

## Relevance of Gandhian Non-Violence: An Analysis

Dr. Mitu Bera

---

### ABSTRACT

Gandhian non-violence remains one of the most powerful ethical and political ideas in modern history. Rooted in the principles of ahimsa (non-injury) and satyagraha (truth-force), Gandhi's philosophy was not merely a method for resisting colonial rule, but a broader framework for social transformation. This paper analyzes the continuing relevance of Gandhian non-violence in the contemporary world. Using a qualitative and descriptive approach based on secondary sources, the study examines the philosophical foundations of Gandhian thought, its interpretation in major scholarly works, and its application to present-day issues such as social conflict, political protest, human rights, communal harmony, and sustainable development. The analysis shows that Gandhian non-violence remains relevant because it combines morality with strategy, emphasizes justice without hatred, and seeks social change through persuasion, sacrifice, and collective action rather than destruction. At the same time, the study notes that Gandhian methods face challenges in a world shaped by terrorism, digital misinformation, state repression, and polarized politics. Even so, the enduring global recognition of Gandhi's legacy, including the United Nations' observance of the International Day of Non-Violence on 2 October, suggests that his ideas continue to offer a meaningful alternative to violence in both national and international life. Overall, the paper concludes that Gandhian non-violence is not an outdated ideal, but a practical and ethical guide for building peace, justice, and democratic citizenship in the twenty-first century.

**Keywords:** *Gandhi, Non-Violence, Ahimsa, Satyagraha, Peace, Civil Resistance, Social Justice.*

### Introduction

Mahatma Gandhi transformed non-violence from a personal moral principle into a mass political method. His idea of satyagraha combined truth, self-discipline, moral courage, and non-cooperation with injustice. Britannica defines satyagraha as a determined but nonviolent resistance to evil, built on truth, peace, and love, while also noting that it became a major instrument in India's struggle against colonial rule. Gandhi first applied this method in South Africa in 1906 and later developed it through major movements in India, including Champaran, Kheda, and other campaigns against oppressive rule.

The importance of Gandhian non-violence extends beyond India's freedom movement. The United Nations observes 2 October, Gandhi's birthday, as the International Day of Non-Violence. The UN states that the day affirms "the universal relevance of the principle of non-violence" and promotes a culture of peace, tolerance, understanding, and public awareness. This recognition shows that Gandhi's message is still considered globally significant, not only as history, but as a living moral and political resource.

In the contemporary world, societies face war, religious conflict, authoritarianism, hate speech, structural inequality, and ecological crisis. In such conditions, Gandhian non-violence deserves renewed attention because it offers both an ethical vision and a practical mode of resistance. This paper therefore examines the relevance of Gandhian non-violence through a review of scholarship and a thematic analysis of its present-day significance.

**Review of Literature**

- Joan V. Bondurant (1967), in *Conquest of Violence: The Gandhian Philosophy of Conflict*, presented one of the earliest systematic academic studies of Gandhian non-violence. Her work treats Gandhian non-violence not as passivity, but as a philosophy of conflict and a technique of non-violent action. This contribution is important because it frames Gandhian thought as an active method of political struggle rather than mere moral idealism.
- Bhikhu C. Parekh (1989), in *Gandhi's Political Philosophy: A Critical Examination*, offered a critical account of Gandhi's moral and political philosophy by placing it in historical context and examining its central assumptions. Parekh's study is valuable for understanding how non-violence was linked in Gandhi's thought to religion, politics, social reform, and human ethics.
- Dennis Dalton (1993), in *Mahatma Gandhi: Nonviolent Power in Action*, examined Gandhi's political and intellectual development and showed how Gandhi refined his ideals through practice. Dalton especially highlighted the Salt Satyagraha of 1930 and the Calcutta fast of 1947, showing that non-violence functioned as a form of political power in action.
- Karuna Mantena (2012), in her article *Another Realism: The Politics of Gandhian Nonviolence*, argued that Gandhian non-violence should be understood as a form of political realism rather than simple moral idealism. She showed that Gandhi's approach was contextual, strategic, and deeply aware of conflict, domination, and violence in political life. This makes Gandhian non-violence highly relevant to modern political theory.
- Bhuvan Chandel (2014), in *Gandhi on Non-Violence (Ahimsa)*, explained that Gandhi wanted to establish a non-violent society regulated by self-rule or *Swaraj*, where non-violence would be the guiding principle. Chandel's interpretation is useful because it shows that Gandhi's concept of ahimsa was not only personal morality, but also the foundation of a wider social and political order.
- David Hardiman (2018), in *The Nonviolent Struggle for Indian Freedom, 1905–19*, demonstrated that Gandhi helped forge nonviolence as both a new word in English and a new political concept. Hardiman's historical analysis is important because it places Gandhian non-violence within actual movements and shows how satyagraha evolved through struggle in South Africa and India.
- Eijiro Hazama (2023), in *Unravelling the Myth of Gandhian Non-Violence*, reexamined the intellectual origins of Gandhi's non-violence and challenged the view that it came mainly from the traditional doctrine of ahimsa. Hazama argued that early modern *nirguna bhakti* and Tolstoyan beliefs were also crucial influences. This study is significant because it shows that Gandhian non-violence was historically shaped and intellectually complex.

**Objectives of the Study**

The major objectives of this study are:

1. To examine the philosophical foundations of Gandhian non-violence.
2. To review major scholarly interpretations of Gandhi's concept of non-violence.
3. To analyze the relevance of Gandhian non-violence in the contemporary social and political context.
4. To assess the practical value and limitations of Gandhian non-violence in present-day conflicts and movements.

## Research Methodology

This study is descriptive, analytical, and qualitative in nature. It is based entirely on secondary sources such as books, journal articles, official UN documents, and scholarly publications on Gandhi, satyagraha, and nonviolent resistance. The method used is thematic analysis. First, the literature was reviewed to identify the central elements of Gandhian non-violence, including truth, self-suffering, non-cooperation, moral persuasion, and constructive action. Second, these ideas were analyzed in relation to contemporary themes such as democratic protest, social justice, communal harmony, peacebuilding, and sustainability. Because the paper is conceptual rather than empirical, the focus is on interpretation, comparison, and critical discussion rather than statistical measurement.

## Results and Discussion

The first objective of the study was to examine the philosophical foundations of Gandhian non-violence. The analysis makes it clear that Gandhian non-violence was never a simple rejection of physical violence alone. It was a complete moral and social philosophy based on ahimsa (non-injury), satya (truth), and satyagraha (truth-force). Gandhi saw non-violence as an active force of moral courage. It was not weakness, fear, or passivity. Rather, it demanded self-discipline, self-control, moral strength, and readiness to suffer for truth rather than injure others. In this sense, Gandhian non-violence was both ethical and practical from the very beginning.

One of the most important findings here is that Gandhi connected the personal and the political in a highly original way. For him, non-violence was not only a private virtue to be practiced in individual life; it was also a public method for resisting injustice. This is why his thought became so influential in anti-colonial struggle and later in global civil rights movements. Gandhi believed that unjust systems survive not only because of force, but also because people cooperate with them out of fear, habit, or dependence. His philosophy therefore aimed to break this cycle through disciplined resistance without hatred. The wrongdoer was to be opposed, but not dehumanized.

Scholars such as Bhuvan Chandel have shown that Gandhi imagined a non-violent society guided by *Swaraj*, where self-rule meant not only political independence but also moral self-mastery. This is an important point because it shows that Gandhi's vision of non-violence extended beyond protest. He wanted a society in which public life itself would be regulated by truth, responsibility, restraint, and non-violent conduct. Thus, Gandhian non-violence functioned as a philosophy of social order as much as a technique of resistance.

Another major finding is Gandhi's insistence that means and ends are inseparable. In much of modern political life, harmful means are often justified by appealing to desirable ends. Gandhi rejected this logic. He held that just ends cannot be reached by unjust means because the methods used in struggle shape the character of the outcome. This idea remains one of his strongest philosophical contributions. It offers a serious ethical challenge to politics based on manipulation, revenge, coercion, and hatred. Karuna Mantena's interpretation helps clarify this point by arguing that Gandhian non-violence should be seen not as naïve idealism, but as a realistic moral politics that recognizes conflict while refusing violence as the only solution.

Therefore, the first result of the study is that Gandhian non-violence rests on a coherent philosophical foundation. It joins ethics with action, truth with resistance, and personal discipline with collective transformation. This is one of the main reasons why it remains relevant far beyond the historical setting of India's freedom struggle.

**Table 1. Philosophical Foundations of Gandhian Non-Violence**

Component	Meaning in Gandhian Thought	Significance
Ahimsa	Non-injury in thought, word, and action	Gives non-violence a moral base
Satya	Truth as a guiding principle of life and struggle	Connects ethics with political action
Satyagraha	Truth-force or soul-force	Makes resistance active, disciplined, and purposeful
Swaraj	Self-rule and self-mastery	Expands non-violence beyond politics into social life
Unity of means and ends	Just goals require just methods	Prevents moral corruption in political struggle

The second objective was to review the major scholarly interpretations of Gandhi’s concept of non-violence. The literature shows that Gandhi’s idea has been understood from several perspectives, and these perspectives are not contradictory but complementary. Some scholars stress its moral and spiritual dimension, while others highlight its political strategy, historical adaptability, or social vision. This itself is an important result because it shows that Gandhian non-violence cannot be reduced to a single fixed formula.

A major pattern in the literature is that Gandhi’s non-violence is treated as both a principle and a method. Chandel emphasizes its ethical and civilizational significance, showing that Gandhi wished to create a society in which non-violence would shape both institutions and conduct. From this view, Gandhian non-violence is deeply moral. It is concerned with the purification of action, the dignity of human beings, and the building of a just social order.

At the same time, Karuna Mantena interprets Gandhi from the perspective of political realism. Her work is important because it corrects the misconception that Gandhi was detached from the realities of power. Mantena argues that Gandhi’s method emerged from a practical understanding of fear, coercion, domination, and political conflict. In this reading, non-violence is not a withdrawal from politics but a different way of doing politics. It aims to challenge injustice without reproducing the violence of the opponent.

Historical scholarship also supports this view. David Hardiman’s work shows that Gandhian non-violence was shaped through actual struggles and not simply developed as an abstract doctrine. Gandhi refined his method in concrete social and political contexts. This means that non-violence was historically adaptive. It responded to oppression creatively and strategically, rather than mechanically.

This point is especially important because critics often dismiss Gandhian thought as impractical or overly moralistic. The literature does not support that conclusion. Instead, it shows that Gandhi’s method was intellectually rich and historically flexible. It could mobilize the masses, create moral pressure, and weaken unjust authority without relying on violent retaliation. In this respect, Gandhian non-violence appears as a sophisticated framework that combines moral philosophy, political strategy, and social reform.

Thus, the second result of the study is that scholarly interpretations reinforce the depth and continued analytical value of Gandhian non-violence. The literature shows that it remains relevant in ethics, peace studies, political theory, and resistance studies because it speaks to both the moral and strategic dimensions of public life.

**Table 2. Major Interpretations of Gandhian Non-Violence**

Scholar/Approach	Main Interpretation	Contribution
Ethical-spiritual interpretation	Non-violence as a moral discipline	Highlights truth, self-control, and human dignity
Bhuvan Chandel	Non-violence as civilizational and social ideal	Shows Gandhi's vision of a non-violent society
Karuna Mantena	Non-violence as political realism	Demonstrates its strategic and practical depth
David Hardiman	Non-violence as historically developed political practice	Shows adaptation through real struggles
General scholarly consensus	Both principled and practical	Confirms complexity and modern relevance

The third objective was to analyze the relevance of Gandhian non-violence in the present social and political context. The findings clearly indicate that Gandhian thought continues to matter in the modern world. Its relevance is visible not only in theory but also in global public culture and contemporary protest movements.

One strong sign of this relevance is the international recognition of Gandhi's legacy. The observance of 2 October as the International Day of Non-Violence reflects the global importance attached to his message. This recognition suggests that Gandhian non-violence has moved beyond Indian nationalist history and become part of a wider moral language of peace, tolerance, and justice.

The contemporary world is marked by war, communal conflict, hate speech, social injustice, ideological polarization, and increasing intolerance. In such a setting, Gandhian non-violence offers an alternative mode of political and social action. It encourages resistance without hatred, protest without revenge, and justice without dehumanization. This is especially important in democratic societies, where violent methods often deepen division and reduce the possibility of long-term reconciliation. Gandhi's emphasis on dialogue, conscience, public participation, and moral pressure remains highly relevant for peaceful democratic reform.

Another important finding is that Gandhian non-violence continues to inspire movements beyond formal politics. Its influence can be traced in civil rights struggles, human rights campaigns, environmental activism, and citizen-led resistance across different parts of the world. This continuing presence suggests that Gandhi's method addresses something fundamental in human conflict: the need to resist injustice while preserving moral legitimacy.

Modern civil resistance research strengthens this conclusion. Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan show that successful nonviolent campaigns are often associated with more durable democracies and are less likely to lead to renewed civil war. Their findings challenge the widely held belief that violence is always the stronger or quicker route to change. Nonviolent movements often broaden participation, preserve legitimacy, and create better conditions for democratic transition.

This finding matters because it shows that Gandhian non-violence remains relevant not simply as an ethical ideal but also as a practical resource for modern societies. It responds to contemporary crises in a way that values both justice and human dignity. Therefore, the third major result of the study is that Gandhian non-violence continues to offer a powerful framework for addressing present-day conflict, inequality, and political struggle.

**Table 3. Contemporary Relevance of Gandhian Non-Violence**

Contemporary issue	Gandhian response	Present significance
Political violence	Moral resistance without revenge	Supports peaceful democratic reform
Communal tension and hate	Dialogue, tolerance, and conscience	Promotes coexistence and reconciliation
Human rights struggles	Resistance with dignity	Protects justice without dehumanization
Environmental and citizen movements	Nonviolent public participation	Expands democratic involvement
Global peace discourse	Universal value of non-violence	Makes Gandhi relevant beyond India

The fourth objective was to assess the practical value and limitations of Gandhian non-violence. The analysis shows that Gandhian non-violence has substantial practical strength. One of its greatest advantages is that it allows wide participation. Unlike armed struggle, nonviolent action can involve students, workers, women, elderly people, and ordinary citizens through strikes, marches, boycotts, non-cooperation, sit-ins, and public demonstrations. This makes it more inclusive and more socially legitimate.

Research on civil resistance explains this strength clearly. Nonviolent campaigns can mobilize people on a broader scale because they lower the barrier to participation. When more people participate, movements gain moral authority and can weaken the support structure of oppressive systems. This connects closely with Gandhi’s own insight that power depends not only on weapons but also on obedience, acceptance, and cooperation. When such cooperation is withdrawn in a disciplined way, even strong systems of domination can be challenged.

Another practical strength is that nonviolent struggle reduces the destructive after-effects often associated with violent conflict. Violent struggle may destroy institutions, deepen hatred, and create cycles of revenge. Nonviolent struggle, by contrast, is more likely to preserve the possibility of future reconciliation and democratic reconstruction. This makes it especially valuable in societies that must continue living together after conflict.

However, the analysis also reveals clear limitations. Gandhian non-violence requires patience, unity, discipline, organization, and moral leadership. These conditions are not always easy to sustain. In situations of severe repression, extremist violence, civil war, or terrorism, nonviolent actors may face enormous risks. In the modern digital world, misinformation, provocation, online hatred, and emotional polarization can also weaken the discipline needed for nonviolent struggle. Some critics therefore argue that nonviolence may be too slow or too demanding when injustice is urgent and brutal.

These limitations should not be ignored. They show that non-violence is not effortless. It is not simply a matter of moral intention. It requires preparation, strategy, sacrifice, and collective discipline. Yet these limitations do not make Gandhian non-violence irrelevant. Rather, they show that it is a demanding political practice. Mantena’s interpretation is helpful here because it presents Gandhian non-violence as realistic precisely because it understands the harsh conditions of politics while trying to prevent new cycles of domination and violence.

Thus, the final result of the study is that Gandhian non-violence remains both valuable and challenging. Its success depends on context, leadership, participation, and discipline, but its moral and political significance remains very strong. In a world increasingly shaped by aggression and force, it still offers a credible path toward justice, peace, and humane transformation.

**Table 4. Practical Value and Limitations of Gandhian Non-Violence**

Aspect	Practical value	Limitation
Participation	Allows broad citizen involvement	Requires large-scale discipline and coordination
Legitimacy	Generates moral authority	Can be undermined by misinformation and provocation
Strategy	Weakens oppressive systems through non-cooperation	May struggle under severe repression
Social outcome	Preserves possibility of reconciliation	May appear slow in urgent crises
Ethical strength	Avoids cycles of revenge and hatred	Demands sacrifice, patience, and leadership

Taken together, the findings show that Gandhian non-violence is not an outdated historical idea but a living and complex framework. Its philosophical depth gives it moral force. Scholarly interpretations confirm its richness and adaptability. Its contemporary relevance appears in peace discourse, democratic protest, and rights-based movements. Its practical value lies in mass participation, legitimacy, and non-destructive resistance. At the same time, its limitations remind us that non-violence is not a shortcut. It is a disciplined and demanding way of confronting injustice.

In overall terms, the study demonstrates that Gandhian non-violence continues to speak powerfully to the present world because it brings together ethics, politics, and social responsibility. It does not deny conflict, but it refuses to treat violence as inevitable. That remains its greatest relevance today.

## Conclusion

Gandhian non-violence is far more than a historical memory of India's freedom struggle. It is a living philosophy of resistance, morality, and social transformation. The literature shows that Gandhi turned nonviolence into both an ethical principle and a practical method of political action. Contemporary scholarship further demonstrates that nonviolent movements can be effective, inclusive, and democratically productive. At the same time, current global recognition of Gandhi through the International Day of Non-Violence reflects the continuing appeal of his message.

The analysis therefore concludes that Gandhian non-violence remains highly relevant in the twenty-first century. It is relevant in politics because it challenges oppressive power without reproducing brutality. It is relevant in society because it promotes justice with reconciliation. It is relevant in ethics because it insists on the unity of means and ends. And it is relevant in development because it questions greed, domination, and unsustainable living. Though difficult to practice, Gandhian non-violence continues to offer one of the clearest pathways toward peace, dignity, and humane democratic life.

## References

- Brown, J. M. (1991). *Gandhi: Prisoner of hope*. Yale University Press.
- Chandel, B. (2014). Gandhi on non-violence (Ahimsa). *Diogenes*, 61(3–4), 135–142.
- Chenoweth, E., Hocking, A., & Marks, Z. (2022). A dynamic model of nonviolent resistance strategy. *PLOS ONE*, 17(7)
- Chenoweth, E., & Stephan, M. J. (2011). *Why civil resistance works: The strategic logic of nonviolent conflict*. Columbia University Press.
- Hardiman, D. (2018). *The nonviolent struggle for Indian freedom, 1905–19*. Oxford University Press.
- Hazama, E. (2022). Unravelling the myth of Gandhian non-violence: Why did Gandhi connect his principle of satyāgraha with the “Hindu” notion of ahimsā? *Modern Intellectual History*, 20(1), 1–25.
- Mantena, K. (2012). Another realism: The politics of Gandhian nonviolence. *American Political Science Review*, 106(2), 455–470.
- Bondurant, J. V. (1967). *Conquest of violence: The Gandhian philosophy of conflict* (Rev. ed.). University of California Press.
- Chandel, B. (2014). Gandhi on non-violence (Ahimsa). *Diogenes*, 61(3–4).
- Dalton, D. (1993). *Mahatma Gandhi: Nonviolent power in action*. Columbia University Press.
- Hardiman, D. (2018). *The nonviolent struggle for Indian freedom, 1905–19*. Oxford University Press.
- Hazama, E. (2023). Unravelling the myth of Gandhian non-violence: Why did Gandhi connect his principle of satyāgraha with the “Hindu” notion of ahimsā? *Modern Intellectual History*, 20(1), 116–140.
- Mantena, K. (2012). Another realism: The politics of Gandhian nonviolence. *American Political Science Review*, 106(2), 455–470.
- Parekh, B. C. (1989). *Gandhi’s political philosophy: A critical examination*. Macmillan.