. It became a moral and social movement that inspired millions of people to participate, not through weapons or violence, but through courage, discipline, and collective action. His principles of non-violence, truth, self-discipline, and self-reliance provided a framework for ordinary people—farmers, workers, students, women, and tribal communities—to take an active role in shaping the future of their country. Gandhi showed that freedom was not just about political power; it was also about ethical living, social justice, and the dignity of every individual. By connecting moral values with practical action, he

mobilized people on an unprecedented scale and created a model of leadership that was both inclusive and empowering.

The significance of non-violence in India's struggle for independence cannot be overstated. It allowed millions to resist oppression safely, united diverse communities, and made it impossible for the British to justify their continued rule without appearing unjust to the world. Non-violent resistance proved to be a powerful force that could challenge an empire without creating widespread hatred or revenge. Gandhi's approach emphasized patience, planning, and moral courage. It also demonstrated that ordinary individuals, when guided by strong principles, can bring about extraordinary change. The use of non-violence not only shaped the outcome of India's freedom struggle but also inspired similar movements around the world, showing that ethical action and discipline could influence political and social systems globally.

There are important lessons from Gandhi's philosophy for modern social movements, ethical leadership, and political activism. First, lasting change requires more than anger or force; it requires principles, planning, and participation. Second, movements are strongest when they include all sections of society, especially those who are marginalized or excluded. Third, ethical leadership—where leaders act by example, not just words—can inspire collective action and build trust among people. Finally, social change is most sustainable when it combines moral values with practical strategies that address both immediate problems and long-term goals. Gandhi's life and work remind us that true leadership is not only about achieving political success but also about transforming society, empowering people, and creating a culture of justice and responsibility.

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