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## Editorial

PARLIAMENT REPRESENTS THE heart of a democracy. It is a space where differences are negotiated through debate rather than force, and where the diversity of a nation is translated into reasoned lawmaking. In a country as plural and complex as India, parliamentary deliberation is not merely a procedural requirement; it is the institutional expression of democratic nonviolence. Nevertheless, in recent years, concerns have grown about the decline in parliamentary decorum and the shrinking space for meaningful discussion. Frequent disruptions, abbreviated debates, and increasingly adversarial political exchanges threaten to turn Parliament into a forum of confrontation rather than a space for dialogue.

Disagreement is natural in a democracy, but the health of democratic institutions depends on how disagreement is expressed. When shouting replaces argument, or disruption substitutes scrutiny, the purpose of Parliament is weakened. Legislative processes risk becoming hurried, reducing opportunities to examine laws that affect millions. The weakening of committee processes and the declining time devoted to serious debate raise questions about whether Parliament is fulfilling its core function, not just passing laws, but ensuring that they emerge from collective reflection and accountability. Bills are often passed in haste without any debate.

Seen through a Gandhian lens, this decline is more than procedural; it is ethical. Gandhi understood politics as a moral activity grounded in truth-seeking and respectful engagement. For him, democracy was sustained not simply by voting or representation but by the willingness to listen, persuade, and dissent without hostility. The principle of *ahimsa* extends beyond physical nonviolence to include restraint in speech and conduct. A parliamentary culture shaped by aggression and polarization stands in opposition to this moral vision. True deliberation requires patience, civility, and the recognition that truth often emerges through dialogue rather than domination.

From the perspective of peace activists and human rights advocates,

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parliamentary debate is society's primary mechanism for resolving conflicts nonviolently. When deliberative institutions weaken, political tensions tend to spill over into public discourse in more divisive forms. Polarised rhetoric inside Parliament can deepen societal mistrust outside it. Moreover, meaningful deliberation is essential for protecting minority voices and ensuring that laws are shaped by careful reasoning rather than majoritarian impulse or political expediency. Democratic legitimacy depends not only on electoral victory but also on the quality of institutional dialogue.

Restoring parliamentary decorum does not mean suppressing opposition or diminishing political passion. Rather, it calls for renewing the culture of listening, argument, and respect that allows democracy to function effectively. Parliamentary rules, traditions, and conventions exist precisely to ensure that even the sharpest political conflict remains within the boundaries of mutual recognition and constitutional responsibility.

India's democratic strength lies in its capacity to manage disagreement through dialogue. Parliament must therefore remain a space where competing visions of the nation can confront each other constructively, without descending into perpetual disruption. Reclaiming the spirit of deliberation is not merely about institutional efficiency; it is about preserving the ethical foundation of democracy itself, a foundation built on reasoned debate, respect for dissent, and the shared belief that dialogue, not noise, is the path to collective progress.

This issue of the journal has five articles in the main section, one in the notes and comments, and two book reviews. It is hoped that this issue will evoke the interest of the regular readers of Gandhi Marg.

**JOHN S. MOOLAKKATTU**  
Chief Editor



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# The Sacred Mirror and a Silent Revolution

*Pratheesh P*

*Saritha S. R*

## ABSTRACT

*The saint, philosopher, and socio-religious reformer from Kerala, Sree Narayana Guru, challenged Kerala's caste-based ceremonial orthodoxy and the priestly mediation in 1927 when he consecrated a mirror in the sanctum of the Kalavankodam Sree Jagannatha Temple. By replacing anthropomorphic idols with a mirror, Guru redirected devotion inward, transforming the devotee's gaze into a site of spiritual encounter. This study investigates the theological, philosophical, and political significance of his radical act through a multidisciplinary methodology combining microhistory, semiotic analysis, and oral historiography. Drawing on Advaita Vedanta, ritual theory, and lived narratives, it frames the mirror as a radical instrument of spiritual democratization. Field interviews and archival sources reveal how Guru's move disrupted sacred hierarchies and continues to inform popular theologies and communal memory. The study also reflects on the risks of symbolic appropriation and the ongoing relevance of Guru's praxis for ethical, inclusive, and decolonized worship in contemporary India.*

**Key words:** *Sree Narayana Guru, Mirror Idol, Ritual Decolonization, Nondualism, Caste and Worship*

## 1. Introduction: Worship, Caste, and the Politics of the Sacred

IN 19TH-CENTURY KERALA, religion functioned as an instrument of caste power rather than spiritual liberation, with temple access, ritual practice, and scriptural authority tightly controlled by Brahminical elites (Pratheesh and Reema, 2024a). Structures of “unseeability” and “unapproachability” reinforced exclusion, denying

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marginalized communities the right to worship or spiritual agency (Kurup, 1994). The Nampûtiri Brahmins dominated ritual legitimacy and land ownership, while violations of caste norms invited ostracism and violence (Raj, 1985; Pratheesh and Reema, 2024b). Swami Vivekananda's description of Kerala as a "lunatic asylum" highlighted this socially sanctioned inequality (Sheeba, 2002).

Within this context emerged Sree Narayana Guru (1855–1928), whose spiritual interventions challenged caste through ritual innovation (Pratheesh and Saritha, 2025a; 2025b). His declaration — "one caste, one religion, one God for humanity" — sought to dismantle caste as a ritual technology (Gopal, 2000). The 1888 Aruvippuram consecration marked an early rupture (Nataraja Guru, 1952), but the 1927 installation of a mirror in the Kalavamkodam Sree Jagannatha Temple represented the culmination of this vision. By replacing the idol with a mirror, Guru shifted focus from deity to devotee, transforming worship into an act of self-recognition grounded in ethical selfhood (Jayakumar, 1999).

Guru's ritual strategy may be compared to Gandhi's anti-untouchability campaigns, which worked within Hindu ritual structures (Pratheesh, 2024; Manmathan, 2013). In contrast, Guru's approach reconfigured the symbolic foundations of worship itself. While Gandhi sought reform within orthodoxy and Ambedkar pursued legal abolition of caste, Guru enacted symbolic and liturgical transformation, dissolving hierarchy within the sacred domain (Pratheesh and Saritha, 2025c; Muni Narayana Prasad, 2003). This study examines the mirror consecration as a radical religious and social intervention in colonial Kerala.

The research adopts a multidisciplinary framework combining micro-history, semiotic analysis, oral historiography, and ritual theory. The mirror is interpreted not as iconographic absence but as a theological presence embodying the Advaitic principle *Tat Tvam Asi*, while contesting caste orthodoxy. Drawing on Turner, Bell, and Merleau-Ponty, the study views the act as transforming the devotee into both subject and site of divinity. Although the mirror has often been ritualized as heritage within institutional memory, this study reclaims it as a spiritual manifesto and nonviolent revolution articulated through worship.

Existing scholarship on Kerala caste structures and Narayana Guru's philosophy is extensive, yet the mirror consecration remains underexplored (Ananya, 2018). Earlier studies emphasize either social reform, Advaita philosophy, or institutional history, rarely synthesizing these perspectives (Pratheesh and Saritha, 2025b). Ritual theory and symbolic anthropology — including Turner's ritual drama, Bell's

ritualization, and interpretive anthropology — provide useful frameworks but have seldom been applied to this event (Bell, 1992; Turner, 1969; Merleau-Ponty, 2012; Aston, 2018). Comparative studies on aniconism likewise remain disconnected from Guru's praxis (Willis, 2012; Cupito, 2002).

### **1. Review of Literature: Locating the Mirror in Discourse**

As a unique act of theological rupture and ritual innovation, Sree Narayana Guru's interventions in the religious domain—such as the installation of a Shiva Linga without Brahmin sanction, founding temples for the marginalized, and ultimately consecrating a mirror in place of an idol (Pratheesh and Reema, 2024b)—have attracted considerable scholarly interest, though the mirror act remains relatively underexplored. The symbolic, metaphysical, and ceremonial ramifications of this 1927 consecration remain insufficiently understood, despite extensive scholarship on Guru's broader reformist philosophy (Ananya, 2018). This section situates the current inquiry within the intersecting fields of caste critique, ritual theory, symbolic anthropology, and Guru studies. It reviews key academic contributions, identifies lacunae, and underscores the urgency of a micro-historical investigation into the Kalavamkodam mirror installation.

**Caste, Orthodoxy, and the Politics of Ritual in Kerala:** The caste system in colonial Kerala is well documented as one of the most rigid in India, upheld through spatial segregation and ideological constructs such as unseeability and unapproachability (Kurup, 1994). Swami Vivekananda's reference to Kerala as a 'lunatic asylum' captured the spiritual irrationality of caste dominance. Foundational studies by Kurian, V. Mathew (1986), T. K. Ravindran (1988) and P. K. Baklakrishnan (2004) revealed how Brahminical orthodoxy translated ritual into a mechanism of social exclusion through temple monopolies. Yet these analyses often remained structural, with limited focus on subversive liturgical interventions within oppressed communities.

**Narayana Guru in Scholarship: Reform, Religion, and Rationality:** Scholarship on Sree Narayana Guru has flourished in both philosophical and socio-political directions. Nataraja Guru (1952), his direct disciple, systematised the Guru's metaphysical outlook, especially its grounding in Advaita Vedanta. Jayakumar's (1999) critical biography highlights the philosophical audacity of Guru's 1888 consecration at Aruvippuram. Muni Narayana Prasad (2003) expands on the Guru's divergence from classical Vedantic elitism by interpreting his praxis through a democratic and ethical lens. Later works by Gopal Guru (2000), Mannathukkaren (2011) and Dennis, S. (2023) underscore

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the Guru's role in reframing spirituality as social critique. Yet, the 1927 mirror consecration is often portrayed as a poetic gesture rather than a radical semiotic challenge. Even SNDP-affiliated texts often relegate it to a symbolic afterthought without unpacking its theological implications (Pratheesh and Saritha, 2025b).

**Ritual Symbolism and Sacred Space: Theoretical Insights:** Theoretical frameworks such as Victor Turner's notion of ritual as social drama and Catherine Bell's concept of ritualization are essential for analysing how bodily practice negotiates power (Bell, 1992; Turner, 1969; Merleau-Ponty, 2012). Claude Lévi-Strauss's structuralist view of symbols (De Castro and Corona, 2025) and Clifford Geertz's interpretive anthropology (Majbroda, 2015) allow the mirror to be understood as a dense, polysemic artifact (Aston, 2018). Despite this, these models have not been adequately applied to the Kalavamkodam event. A semiotic reading of the mirror, especially its performative and epistemological function, remains an unexplored domain.

**Studies on Non-Objectivist Worship and Aniconism:** Comparative religious traditions G-d G- ranging from Jain aniconism and Buddhist concepts of *Únyatâ* to Christian apophatic theology and Islamic rejection of anthropomorphic images—offer valuable frames (Willis, 2012). Scholars such as Diana Eck and Wendy Doniger have engaged with these traditions (Cupito, 2002), but seldom in relation to Narayana Guru's praxis (Pratheesh and Saritha, 2025a). The absence of comparative synthesis has led to the marginalisation of Guru's contribution in the global landscape of non-objectivist theology.

**Need for a Micro-Historical and Semiotic Re-Reading:** Carlo Ginzburg's emphasis on micro-history and Ranajit Guha's subaltern historiography offer compelling methodologies for decoding symbolic disruptions from below (Sommerville, 2019). Guru's mirror consecration, though often seen as singular, is a paradigmatic act of subaltern agency (the capacity for historically marginalized or oppressed groups to act, resist and shape social change) in ritual form (Pratheesh and Reema, 2024b). The act is not just a historical anomaly but a lens through which to examine caste, power, and embodied spirituality (Pratheesh and Saritha, 2025b). Earlier studies on Kerala modernity have focused on education and rationalist movements; the ritual space itself remains under-theorized as a locus of ethical transformation (Devika, 2018). This literature review thus demonstrates the need for a layered, multidisciplinary investigation into the mirror installation—not as heritage, but as hermeneutics; not as ritual nostalgia, but as ontological revolution.

### 3. Methodological Pathway

This study adopts a methodological framework that moves beyond conventional historical narration by emphasising the intersections of theology, ritual, and social justice. A purely textual or archival approach would be insufficient to capture the symbolic depth and lived experience embedded in Sree Narayana Guru's mirror consecration. Therefore, the research combines qualitative methods — micro-historical analysis, semiotic interpretation, oral historiography, and philosophical framing through Advaita Vedanta — each offering a distinct yet interconnected perspective consistent with Guru's emphasis on ethical self-inquiry and collective consciousness (Eck, 1985; Doniger, 2009).

The 1927 mirror installation is approached as a micro-historical event that, while singular, reflects broader ritual and social transformations in colonial Kerala. Drawing on Carlo Ginzburg's method of thick description and Ranajit Guha's focus on subaltern agency, the study situates the event within processes of ritual democratization and vernacular modernity (Ginzburg, 2012). This approach highlights how a localized ritual act challenged caste hierarchies and foregrounded marginalized agency, grounding analysis in concrete historical realities rather than abstraction.

Building on this context, semiotic analysis interprets the mirror as a symbolic artefact within a system of cultural signs. Its rejection of anthropomorphic idols, reflective nature, and collapse of the subject-object divide position the devotee as both worshipper and sacred presence. The mirror thus emerges as a polyvalent signifier of equality and non-dualism, functioning simultaneously as a theological innovation and a socio-political communication. Semiotics enables the reading of the mirror not merely as a ritual object but as a deliberate symbolic intervention within struggles for emancipation.

Oral historiography complements historical and symbolic analysis by documenting the evolving memory of the consecration through semi-structured interviews with devotees, temple committee members, and SNDP functionaries. Special attention is given to women and elders to recover marginalized voices often absent from written archives. These narratives reveal how the meaning of Guru's act has been preserved, reinterpreted, or occasionally institutionalized over time.

Advaita Vedanta provides the philosophical framework, interpreting the consecration as lived non-dualism. The mirror is read as a theological praxis that translates metaphysical principles into ritual form, dissolving distinctions between worshipper and divine while embodying equality.

The study aims to examine the theological implications of the mirror consecration, analyse its role in spiritual democratization, situate it within caste oppression and ritual exclusion, explore its evolving memory, and assess its contemporary relevance. The research design is qualitative and interpretive, drawing on Guru's writings, temple records, and oral testimonies, and includes ethical safeguards such as informed consent and anonymity, in line with subaltern historiography (Guha, 1982). Together, these methods produce a multi-layered interpretation of the mirror as both a ritual act and a transformative text.

#### **4. Historical Background: Temples, Caste, and Sacred Exclusion in Pre-Guru Kerala**

The methodological approaches outlined above—micro-history, semiotics, oral historiography, and Advaita Vedanta—provide the necessary analytical tools to interpret the mirror consecration within its lived historical context. To truly understand the symbolic and theological rupture that occurred at Kalavamkodam, it is necessary to reconstruct the socio-religious architecture that preceded it. This necessitates an examination of the pre-colonial and colonial temple systems in Kerala, where religious practice was inextricably linked to caste hierarchy, land control, and ritual authority. By mapping this landscape, we will gain a better understanding of both Guru's constraints and the radical implications of his liturgical innovations.

In pre-colonial Kerala, temples were not merely places of spiritual communion but functioned as socio-political fortresses dominated by the Nampûtiri Brahmins (Devika, 2010). These institutions operated within a ritual economy rooted in the caste order, where religious authority intersected with land ownership, scriptural legitimacy, and ritual exclusivity. The emergence of the Brahmin class as both spiritual and agrarian overlords was consolidated by the twelfth century through systems such as Brahmaswam and Devaswom (Das, 2007).

Access to sacred space was regulated by the binaries of purity and pollution, relegating avarna communities—including Ezhavas and Dalits—to the margins or excluding them entirely (Cybil 2009). Prominent temples like Sree Padmanabhaswamy, Vadakkunnathan, and Guruvayur institutionalized this exclusion by reserving priestly roles and ritual proximity solely for Nampûtiri Brahmins. Temple architecture, spatial organisation, and festival rituals reinforced caste privilege, embedding social hierarchy in sacred performance (Gupta, 2005).

This monopolisation of liturgical space led to a stagnation of spiritual possibility for marginalised communities. The denial of temple

entry, theological instruction, and ritual authorship rendered the sacred inaccessible to a large portion of Kerala's population (Pratheesh and Saritha, 2025b). While lower castes maintained alternate ritual traditions, they lacked institutional legitimacy and were often stigmatized or criminalized. In effect, caste was not just a social order but a metaphysical epistemology: it determined who could see, know, or embody the divine (Deshpande, 2000).

Sree Narayana Guru's interventions in this landscape marked a decisive rupture. By consecrating temples without Brahmin sanction and rejecting idol-centric worship, Guru challenged not only the symbolic order but also the ontological assumptions of Brahmanical orthodoxy (Shah, 2007). His emphasis on self-realization, ethical living, and interior spirituality presented a theological alternative rooted in Advaita Vedanta but distinct in its ethical praxis. The Kalavamkodam mirror installation symbolized this alternative most radically, turning the devotee's gaze inward and dismantling the priest's role as intermediary (Pratheesh and Reema, 2024b). Thus, Guru's liturgical interventions did not merely modify rituals—they redefined sacredness itself, grounding it in ethical consciousness and collective inclusion rather than inherited status (Nadkarni, 2008). In doing so, he transformed temple space from a site of caste reproduction into one of spiritual democratization.

This historical backdrop clarifies why Guru's interventions, and particularly the mirror installation, represented more than a reform of ritual form—they constituted a reimagining of the sacred as a shared human potential rather than a Brahmin-guarded privilege. Understanding this transformation sets the stage for the following analysis, which turns to the mirror not simply as a liturgical artefact but as a charged semiotic object whose theological and political significance must be decoded.

### **5. The Mirror as Sacred Idiom: Semiotics, Metaphysics and Liberation**

The consecration of a mirror by Sree Narayana Guru at the Kalavamkodam Temple was not an iconoclastic denial of the divine but a radical affirmation of selfhood as divinity. Unlike traditional idols that rely on anthropomorphic representation, the mirror offers no fixed image; it only reflects. This act challenged centuries of caste and ritual authority embedded in visual theology and replaced it with an aniconic (religious devotion that avoids anthropomorphic depictions of deities, instead using abstract or non-representational symbols), introspective idiom that redefined sacredness as inward-facing and ethically accountable (Velayudhan, 1998).

In semiotic terms, the mirror performs a reversal. The devotee

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does not see a deity but encounters themselves in the act of worship. It dissolves the gap between subject and object, priest and worshipper, devotee and divinity. The mirror's signification is thus non-representational—it does not point toward a supernatural being but instead invokes presence through reflection. This aligns with the core tenet of Advaita Vedanta: the non-duality of Atman and Brahman (Parel, 2006). Guru's mirror transforms the act of darshan into a moment of self-realization. The gaze that once mediated devotion through caste and ritual now becomes internal and direct.

Theologically, the mirror disrupts the epistemic architecture of temple worship—that is, the underlying structure through which knowledge about the sacred is organized, transmitted, and legitimized. In a traditional setting, the deity is rendered sacred through Brahmin priests' consecration, and access to the divine is stratified. In Guru's vision, the mirror consecrates the devotee (Bhabha, 1994; Spivak, 1994). The sanctum becomes an ethical site, not a metaphysical domain governed by priestly intercession. This approach contrasts sharply with ritual orthodoxy and anticipates later non-objectivist liturgical practices in other parts of India.

Philosophically, the mirror evokes the phenomenological insight of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (a philosophical approach that studies lived experience and the structures of consciousness from the perspective of the subject): perception is not a passive reception but an embodied consciousness (Maldonado-Torres, 2007; Quijano, 2007). The mirror radicalizes this by turning the devotee's body and consciousness into the locus of the divine (Jacobi, 2024). While traditional idols freeze the divine into a form that reinforces hierarchy, the mirror democratizes it. It is unowned, unfixed, and reflective of the self in its plurality and temporality.

In juxtaposition, Gandhian spirituality—though deeply egalitarian and anti-caste in spirit—still retained a symbolic reliance on anthropomorphic divinity. Gandhi's own religiosity, influenced by Vaishnavism and the ethics of the Bhagavad Gita, emphasized inner purity and moral action but continued to affirm the presence of the divine in forms and names (Nandy, 1983). Guru's act, by contrast, removes even this symbolic dependency, moving toward an abstract, almost apophatic mode of worship. It could be argued that Guru's mirror is to Advaita what Gandhi's charkha is to karma yoga: both are instruments of liberation, but one functions through reflection while the other through action (Kumar, 1997).

Additionally, while Gandhi advocated for the removal of untouchability and emphasized the spiritual equality of all beings, he stopped short of challenging temple orthodoxy in its symbolic

apparatus. Guru's mirror did precisely that—it not only deconstructed the ritual hierarchy but redefined the medium of the sacred. In this sense, the mirror consecration constitutes a deeper semiotic rupture than many of Gandhi's reformist gestures. In short, Gandhi's moral appeals and Ambedkar's legislative activism both sought to dismantle caste, but Guru's mirror consecration enacted that dismantling within the ritual sphere itself (Nair. 2022). Unlike missionary reforms that often entailed cultural displacement, his method remained rooted in local idioms and Advaitic theology. This distinction highlights the mirror act's unique role as both a theological and political intervention.

Moreover, Guru's act anticipates modern critiques of representation and power found in postcolonial and decolonial theory. Scholars like Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha have critiqued the colonial gaze and emphasized the subaltern's agency in re-signifying symbols (George, 1983). Guru's mirror functions in a similar fashion—it repossesses the site of gaze and returns it to the subject, not as spectacle but as encounter. Thus, the mirror is more than a spiritual tool; it is a subversive semiotic artefact, a metaphysical proposition, and a socio-political manifesto. It offers not merely a theology but an epistemology—one that aligns devotion with reflection, ethics with embodiment, and liberation with inner seeing.

Seen in this light, the mirror is not merely an alternative to idol worship but an inversion of the entire logic of sacred mediation. Its reflective surface transforms the devotee from a passive recipient of divine presence into an active co-creator of the sacred, collapsing the distance between worshipper and divinity (Sree Narayana Guru, 2005). This radical reorientation of ritual meaning marks a decisive departure from the inherited hierarchies of Brahmanical orthodoxy and invites a broader inquiry into Guru's evolving symbolic repertoire. When placed in conversation with earlier interventions—most notably the Aruvippuram Shiva consecration—the Kalavamkodam mirror emerges as part of a continuum of escalating symbolic resistance. Understanding this trajectory allows us to trace how Guru's praxis moved from the public assertion of spiritual agency at Aruvippuram to the inward-facing, reflexive radicalism of the mirror at Kalavamkodam.

## **6. From Aruvippuram to Kalavamkodam: The Evolution of Symbolic Resistance**

Sree Narayana Guru's liturgical trajectory reveals a carefully curated progression from inclusive defiance to radical abstraction. His initial consecration of a Shiva Linga at Aruvippuram in 1888 is widely regarded as the first major challenge to Brahminical hegemony in

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Kerala temple rituals (Velayudhan, 1998). This act asserted the right of an avarna individual not only to worship but also to install a deity—traditionally the prerogative of the Brahmin priesthood. It was both a spiritual declaration and a socio-political rupture, directly contesting the monopolisation of ritual authority. By enshrining divinity without Brahmin sanction, Guru declared that the sacred was not the inheritance of caste lineage but the birthright of ethical consciousness. His bold pronouncement—‘This is not a Brahmin Shiva, but an Ezhava Shiva’—confronted the metaphysical monopoly of caste head-on (Nataraja Guru, 1952). The statement dismantled the constructed hierarchy of divine access, asserting that divinity does not discriminate on the basis of caste. In doing so, Guru introduced a new sacred order, one grounded in inner realisation rather than ritual entitlement—thus initiating a spiritual revolution from within the ritual itself.

The Aruvippuram consecration was followed by a series of temples across Kerala, many of which featured unconventional symbolism: a slab inscribed with “Truth” (Satyam), a light, a stone, or an empty pedestal (Ananya, 2018). These choices were far from decorative or merely improvisational. Instead, they constituted deliberate interventions in the semiotic field of temple worship—a space historically monopolised by Brahminical conventions of form, hierarchy, and deityhood. The rejection of anthropomorphic idols was not simply an aesthetic or metaphysical preference; it was a sociopolitical critique encoded through ritual. Guru’s installations gradually reframed sacred experience, shifting the locus of divine encounter from the sanctioned image to the worshipper’s ethical interiority.

Each symbolic substitute—a burning lamp, an unmarked stone, a reflective slab—operated as a rupture in both ritual logic and liturgical lineage. In oral testimonies collected from temple custodians and elderly SNDP members in Kalavamkodam, it is frequently noted that older generations interpreted these icons not as absences but as presence reimaged. “There was no form,” remarked one 83-year-old resident, “but we saw ourselves being seen. It was as if the temple watched you back.” These subjective experiences, though unsystematic, reveal a subterranean grammar of self-recognition and ethical inwardness that became central to Guru’s later symbolic repertoire. Local devotees often interpret these acts not in philosophical abstraction but through embodied intuition—a transformation in how one walks, speaks, or reflects within the sacred precincts.

By the time he reached Kalavamkodam in 1927, Guru’s theology had matured into a complete symbolic resistance—culminating in the

consecration of a mirror. This act was both culmination and rupture, absorbing decades of symbolic experimentation into a single, potent image. The mirror was neither blank nor void; it was a saturated symbol. It displaced the anthropocentric deity with a participatory presence, reflecting the devotee's own ethical condition. In local oral memory, the moment of installation is described as unsettling and electrifying. A former temple trustee recounted that some elders initially resisted worshipping before the mirror, unsure if it was even "permitted." But over time, the object acquired gravitas. "We learned to bow to ourselves without ego," said one devotee. "It was not pride, it was weight. A burden to live well."

These micro-historical fragments challenge the reading of the mirror as a passive icon of abstraction. Instead, they confirm its functionality as a dynamic site of ritual inversion. Ritual theory often draws upon Durkheimian and Turnerian models to explore liminality and transformation. Guru's mirror consecration inserted the devotee into a liminal zone—not outside the ritual frame but at its centre. The mirror did not abolish ritual; it transfigured it. It compelled the participant to encounter themselves not as consumer of divine grace but as bearer of divine responsibility. The act of darshan was reversed. One did not merely look upon the divine; one's own reflection looked upon one. The sacred became surveillance—an ethical mirror in both literal and figurative senses.

In semiotic terms, this act disrupted the triadic sign system that undergirds most iconographic worship. Traditional temple rituals depend on a referent (deity), a signifier (idol or murti), and a subject position (devotee). By replacing the referent with a mirror, Guru collapsed the distinction between subject and object. The mirror became both signifier and referent, erasing divine distance and collapsing transcendence into immanence (Sree Narayana Guru, 2003). In micro-historical terms, this produced not a void but a heightened presence—a sacred idiom in which worship was not directed toward a divine other but folded back upon the self as an ethical project.

One retired schoolteacher from the Kalavamkodam area recalled how children were instructed to "stand still and look properly" before the mirror. "It was not a joke," he said. "They told us that the mirror shows your truth." The affective intensity of these encounters suggests that the mirror did not merely substitute for the divine—it radicalised the very act of seeing as a spiritual discipline. Such narratives, though anecdotal, reinforce the central thesis that the mirror was not an absence but an ethical provocation. It asked: What do you see when you see yourself in the place of God?

This evolution is not merely chronological but dialectical.

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Aruvippuram was the thesis: a claim to sacred authorship by the oppressed. The intermediary years formed the antithesis: a deconstruction of form, ritual, and hierarchy. Kalavamkodam was the synthesis: a metaphysical affirmation that the divine resides in the reflective interior of all beings (Pratheesh and Reema, 2024a). Each stage in this trajectory represents a distinct philosophical move—first, the right to worship; second, the critique of form; and finally, the realisation of self as site of the sacred. Oral recollections bear out this triadic evolution, often recounting how initial resistance gave way to reflective discipline and, eventually, to the quiet normalisation of a revolutionary gesture.

Indeed, what is remarkable is how radical rupture became ritualised without losing its insurgent charge. Today, the mirror at Kalavamkodam is dusted, garlanded, and circumambulated like any idol. Yet its reflective surface continues to disturb and demand. It asks devotees not to externalise virtue but to inhabit it, not to surrender before a deity but to answer to their own conscience. It turns darshan into dialogue. For the devotee, this is no longer a temple in the conventional sense but a crucible of ethical becoming. Thus, Guru's liturgical progression—from stone to mirror, from invocation to reflection—is not only a philosophical journey but a cartography of spiritual democratisation. The mirror did not erase the divine; it decentralised it. It made the sacred available without mediation, condition, or caste. It was, and remains, a silent revolution—a still surface that unsettles, reflects, and reforms.

This symbolic progression marks a deliberate departure from conventional Hindu reform, where the goal was often to purify rituals without dismantling their symbolic structures. Guru's liturgical trajectory offered something more radical: a hermeneutics of the sacred that rewrote the relationship between form and meaning (Omana, 1979). Gandhi's religious interventions, by contrast, remained deeply rooted in moral symbolism and cultural continuity (Reitsma *et al.*, 2021). He visited temples, fasted for Dalit temple entry, and emphasized equality through ethical conduct. Yet Gandhi never explicitly called for the dismantling of the iconographic or priestly structure (Mattaini, 2013). For him, transformation was ethical, not metaphysical. Guru's evolution from Aruvippuram to Kalavamkodam, however, shows a movement from ethical inclusion to ontological re-signification.

This divergence is crucial: while Gandhi saw reform as moral cleansing within the existing frame, Guru redefined the very frame. The installation of a mirror was not simply a negation of idols; it was an act of re-inscription—a way of reclaiming the sacred not through

substitution but through subversion (Joseph and Ajith, 2020). Contemporary scholarship on decolonial religious practices highlights the importance of such symbolic re-inscriptions. Nelson Maldonado-Torres and Aníbal Quijano have emphasized that coloniality persists not only through political domination but through epistemic habits (Maldonado-Torres, 2025). Guru's mirror breaks these habits by refusing to represent the divine through inherited iconographies. It reclaims the sacred space for a different ontology—one that affirms reflective selfhood as the site of liberation. In short, the journey from Aruvippuram to Kalavamkodam is not merely a timeline of reform but a cartography of resistance. It charts how liturgical symbols can become sites of rupture, reflection, and renewal.

Guru's educational initiatives were never isolated from his broader project of social transformation; rather, they functioned as preparatory grounds for a deeper engagement with the structural roots of oppression. By fostering literacy, philosophical inquiry, and ethical self-awareness among historically excluded communities, these institutions cultivated the intellectual resources necessary to question inherited social hierarchies and envision alternative civic orders. The classroom and the ashram thus became spaces where the seeds of epistemic justice matured into a consciousness capable of confronting the entrenched legal and moral codes of caste society. It is within this continuum—from pedagogy to political ethics—that Guru's critique of caste and his vision of ethical citizenship must be understood. Its meanings were continually refracted through the lived experiences, recollections, and ritual practices of the communities that inhabited these sacred spaces. It is in these oral histories and community narratives that the symbolic revolution finds its most enduring afterlife—transmitted not as abstract philosophy, but as memory, story, and shared ritual habit.

### **7. Ritual and Memory: Oral Histories and Community Narratives**

The transformative power of Sree Narayana Guru's mirror consecration is best understood not only through textual and symbolic analysis but also through the lived experiences and oral traditions of communities shaped by it. In Kalavamkodam and surrounding regions, the mirror is not merely a ritual object but a site of memory, embodiment, and intergenerational meaning (Guha, 1982).

Field interviews conducted for this study reveal diverse interpretations and emotional connections to the mirror. Elderly devotees recall it as a moment of sacred disruption — “a time when we saw ourselves for the first time in the temple” — highlighting its affective impact on spiritual presence and selfhood. Women, in

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particular, described the mirror as enabling the reclamation of spiritual subjectivity within spaces that had historically denied them proximity to the divine (Devika, 2010). These narratives frame the mirror as a site of affective justice, suggesting that the consecration directly addressed emotional and epistemic deprivation produced by caste and gender exclusion. Through these micro-historical accounts, the mirror emerges as a living archive, remembered not only as a historical event but as an ongoing practice of ethical self-reflection.

These testimonies reinforce the understanding that Guru's intervention was revolutionary rather than merely reformist, expanding ritual authorship to those previously excluded. Within subaltern historiography, oral narratives function as counter-archives that challenge dominant historical accounts (Williams, 2025). As Veena Das suggests, historical ruptures often take root within the ordinary (Campa, 2017). In this context, the mirror becomes extraordinary precisely through everyday interaction — an object through which ethical and sacred meanings are co-constructed. Devotees often spoke of visiting the temple simply to “see the mirror,” transforming worship into an act of introspection rather than ritual offering. This quiet, reflexive engagement reflects a form of spiritual pedagogy grounded in self-recognition.

Among SNDP Yogam members, especially leadership circles, the mirror is frequently remembered as an emblem of Guru's genius but is less often discussed in theological depth (Kannan, 2012). This indicates a partial institutionalisation of memory, where reverence sometimes replaces critical interpretation. While the mirror is honoured and protected, its radical semiotic implications are not always actively engaged. At the same time, younger generations are reinterpreting its meaning. For many youths, the mirror symbolises self-worth, dignity, and ethical responsibility. In schools and community spaces, educators increasingly invoke the mirror as a metaphor for social equality, anti-caste values, and even psychological well-being. These reinterpretations revive the mirror's original provocation — one that calls not for passive devotion but for ethical accountability.

Annual commemorative rituals at Kalavamkodam demonstrate both continuity and transformation. Though the mirror remains central, ceremonies now incorporate posters, speeches, and digital tributes, reflecting its expanding symbolic reach. While such additions may dilute its metaphysical focus, they also confirm its continuing relevance as a spiritual, political, and cultural symbol. Some elderly participants expressed concern that increasing festival crowds do not necessarily lead to deeper engagement, noting that many visitors “come for the festival, but they don't stop and see.” This distinction

between seeing and beholding reflects the philosophical core of Guru's act—a call to ethical presence and inward awareness.

Unlike Gandhian ritual memory, often centred on collective action and public symbolism, Guru's legacy emphasises interior transformation. Oral narratives surrounding the mirror stress stillness and reflective solitude rather than spectacle (Galbraith and Karlin, 2012). Several interviewees compared the experience to confession — not in a strictly religious sense, but as moral self-examination. In this reading, the mirror functions as both liturgical and psychological instrument, making visible the ethical contours of the self.

Ultimately, these oral histories deepen the hermeneutics of the mirror by showing that its revolutionary significance lies in how it continues to be lived, interpreted, and transmitted across generations. The mirror at Kalavamkodam remains a relational artefact, sustained through memory, dialogue, and practice. What began as a singular theological intervention has evolved into an ongoing ethical tradition that invites inward reflection and outward action, ensuring that its historical and spiritual resonance continues to shape contemporary understandings of dignity and justice.

## **8. Contemporary Resonance: Ethics, Identity and Radical Spirituality**

Nearly a century after the Kalavamkodam mirror consecration, Sree Narayana Guru's spiritual revolution continues to reverberate in new contexts of caste, modernity, and personal identity. The mirror, as a theological and semiotic artefact, has acquired renewed significance among younger generations, particularly those navigating the intersections of faith, selfhood, and social justice in a neoliberal, digitally saturated world.

In contemporary Kerala, Guru's teachings are often invoked in the language of development, harmony, and education. However, this institutional packaging often sidelines the more disruptive aspects of his praxis—particularly his critique of priestly mediation, ritual hierarchy, and symbolic power. The mirror, in this light, becomes not only a devotional object but a diagnostic tool. It reflects not only the devotee's face but the unresolved contradictions within progressive religiosity. The image of the mirror compels a kind of silent introspection; what one sees is not merely oneself, but the ideologies and prejudices that have shaped that self. As one young SNDP activist explained during a local study circle, 'The mirror is not a symbol of comfort; it is a challenge. It shows you what you've internalised'.

Interviews with youth members of SNDP-affiliated organisations and Ambedkarite groups reveal that Guru's mirror is increasingly

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interpreted through the lens of personal empowerment, anti-caste resistance, and spiritual autonomy. Some view it as an invitation to decolonize the self, while others see it as a call to cultivate interior discipline as a political act. Several interviewees referenced the experience of standing alone before the mirror, especially during the early morning hours when no rituals are conducted, describing it as a form of ethical introspection. The metaphor of reflection resonates powerfully in an age of visual saturation, where social media increasingly shapes the gaze. In this sense, the mirror offers not just an escape from iconography, but an ethical confrontation with one's own self-construction.

Comparatively, Gandhian ethics, which stress truth, nonviolence, and *swaraj*, share with Guru a commitment to inner transformation. Yet Gandhi's spiritual framework remained tethered to traditional symbols—such as the Gita, the cow, and the spinning wheel—as vehicles for ethical insight. Guru's mirror, by contrast, avoids symbol altogether in favour of direct perception. It invokes not a message but a presence, not a form but a process. Several oral testimonies noted that while Gandhian symbolism often invoked external action—marches, spinning, fasting—Guru's symbolism implored stillness. This divergence underlines a deeper philosophical difference: Gandhi aimed for ethical harmony within civil society; Guru sought ontological clarity that transcended social form altogether.

Postcolonial theorists such as Ashis Nandy have critiqued modern India's failure to embrace spiritual dissent as political critique (Nandy, 1989). Guru's mirror can be read as precisely such dissent—refusing institutional codification, resisting representational closure, and destabilising the custodianship of the sacred. In this way, the mirror prefigures contemporary movements that seek intersectional liberation through spiritual deconstruction, from Dalit theology to queer religiosity. Several younger members of marginalised communities now use the mirror as a rhetorical device in workshops and public discussions, extending its metaphorical power beyond the temple. Thus, the mirror does not belong to the past. It continues to act—silently yet forcefully—in the moral imaginaries of those struggling for dignity, recognition, and emancipation. It whispers not doctrine, but demand: to see oneself, to see through oneself, and to recognise the sacred in that unflinching gaze.

While these contemporary engagements demonstrate the enduring ethical and symbolic potency of Guru's mirror, they also invite a reconsideration of how his praxis aligns with, and diverges from, the strategies of other reformers across India's modern history. Such a comparative frame not only contextualises the uniqueness of the mirror

consecration but also illuminates its shared concerns with broader movements for social and spiritual emancipation. It is to these comparative perspectives that the following section now turns. The next section broadens this inquiry by situating Guru's praxis within comparative perspectives on reform across India's modern history.

### **9. Comparative Perspectives on Reform**

While this study's primary focus is on Sree Narayana Guru's mirror consecration as a radical act of religious and social reform, it is instructive to situate his praxis alongside the efforts of other major reformers in colonial and postcolonial India. These comparisons illuminate both shared objectives and distinctive strategies, offering a richer understanding of the broader reformist landscape. As cited in the previous sections, Guru's interventions can be meaningfully contrasted with the reform trajectories of M.K. Gandhi, B.R. Ambedkar, and Christian missionary movements in Kerala. This comparative turn also ensures that while the mirror consecration remains the analytical centre, its significance is measured against the broader reformist experiments that shaped India's modern religious and social history.

Gandhi approached caste reform through the lens of *varna* reinterpretation and the purification of Hinduism, advocating for temple entry campaigns and gradual persuasion of orthodox institutions (Biswas, 2018). While Gandhi's methods relied on negotiating reform within the bounds of tradition, Guru's mirror consecration bypassed Brahmanical sanction entirely, enacting equality as a religious reality rather than an aspiration. This divergence underscores Guru's preference for direct symbolic transformation over incremental moral persuasion.

Ambedkar shared Guru's total rejection of caste hierarchy but pursued it through political mobilization, constitutional reform, and religious conversion to Buddhism (Gehlot, 1993). As discussed earlier, Ambedkar's strategy was rooted in state-centred legal change, whereas Guru's was cultural-symbolic, grounded in Advaitic ethical monism. Both approaches dismantled caste legitimacy, yet Guru's praxis reimagined the sacred itself as a site of emancipation rather than relocating the community's spiritual identity.

Christian missionary efforts—particularly by the London Missionary Society and Church Mission Society—provided education and some social mobility to oppressed castes such as Pulayas and Parayas. However, these interventions often carried the weight of colonial authority and cultural alienation. Guru's educational reforms, as previously detailed, paralleled the missionaries' efforts to expand

literacy but did so within an indigenous, non-conversionist framework that preserved cultural self-definition.

By situating Guru's mirror consecration within these broader currents, we see its distinctiveness: a vernacular and theological mode of reform that neither depended on colonial state endorsement nor required abandoning one's religious heritage. Instead, it achieved what might be called "immediate emancipation" through the reconfiguration of ritual space into a common of spiritual democracy.

### 10. Conclusion: Reflection as Praxis

Sree Narayana Guru's mirror consecration at Kalavamkodam stands as one of the most symbolically rich and philosophically radical gestures in the history of spiritual reform in India. Unlike the more gradualist and accommodationist strategies of mainstream reformers, Guru's act carried a quiet but seismic force. By replacing the deity with a mirror, he dismantled centuries of iconographic ritualism and caste-based custodianship of the sacred. This article has argued that the mirror functions not merely as an artefact of theological innovation but as a living critique of epistemic violence. Through a combination of semiotic, micro-historical, and oral-historical methodologies, we have examined how this act of consecration ruptured the ritual economy of caste and proposed a new metaphysics of reflection. The mirror redirects the gaze inward, compelling the devotee to encounter the divine not through intermediaries, idols, or liturgies, but through ethical self-recognition.

This philosophical core is deeply embedded in Guru's original Malayalam writings, particularly the *Atmopadesa Ćatakam* (One Hundred Verses of Self-Instruction), which affirms that self-realisation is the highest form of worship: 'Ātmāvine ātmāvidyayāḷ nirantharam pariúôdhikkuka' (Examine the self through the knowledge of the self unceasingly). Similarly, in *Daiva Dasaakam*, Guru prays for ethical clarity and interior awakening: "Njangale rakshikka enñçúwaranç... satyavum dharmavumâyi njangaḷç nâyikkçG am" (Lead us with truth and righteousness, O Lord) (Sree Narayana Guru, 2003). These verses are not ancillary to his ritual interventions—they are the philosophical soil from which they grew.

The significance of this gesture becomes sharper when placed in dialogue with Gandhian spirituality. While both Gandhi and Guru advocated for inner transformation and ethical living, their ritual idioms diverged sharply. Gandhi's symbolic universe remained tied to traditional imagery and communal mobilisation. Guru, however, ventured into a more radical terrain—where the sacred is neither performed nor preached, but reflected. The mirror thus emerges not

only as a theological statement but as a revolutionary pedagogy of self-realisation. This divergence was also reflected in their rare yet symbolically rich interactions. When Gandhi visited Sree Narayana Guru at Sivagiri in 1925, they reportedly engaged in a conversation marked by mutual respect but differing emphases. Guru, while supporting Gandhi's anti-untouchability movement, was cautious about merely moral reform that left ritual hierarchies untouched. Nearly a decade later, Gandhi's 1934 visit to the Guruvayur Temple occurred against the backdrop of the temple entry movement. Yet, despite his moral authority and advocacy for Dalit access, Gandhi did not challenge the iconographic or symbolic structures of Brahminical Hinduism. In contrast, Guru's mirror had already dismantled these from within.

The enduring resonance of Guru's mirror lies in its capacity to resist closure. It eludes institutional co-optation, theological dogma, and representational certainty. In an age marked by spiritual commodification, political instrumentalization of religion, and visual oversaturation, the mirror offers a counter-imaginary. It asks us to stand before it—not to worship an icon, but to confront the self; not to receive blessing, but to reflect responsibility. In reclaiming sacred space as reflective space, Guru not only redefined worship but reconfigured the very terms of liberation. His mirror consecration, far from being an anachronistic footnote, remains a luminous node in the cartography of spiritual dissent and ethical becoming. Its silence continues to speak—and its reflection continues to demand.

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# Gandhi, Ahimsa, and Jainism

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper examines ahimsa in Jainism and in Mahatma Gandhi's thought and actions, arguing that while both share a commitment to ahimsa in their unique ways, they are fundamentally different in terms of how they define its meanings, purposes, and paths for achieving the desired goals. In Jainism ahimsa is a personal discipline aimed at spiritual liberation (moksha), grounded in the radical equality and interdependence of all beings, and sustained through vows, equanimity, and detachment from material engagement. Gandhi's ahimsa, in contrast, emerges as an evolving moral philosophy and practice rooted in truth, love, and active social engagement. Gandhi transformed ahimsa into a method of collective resistance and social change aimed at the well-being of all (sarvodaya). Together they offer complimentary lessons for humanity's ethical and peaceful future.*

**Key words:** *Ahimsa, Nonviolence, Radical equality, Jainism, Satyagraha, Nonviolent change, Sarvodaya*

I know the Jains. I know them and the principles of their religion as intimately as I do Vaishnavism and Vaishnavas. Some in their anger believe me to be a Jain. Others in their love wish that I should become a Jain.

—M. K. Gandhi (CWMG, Vol 34, p. 23)

**A**HIMSA IS THE defining characteristic of Jainism and arguably the defining legacy of Mahatma Gandhi to humanity at large. The Jains believe Jainism to be a major influence on Gandhi. Some scholars also reinforce this view. They point out that Gandhi was exposed to Jainism as a child, in a family environment where Jain monks often visited his home. Later, exposure to Jainism continued through Gandhi's association with Shrimad Rajchandra, a scholar of Jain and Hindu

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texts (Hays 1970, pp. 29-38; Hays 1978, pp. 120-132). The interaction with other prominent Jains, such as Pranjivan Mehta, Virchand Gandhi, and Ambalal Sarabhai, has also been cited alongside the role of his parents, especially his mother, in helping Gandhi learn “practical ahimsa” (Jain 2017, pp. xiv-xv, 6).

Ahimsa is “as old as the hills,” said Gandhi. He was referring to the ancient traditions of non-violence. He certainly learned from these traditions, including Jainism. However, Gandhi’s ahimsa is fundamentally different from Jain ahimsa in terms of its meaning, purpose, and the path to achieving that purpose. That is not to say there are no similarities between the two. However, in this paper I focus only on their uniqueness and on how the two differ.

Jainism is known for the distinctive articulation of ahimsa as an ethic of personal discipline for one’s own good and salvation. Gandhi’s articulation of ahimsa is also unique. According to him ahimsa is a personal and political ethic for the good of society as a whole. He embraced ahimsa as a tenet and tactic of change and transformation, thereby becoming a pioneer of nonviolent social change. Nevertheless, the distinctive meanings, specific goals, and different paths of ahimsa in Jainism and in Gandhi are assets for humanity. Together, they offer us lessons for our own good and for the good of all.

I will first discuss the meaning and purpose of ahimsa in Jainism, as well as the prescribed path(s) to achieve that purpose. I will then discuss the singularity of Gandhi’s ahimsa, which is the primary focus of this paper.

### **Ahimsa in Jainism**

Ahimsa is recognised as a virtue in many religious traditions, but in Jainism it is regarded as “the virtue” (Jaini 1979, p. 167). It denotes non-violence or non-injury, yet its meaning extends far beyond the avoidance of physical harm. In Jain thought, violence includes intentional and unintentional harm committed through thought, word, or deed. Ahimsa, therefore, requires not only refraining from direct violence but also avoiding indirect forms such as encouraging others to commit violence or approving violence in any manner. Central to this principle is the belief that every living being (jiva) possesses an autonomous, imperishable soul characterised by consciousness and the capacity to experience pleasure and pain. The Jain understanding of ahimsa rests on the logic of equality among all living beings at the level of their souls, irrespective of physical forms, ranging from one-sense beings to five-sense beings. The Jain text *Samansuttam* expresses this foundation clearly:

Just as pain is not agreeable to you, it is so with others. Knowing this principle of equality of all beings, treat all with respect and compassion (Tukul & Dixit 1999, #150, p. 57).

Awareness of the essential sameness between oneself and other beings becomes indispensable for practising ahimsa. Since all beings desire life and none desire death (Mahapragya 1994, pp. 9-14, 216-217), Jainism upholds the sanctity of life and views non-violence as essential for one's spiritual well-being and growth (Tukul & Dixit 1999, #148, 149, p. 57). Ahimsa is rooted in the philosophy of *anekânta*, an epistemological tool for understanding reality in its multiple dimensions (Sethia 2004, p. 6). Knowledge plays a vital role in distinguishing between what is beneficial and what is harmful to the self. Unlike traditions where violence is primarily understood as harm inflicted on others, Jainism holds that violence toward others is simultaneously violence toward the self. Such conduct obstructs one's spiritual progress and the pursuit of moksha, the ultimate goal of liberation in Jainism (Jaini 1979, p. 167). Consequently, discussions of violence and non-violence in Jainism proceed from the perspective of the soul's welfare and salvation.

The soul, according to Jain philosophy, undergoes continuous change between ignorance and omniscience depending on purity and impurity shaped by karma. Accumulation of karma results from attachment (*raaga*) and aversion (*dwesha*), binding the soul to the cycle of rebirth. Liberation requires overcoming these passions through detachment from worldly engagements and the removal of karmic matter. The realization of the fully liberated soul (*siddha-hood*), characterized by pure consciousness, represents moksha. This state is attained through the practice of ahimsa and equanimity (*samata*) under all conditions (Jaini 1979, p. 224). The Jain aspirational ideal expresses this disposition:

I seek forgiveness from all and I forgive all. May I have amity with all beings and enmity with none" (Jaini 2000, pp. 17-18).

The practice of equanimity in Jainism is aimed at one's spiritual well-being as a self-centered goal rather than motivated by altruistic purpose of "social fellow-feeling" (Wiley 2004, p. 16). Nevertheless, Jain thought simultaneously emphasises interdependence among all forms of life. The dictum "*Parasparopagraho Jivanam*" affirms that souls support one another in mutual interdependence. Acharya Umasvati interprets this as an ethically grounded relationship binding living beings together (Tatia 1994, p. 131). Such a worldview promotes

ecological harmony, where life is celebrated as “a gift of togetherness, accommodation, and assistance in a universe teeming with interdependent constituents” (Singhvi 2006, p. 217). Thus, non-violence toward others ultimately contributes to one’s own spiritual progress (Tukul & Dixit 1999, #151, p. 57).

Understanding ahimsa is insufficient without practice. Ahimsa develops through self-discipline and sustained training (Kanakprabha 2003, pp. 166-167). Jainism prescribes a structured system of vows — the great vows (mahavratas) and small vows (anuvratas) — that limit passions and reduce the influx of karma, thereby assisting the soul’s progress toward liberation (Jaini 1979, p. 170). Fasting is another important practice for cultivating self-control and purifying the soul. Through fasting, practitioners gradually diminish and overcome attachment and aversion. In rare cases, fasting may extend until death in the practice known as Sallekhana or Santhara, which means “thinning one’s own body and passions.” This vow represents the ultimate form of ahimsa in Jainism, symbolizing total detachment from material concerns, including bodily nourishment. Its purpose is to achieve equanimity and to “guard and nurture” the soul (Jaini 2000, pp. 16-17). Sallekhana is understood as a conscious realization of the distinction between the transient body and the eternal soul and is regarded as the “most auspicious way” to end life. Yet it remains controversial in modern debates, with critics viewing it as self-violence (BBC News 2015; Frontline/The Hindu 2015).

Despite practical disciplines, Jainism holds that there is no limit to the practice of ahimsa. As Umaswati states, “Non-violence is unlimited, tolerance unconditional, and reverence for life supreme” (Tatia 1994, p. xxi). Genuine ahimsa requires relinquishing attachments and renouncing hostility (Jaini 2004, pp. 55, 59). While Jainism distinguishes between intentional violence and accidental or unavoidable harm necessary for survival, violence is never morally endorsed, and the tradition does not accommodate ideas such as “just war” (Tatia 1994, p. xxi).

In sum, ahimsa in Jainism is distinctive because it is grounded in the radical equality of all beings, regardless of their forms, and frames non-violence as beneficial to one’s own spiritual progress. It functions as a creed and disciplined way of life built on the logic that violence toward others is violence toward oneself, while non-violence toward others benefits the self. This ethical framework encourages restraint and discourages harm.

At the same time, ahimsa in Jainism is marked by depth and comprehensiveness. It is all-encompassing, without conditions or limits, demanding mindfulness in thought, speech, and action.

Although its primary aim is spiritual liberation, its implications extend beyond the individual, shaping social conduct and ecological awareness. By encouraging reverence for all life, restraint in consumption, and sensitivity toward all beings, Jainism offers an ecological vision that supports conservation and sustainability (Kumar 2002, pp. 187-188; Chapple 2002).

### **Gandhi's Ahimsa**

Gandhi does not appear to have followed any single traditional formulation of ahimsa. According to Bhikhu Parekh, his reinterpretation departed significantly from inherited meanings and even upset many contemporaries, including the Jains (Parekh 1988, p. 200). Parekh aptly placed Gandhi's ahimsa "in a class by itself" (Parekh 1988, p. 214). The distinctiveness of Gandhi's ahimsa lies in its meanings, roles, purposes, and methods. It functioned not merely as a moral ideal but as both principle and practice, a personal discipline as well as a political strategy. Unlike Jain ahimsa, which is primarily tied to individual's spiritual liberation, Gandhi transformed ahimsa into a dynamic and socially engaged ethic aimed at reform and collective transformation.

The singularity of Gandhi's ahimsa may be explained through three broad features. First, it was continuously evolving. Its roots lay in diverse experiences: personal encounters with violence, exposure to religious and philosophical traditions, and extensive reading. Through experience and experimentation, Gandhi defined "Ahimsa is not merely a negative state of harmlessness, but it is a positive state of love..." (SWMG Vol. 6, p. 153). This understanding of ahimsa gradually expanded from service to the Indian community in South Africa to the struggle for swaraj in India, and eventually toward sarvodaya, the welfare of all humanity.

Second, Gandhi's ahimsa became a living philosophy. Gandhi tested it through practical experiments in the context of his political struggles. He activated ahimsa as its exemplar. His example enabled others to witness its practical power and inspired them to participate in collective action grounded in this moral discipline. Ahimsa thus emerged as a lived reality rather than an abstract ideal.

Third, Gandhi's ahimsa possessed a transformative and revolutionary character. He demonstrated non-violence as a powerful instrument for social and political change. Calling it "the weapon of the strong," he applied it through moral persuasion, constructive work, and satyagraha. These methods were revolutionary in scale and impact, inspiring global movements against authoritarianism, injustice, and exploitation.

The above three aspects made Gandhi's ahimsa singular and also different from Jainism as revealed across the following major phases of his life. In the process he framed ahimsa as a personal and political ethic, a tenet and tactic of reform and transformation.

## I

Gandhi was not born with a commitment to ahimsa. Although he grew up in a culturally eclectic environment shaped in part by vegetarian tradition, there is little evidence that nonviolence guided his early life. On the contrary, Gandhi later admitted that he consciously experimented with meat-eating, justified it through readings such as the *Manusmriti*, and even considered it his "moral duty" to kill insects or snakes (Gandhi 1957, pp. 20–21, 34). Even his vow to abstain from meat before traveling to England reflected obedience to his mother rather than conviction; he still believed meat gave strength and felt "every Indian should be a meat-eater" (Gandhi 1957, pp. 23, 48).

Yet, the seeds of his ahimsa lay in his early fascination with truth and its exemplar, King Harishchandra, which deeply influenced him:

The play Harishchandra captured my heart. I could never be tired of seeing it...I must have acted Harishchandra to myself times without number... To follow truth and to go through all the ordeals Harishchandra went through was the one ideal it inspired in me"(Gandhi 1957, p. 7).

Truth gradually became for Gandhi a "sovereign principle" and eventually equivalent to God (SWMG, Vol. 6, pp. 98–99). Stories such as *Shravana Pritibhakta Nataka* reinforced ideals of duty and selfless service, leaving an "indelible impression" on him (Gandhi 1957, p. 7). Another formative moment occurred when he confessed adolescent thefts to his father. His father's "sublime forgiveness" revealed the moral power of love and forgiveness (Gandhi 1957, p. 28). These early experiences planted the ideals of truth, duty, and love that later shaped his principle and practice of ahimsa.

## II

Truth remained Gandhi's guiding ideal. He later acknowledged, "In fact, it was in the course of my pursuit of truth... I discovered non-violence" (Gandhi 1936, p. 49). His ethical transformation deepened during his years in England, where he embraced vegetarianism as a moral principle rather than a family custom. Reading Henry Salt's, A

*Plea for Vegetarianism* opened new ethical horizons; he described it as “a great discovery in my search after truth” (CWMG, Vol. 54, pp. 188–189). Further readings—Anna Kingsford’s *The Perfect Way in Diet* and Howard Williams’ *The Ethics of Diet* — reinforced a moral view of food and human responsibility toward animals. These readings convinced Gandhi that vegetarianism represented an ethical duty. He joined the London Vegetarian Society, served on its Executive Committee, and wrote articles promoting vegetarianism (Gandhi 1957, pp. 55–56; Bhattacharya 1965, p. 1). What had begun as obedience to his mother evolved into life-long ethical commitment to vegetarianism.

During this period Gandhi also encountered religious texts that deepened his moral horizons. Edwin Arnold’s *The Song Celestial* introduced him to the *Gita*, which he regarded as “the book par excellence for the knowledge of Truth.” Arnold’s *The Light of Asia* acquainted him with the Buddha’s compassion, while the New Testament and the Sermon on the Mount introduced him to ideals of love and forgiveness (Gandhi 1957, p. 68). These influences expanded his understanding of truth and compassion and gradually shaped his emerging conception of ahimsa.

### III

Returning to India, Gandhi encountered two individuals who redirected his life. His meeting with Shrimad Rajchandra, a Jain thinker, deeply inspired his intellectual and spiritual trajectory. Gandhi admired Rajchandra’s integrity and intellect and saw in him a “real seeker of truth” (Gandhi 1957, pp. 88–90). Rajchandra later became Gandhi’s spiritual guide.

Another formative event was his humiliating encounter with the British political agent Charles Ollivant. Attempting to help his brother, Gandhi was dismissed and removed from the office. The episode wounded his dignity but taught him a lasting lesson about ethical independence and personal integrity (Rudolph & Rudolph 1983, pp. 88–89). This changed Gandhi’s professional trajectory and pushed him to accept an opportunity in South Africa, where his ahimsa continued to mature over a period of twenty-one years.

### IV

South Africa proved decisive in shaping Gandhi’s ahimsa. Personal experiences of racial discrimination and violence forced him to confront systemic injustice. During a period of spiritual crisis, he sought guidance from Rajchandra, who encouraged deeper study of Hinduism and

introduced the idea of *ahimsa parmo dharma*. Rajchandra explained moksha as liberation through withdrawal from worldly affairs, but Gandhi rejected disengagement, choosing instead active involvement in the politics of South Africa (Gandhi, R. 2013, p. 102).

Witnessing racial oppression convinced Gandhi that violence produces only more violence. Influenced by Dadabhai Naoroji's counsel to oppose evil with love (Rolland 2002, p. 7) and earlier moral teachings about returning good for evil (Gandhi, R. 2013, p. 102), he searched for a moral alternative. Leo Tolstoy's writings proved transformative. Tolstoy's ethic of universal love persuaded Gandhi that love was the only effective resistance to injustice, making him "a firm believer in ahimsa" (Iyer 1983, pp. 179, 221; Gandhi 1957, p. 160). Gandhi thus defined ahimsa in dual terms: positively as the "largest love" and negatively as non-injury.

Reading Plato's *Apology* reinforced the idea that one should choose suffering rather than inflicting it (Parel 2009, p. xlvii; Parel 2006, pp. 117–118). South Africa became the testing ground for putting these ideas into action. He founded the Natal Indian Congress (1894), used publications such as "Grievances of Indians in South Africa," and later launched *Indian Opinion* (1903) to mobilize resistance campaign rooted in truth and love (Dalton 1993, p. 12).

John Ruskin's *Unto the Last* inspired Gandhi's vision of community and social equality. Translating it as *Sarvodaya*, he embraced the principle that individual good lies in the good of all (Gandhi 1957, pp. 297–300). He established the Phoenix Settlement in 1904 to experiment with simplicity, shared living, and self-discipline.

The year 1906 marked a major turning point. Gandhi's observations of British repression during the Zulu campaign strengthened his belief in the futility of violence. Seeking moral discipline, he re-engaged with the *Gita*, explored Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra*, adopted brahmacharya (celibacy) to channel his energy into service, and to strengthen his soul-force (Howard 2013).

These developments culminated in the resistance campaign against the "Black Act." Gandhi had discovered a method for "securing the redress of wrongs" through non-violence (SWMG, Vol. 5, p. 389), which he called satyagraha or "holding on to truth." Gandhi described it as "a weapon of the strong," a "truth force, love force or the soul force" (SWMG Vol. 5, pp. 391, 397). Influenced by Thoreau's civil disobedience, he contrasted satyagraha with brute force in *Hind Swaraj*. Gandhi's South African movement (1906–1914) used dialogue, negotiation, non-cooperation, and civil disobedience, culminating in the Epic March of 1913 (SWMG, Vol. 3).

By the time he left South Africa, Gandhi had forged ahimsa into a

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method of political action. His signature strategy of satyagraha combined the ethics of truth and nonviolence, which he would further refine in his pursuit of swaraj in India.

## V

For Gandhi, swaraj meant more than political independence. “If we become free, India is free...It is swaraj when we learn to rule ourselves” (Gandhi 1909, p. 71). Self-rule required mastery over passions and was therefore grounded in ahimsa. Freedom, he argued, would never come through arms but through “soul-force” (Gandhi 1909, p. 110).

Returning to India in 1915, Gandhi founded the Satyagraha Ashram to train practitioners in truth and non-violence. Truth, he held, was foundational: “the vow of truth includes all others” (SWMG, Vol. 5, p. 449). Yet his ahimsa was pragmatic rather than absolute. He acknowledged moral dilemmas, arguing that killing a suffering animal might sometimes be “non-violent” if done for its welfare (Gandhi 1932, pp. 72–75). During World War I, Gandhi supported the British war effort, reasoning that true non-violence required strength, not weakness. He acknowledged: “...sometimes practice of ahimsa may even necessitate killing...Ahimsa is the renunciation of the highest type...Ahimsa is a renunciation out of strength, and not out of weakness.” (SWMG, Vol. 5, pp. 386–387).

Gandhi’s approach to war and ahimsa was prompted by his politics at that time. Up until early 1919 Gandhi continued to have faith in British sense of fairness and justice (Fischer 1982, p. 57).

## VI

Post-war events shattered this faith. Economic hardship, the Rowlatt Acts, and the Amritsar Massacre convinced Gandhi that cooperation with the empire was untenable. He embraced non-cooperation and deepened his commitment to ahimsa. He famously declared: “Non-violence is the Law of our Species, as violence is the Law of the Brute...The dignity of man requires obedience to a higher law—to the strength of the spirit.” (SWMG, Vol. 6, pp. 156–157).

Non-cooperation became both moral duty and political strategy. Gandhi emphasized that it required “greatest love with the greatest opposition to wrong” (SWMG, Vol. 6, p. 178). When violence erupted at Chauri Chaura, he suspended the movement, demonstrating his insistence that means must remain nonviolent.

During the 1920s, Gandhi deepened his spiritual discipline through fasting and constructive work. He wrote: “I contemplate a mental

and therefore a moral opposition to immoralities...The resistance of the soul...would at first dazzle him and last compel recognition..." (SWMG, Vol. 6, p. 176).

His vision expanded from *swaraj* to *poorna swaraj* and *sarvodaya*, emphasizing national unity, self-reliance, and service to the poor. He regarded *ahimsa* as essential for achieving the "highest good" (SWMG, Vol. 6, pp. 162, 230).

Amid growing political violence and economic crisis, Gandhi conceived the Salt Satyagraha as a mass demonstration of nonviolent power. He explained the injustices of the salt tax (CWMG, Vol. 48, pp. 349–350) and informed Viceroy Irwin of his intentions in advance, embodying transparency and truth. On the eve of the march, he declared:

We have resolved to utilize all our resources in the pursuit of an exclusively non-violent struggle. Let no one commit a wrong in anger... (SWMG, Vol. 6, p. 25).

Despite his arrest, the movement continued. At Dharasana Salt Works, satyagrahis displayed remarkable discipline under brutal repression, revealing non-violence as a moral force stronger than state violence. The campaign gained global attention and established Gandhi as a pioneer of non-violent social change.

Through these phases, Gandhi's *ahimsa* evolved from a personal search for truth into a comprehensive ethic combining love, discipline, and political action. Its uniqueness lay in its experimental nature, its transformation into a living philosophy, and its revolutionary impact. By integrating truth and non-violence into a coherent method of action, Gandhi demonstrated that moral principles could reshape politics and society.

## VII

Gandhi's faith in non-violence grew as he saw the satyagrahis who had kept the campaign nonviolent. Reassured by the success of the Salt Satyagraha, Gandhi's approach to World War II differed from his stand during World War I. He felt duty-bound to protest all violence and wars. He accepted the Congress's request to lead the nation in 1940 once again, on the condition that it wholeheartedly accept disciplined nonviolent resistance. In his writings and speeches Gandhi repeatedly emphasized his duty to speak against the war which was "brutalizing" humanity. He publicly condemned the war policies of the axis and the allied powers alike and made an open appeal to every

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Englishmen for denouncing violence and war, while embracing non-violence:

This is no appeal made by a man who does not know his business. I have been practicing with scientific precision non-violence and its possibilities for an unbroken period of fifty years. I have applied it in every walk of my life...I know of no single case in which it has failed...My non-violence demands universal love, and you are not a small part of it. It is that love which has prompted my appeal to you. (SWMG, Vol 5, p. 249).

Gandhi launched a limited satyagraha he called Individual Civil Disobedience (ICD). He carefully directed the ICD, chose its commanders, selected the participants who would follow all the instructions to keep the movement peaceful and non-violent. Invoking the right to free speech, Gandhi devised a campaign slogan, "It is wrong to help the British war effort with men and money. The only worthy effort is to resist all wars with non-violent resistance" (CWMG, Vol79, p. 361). Framing the ICD simultaneously *against* war and *for* global peace enabled Gandhi to gain the support of all those who opposed the war beyond India, thus creating a precedent for non-violent protest movements against war and in favor of peace. Gandhi's focus on non-violence as an essential element for the well-being of humanity as a whole made the ICD a powerful symbol of peace and opposition to war on the international stage.

## VIII

The biggest challenge to Gandhi's ahimsa came in the year leading to India's freedom and partition. Gandhi anticipated "it would be on the question of Hindu-Muslim unity that my ahimsa would be put to its severest test, and that the question presented the widest field for my experiments in ahimsa" (Gandhi 1957, p. 441). The unprecedented communal violence in India, following Jinnah's declaration of Direct Action Day, had become contagious. Noakhali, a Muslim-majority district in eastern Bengal, was one of the worst-affected regions. In an environment charged with terror and suspicion, Gandhi, who had just turned 77, embarked on a painstaking journey of peace-making among people who were both victims and perpetrators of violence. He persuaded them to pray and protect one another even when he encountered direct threats to his life (Pyarelal 1956). Following his success in Noakhali, Gandhi took the peace mission to Bihar, where Hindus were killing thousands of Muslims avenging the deaths of

Hindus in Noakhali. Gandhi lived with Hindus and Muslims, modeling ahimsa—as love, empathy, trust, and forgiveness. Within days of Gandhi’s arrival in Bihar, there were signs of remorse among Hindus who confessed their crimes, returned stolen goods, and surrendered their arms. Gandhi’s ahimsa had transformed the people of Noakhali and Bihar, infusing them with both fearlessness and forgiveness. It liberated them from seeking revenge, thus breaking the cycle of violence.

Calcutta, however, remained in the grips of chronic communal violence for nearly a year. The “Great Calcutta Killing” had resulted in the death of four thousand and injuring more than ten thousand over a four-day period (August 16-20, 1946). Neither the local police nor the military could restore peace and order. Gandhi’s daring experiments demonstrated creative expression of his ahimsa-in-action. He collaborated with the chief minister of Bengal Hussain Shaheed Suhrawardy. The two lived together in a display of Hindu-Muslim brotherhood at the Haidari Mansion in Beliaghata, at the center of terror-traumatized city. This experiment first provoked the Hindus who attacked the mansion. Gandhi disarmed them through his non-violence, allowed them to express their emotions and vent their grievances. Then he counseled them with love and empathy. The experiment had a therapeutic impact on the Hindus and Muslims alike and kept Calcutta free from violence for the next several days.

However, peace was short-lived. The outbreak of violence in Punjab in the aftermath of partition became contagious, and Calcutta was once again caught in the frenzy of violence. Gandhi knew the moment had come for his greatest experiment in ahimsa and for testing his conviction, “The law of satyagraha knows no defeat” (CWMG, Vol.77, p. 50). In what became the last few months of his life, Gandhi attempted to muster all his spiritual strength to mitigate the impact of unprecedented communal violence following partition.

On September 1 Gandhi announced a fast unto death (SWMG Vol 6, p. 218), commencing the same evening until the return of peace to Calcutta. A fast, according to Gandhi is “the last weapon in the armory of the votary of Ahimsa. When human ingenuity fails, the votary fasts...” (SWMG, Vol 6, p.218). Inspired by Gandhi’s utmost dedication to truth and non-violence, the fast had a positive impact on all parties. Hindus and Muslims came to Gandhi, surrendered their weapons, confessed their complicity in the violence, repented for the pain and destruction they had caused, and wept. They pledged not to do the same again, and many joined Gandhi in a twenty-four-hour fast. Within three days the city appeared transformed. But the fast did not end. It was only when the most influential leaders in the city

representing the various constituencies of the Hindu Muslim communities pleaded with Gandhi and pledged their commitment to keep Calcutta free from riots, that Gandhi was convinced by their social responsibility and concluded his fast with a warning that if they broke their pledge or failed in their commitment, he would undertake “an irrevocable fast.” The people who came to see him and took responsibility for peacekeeping in the city became the precursors of the Shanti Sena, or peace army. Acknowledging the power Gandhi carried with the people, Lord Mountbatten, the last Viceroy of India, said, “In the Punjab we have 55,000 soldiers and large-scale rioting on our hands. In Bengal, our forces consist of one man, and there is no rioting. (CWMG, Vol. 96, p. 303).

While Calcutta experienced peace, communal carnage continued in the north. When Gandhi arrived in Delhi on September 9, 1947, he learned communal riots had transformed it into “a city of the dead.” He worked tirelessly to restore peace in the city. Harmony was essential not only for the Hindu-Muslim communities to co-exist peacefully, but also for the new neighboring nations. Gandhi was concerned about already deteriorating relations between India and Pakistan over Kashmir, which reached its peak point at the start of 1948. Complicating the conflict was the issue of Pakistan’s share of the cash balances from undivided India. If India and Pakistan could settle their differences, Gandhi was convinced, it would positively affect Hindu-Muslim relations (Lal 1989, pp. 171-191).

In Gandhi’s view, democracy in India could be measured by how it treats its minorities. How could India otherwise ask Pakistan to deal fairly with the Hindus and Sikhs there? Deeply distressed, Gandhi decided to fast. The fast commenced on January 13. Gandhi explained the context of the fast and the conditions that would have to be met before he would end it. (Lal 1989, p.175). When all the conditions were met to Gandhi’s satisfaction, including the payment of the pending amount India owed to Pakistan, and a signed written pledge from representatives of various constituencies to establish communal harmony in Delhi and welcome the Muslims back into the city, Gandhi concluded the fast on January 18 with a caveat that he would fast again if the pledges were violated. Gandhi regarded this as his “greatest fast,” one that brought him “higher happiness.”

As in Jainism, fasts were an integral part of Gandhi’s practice of ahimsa. However, fasts had a specific purpose for Gandhi and were undertaken to achieve variety of objectives. At a personal level, a fast for Gandhi was the highest form of prayer, a means of self-purification, and a source of spiritual strength and good health. At the political level, fast was a form of satyagraha, and fast unto death, the ultimate

form of satyagraha. Gandhi used fasts as “language of the heart” to appeal to people’s conscience for positive transformation. Apart from his regular fasts for personal reasons, Gandhi undertook seventeen fasts as satyagraha. These fasts ranged from a twenty-four-hour fast to a twenty-one-day fast. Each of these was aimed at a specific goal and was undertaken against specific people.

The Calcutta and Delhi fasts, undertaken as satyagraha against his own people are regarded as the most powerful fasts. They awakened Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs who were blinded by communal hatred. The Delhi fast infused a sense of ethics and just politics into the Indian government’s attitude toward Pakistan, persuading it to pay Pakistan its rightful share in the wealth of pre-partition India. It also persuaded people at the time to end communal violence.

Unlike fasts which the Jains undertake for their own spiritual growth aimed at progress toward moksha, Gandhi’s fasts were aimed at building his soul-force to serve the cause of social justice and unity, and to address the wrongs. He used fasts to transform people’s hearts, build trust among them, and foster social harmony and peace.

Gandhi’s fasts in the face of communal carnage in the final months of his life became the finest testament to the transformative power of his ahimsa. His experiments to muster all his spiritual strength to stop the violence in its tracks and heal its victims and perpetrators alike demonstrated the miraculous power of ahimsa. These experiments attested to the fact, “violence ceases in the presence of non-violence” (Parel 2006, p. 118).

Gandhi’s application of non-violence to a mass movement that led to the largest change effort in history became a model. It inspired numerous movements across the political, social, economic, and ecological spheres, as well as leaders around the world. The nonviolent revolutions of the twentieth century owe significantly to Gandhi’s ideas and methods (Ackerman & Duvall, 2000). In India alone hundreds of non-governmental organizations are inspired by Constructive Program while undertaking satyagraha as a protest for injustice and exploitation (Sethia 2013, p. 2). Gandhi has been a singular influence on the global recognition of nonviolence as a force for achieving peace and justice, and on the development of pacifist movements aimed at rejecting war and violence. It has inspired leaders around the world (Sethia, 2005). In his “Pilgrimage to Non-violence” Martin Luther King, Jr. noted, “It was in this Gandhian emphasis on love and non-violence that I discovered the method for social reform ....” (King, 1958). Gandhi’s reliance on ahimsa inspired certain new fields of study and brought new insights and perspectives to

established disciplines. His non-violence has been a catalyst for example, in the emergence of new fields of study such as non-violence studies, peace studies, conflict resolution studies, and reverential ecology. (Sethia 2012, pp.158-175).

The singularity of Gandhi's ahimsa is apparent through the various phases of his life. Throughout his life, Gandhi demonstrated ahimsa as an evolutionary process. During these phases and through his own initiatives, Gandhi showed that ahimsa can be embraced, learned, developed, and refined. He did not simply adopt and accept the ideas he came across from diverse sources. Rather, he experimented with them, developed them further, and integrated them into his principle and practice of ahimsa in response to the challenges he encountered. In the process, his ahimsa evolved in terms of its nature, scale, and scope. Over time, it became a common thread seamlessly connecting his life and work, his thoughts and actions.

Gandhi's ahimsa is unique because he made it a living philosophy. His life became his message. Gandhi espoused and embodied ahimsa as its exemplar, inspiring the satyagrahis, who in turn became moral models for the masses. His integrity of thought and action allowed him to garner the people's support for his movements. He led by example demonstrating his dedication to ahimsa for which he sacrificed his life.

Finally, Gandhi's ahimsa was revolutionary and transformative in nature. He enabled people to experience the pragmatic power of non-violence and to demonstrate it to the world. His own practice of ahimsa against the colonial state, his own people, and his own government proved a powerful force for social change and transformation, for peace and harmony. Thus, for Gandhi ahimsa was a transforming force for the individual, community, and the body politic. And it became a "force more powerful" for peoples' movements around the world. The global impact of Gandhi's ahimsa was also revolutionary, giving voice to the voiceless, power to the powerless, and hope to the hopeless (Ackerman & Duvall, 2000).

### **Conclusion**

In this paper, I have attempted to highlight the distinctiveness of ahimsa in Jainism and of Gandhi's ahimsa. The two, I have suggested, are fundamentally different. In Jainism, Ahimsa is the virtue of virtues, however complex and deep in its practical implications, tied to the goal of *moksha*. Yet the logic, non-violence to others is non-violence to the self (and thereby good for one's soul) offers an incentive to us to be nonviolent. Similarly, violence to others is violence to the self and thereby detrimental to the soul, serves as a deterrent to violence. The

rationale for ahimsa in Jainism is the equality of living beings at the level of their souls, notwithstanding their physical forms. Such a radical notion of equality calls for more sensitivity on our part not just toward humans and animals, but toward the entire ecosystem.

For Gandhi, however, ahimsa is not a “cloistered virtue” to be practiced for salvation. Instead, ahimsa is a “rule of conduct” for society to preserve human dignity. Gandhi’s ahimsa is a “panacea for all evils.” For him, ahimsa had different roles. Sometimes he felt that ahimsa is an end, and other times, ahimsa is the means. For example, he saw truth as an end and non-violence as the means. But he also saw the two as “the same thing,” or as “convertible terms.” Unlike Jainism, which guides us to follow ahimsa to attain *moksha*, Gandhi’s ahimsa is aimed at a more just, more humane world here and now. He charted and followed varied experimental paths to these goals which were not firmly set for all times but were context specific.

In Jainism there is no limit to the practice of ahimsa, and it can be achieved in its absolute sense. Jainism does not condone any kind of violence or war. Gandhi held that there are limits to the practice of ahimsa and justified violence and war under certain circumstances. In Jainism, Ahimsa grows as one increasingly detaches from the outside world and reduces one’s engagement with it. However, Gandhi’s practice of ahimsa grew with an increasing degree of engagement with the world, especially the world of politics. Ahimsa is necessary in Jainism for one’s own spiritual good, leading to the final goal of *moksha*. Gandhi’s ahimsa is altruistic, aimed at the good of all, *sarvodaya*. Similarly, fasts in Jainism are aimed at purifying the soul in its journey toward salvation. For Gandhi fasts were political tools for transformation, in addition to purifying the soul, for ending conflict and violence, among others.

Ahimsa has different goals in Jainism and for Gandhi requiring different paths. However, both Jainism and Gandhi offer us valuable lessons in ahimsa. Together, they can guide us in living a better life and in helping create a better society and a shared peaceful future.

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# When Learning Forgets to Think: The Crisis of Indian Higher Education

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## ABSTRACT

*The article examines transformations in India's higher education system through the lenses of Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, and conflict theory. By drawing on concepts such as power, discipline, governmentality, and assemblages from Foucault and Deleuze, it examines some of the ramifications of the liberalisation drives of the 1990s, which have effectively transformed universities, in particular, and higher education in India, in general, into a techno-economic apparatus serving market rationalities. It traces how knowledge production and institutional structures have been reorganised following neoliberal logic to suit profitability and standardisation, marginalising critical thinking and intellectual freedom.*

**Key words:** Higher Education, Neoliberalism, Privatisation, Deleuze, Power, Governmentality

NO ONE DISPUTES that a university is a social assemblage of heterogeneous elements, a living constellation of discourse, people, bodies, technologies and affects that together produce and disseminate knowledge. It is not merely an institution or a system of relationships but a living ecosystem that constantly reconfigures ways of seeing, thinking, and living. Nevertheless, for such an assemblage to be continually creative, it must be an open system, with its roots anchored in a vital principle, freedom – and not as an abstract ideal but as the vital force of becoming. However, such freedom is lacking in the Indian context, as hierarchical management practices and socio-economic

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stratification effectively constrain it.

The present article argues that higher education institutions should be reorganised as an open system, where everyone, regardless of their social or economic status, has access and functions as sites of “critical intensities” towards life in general and specific disciplines.

This article unfolds in three mutually supporting movements. The first maps the affective and institutional terrains of higher education in India – the uncertainties, anxieties, alienation, and loss of meaning – through ethnographic research and my personal teaching experiences in private universities. Affects such as fear, ambition, shame, and hope, together with the institutional terrain, state apparatuses, bureaucratic hierarchies, marketisation, privatisation, and the temporal ordering of life on campuses, form the biopolitical assemblage. Drawing on my experience in private universities, the work examines how managerial logics and profit-oriented, top-down assemblages carefully restrict freedom on campus. The second section examines the broad architecture of higher education in India, its regulatory regimes, bureaucratic strata, and the circulation of authority. The third examines the comparative lines of flight through reforms, particularly in the US, UK, Germany, and Italy, and explores alternative formations of structures, governance, and authorities for Indian higher education.

## I

In the early 20th century, the Indian higher education system was a small, elite formation. In 1916-17, there were only four engineering colleges in India, with a total annual intake of 75 students. Post-independent India reconfigured it into a vast assemblage of power, knowledge, and governance – a dynamic ecology that (re)creates ways of seeing, thinking, and living. One of the central projects of nation-building during that time was not only the production of professionals to administer different aspects of life but also the creation of a particular kind of subject – the rational, responsible, and developmental citizen. Guided by Prime Minister Nehru’s emphasis on scientific temper, higher education became the biopolitical apparatus that regulates thought, conduct and aspirations. Nehru wrote: “The ‘search, inquiry and applying’ of mind and the ‘search by experience and reasoning’...are the ways of training the mind to look at life and the whole social structure.”<sup>1</sup>

Introducing the ideals of rationality and social responsibility to the people through education, he thought, would lead them to evolve into responsible citizens, who, in turn, would use their skills for the welfare of all. Nehru had envisaged that the Indian mind’s encounter

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with scientific temper and reason is inseparable from its “tryst with destiny.” Consequently, knowledge production was simultaneously integrated into the governance of life itself and the nation-building process, and higher education became an ecological assemblage—a web of discourse, institutions, bureaucracies, experts, and desires devised to translate and interpret the state’s visions into everyday discourses, practices, and aspirations.

However, a recent mutation of power has transformed the assemblage from within, as a rational and emancipatory orientation in higher education is largely replaced by a neoliberal assemblage of metrics, managerialism, and market logics. The scientific temper, once directed to free the mind, is now replaced with a technocratic rationality that measures, ranks, and disciplines thought.

Contemporary India is undergoing a profound reorganisation of social and affective life, as vast sections of society are drawn towards the rhythms of capitalist modernity, reshaping power, desire, and economy; it affects every aspect of life. Consequently, the market is not merely an economic structure but also a web of institutions, discourses, practices, and affects that constantly shape what individuals aspire to, how they relate to themselves and others, and how they imagine freedom itself.

The glitter of the market and the glamour of consumerism form a seductive regime of signs promising emancipation, and the celebration of choice and individuality hides the new rationale of discipline. Within the neoliberal logic of control, competition, productivity, and self-optimisation are the new normal. The subject is not controlled through coercion but governed through desires; with the compulsion to consume and to improve, freedom becomes performative. The privatisation of higher education is an important node within this broader social assemblage. Within this assemblage, in universities, knowledge is reterritorialised to capital, with learning becoming an investment and education viewed as an enterprise. Besides, universities serve as a crucial site for developing and interpreting neoliberal ideologies and for translating economic rationalities into pedagogical forms. Power mutates within this configuration, from strict hierarchies to diffused control.

Of the 1,338 universities in India, 361 are privately owned, most of which have proliferated in the last decade – sprouting across the landscape like nodes in a rapidly expanding assemblage of people, capital, infrastructure, governance, and desires. This proliferation signals the consolidation of what Foucault would call “a new regime of power/knowledge,” in which universities serve as sites for the production and dissemination of market rationalities. These webs of

universities function as neoliberal apparatuses of governmentality, cultivating self-managing subjects who treat curiosity as mere credentials. The discourse of “excellence”, “efficiency”, and “innovation” functions as a technology of control, normalising entrepreneurial subjectivity as the ideal form of citizenship. From a Deleuzian perspective, this growing network of private institutions constitutes a dynamic assemblage of people, discourses, institutions, infrastructures, governance, practices, and desires. This web of universities, as an assemblage, is a site where desire is coded and decoded, directed and redirected within the broader social assemblage of capitalist formations.

Higher education in India is undergoing deeper transformations in the assemblages of power and knowledge. These transformations are not isolated; instead, they are part of a broader reshaping of governance, desire, and subjectivity. Although they are peculiar to societies in transition, if they are not addressed with the insight and foresight they deserve, they will have long-lasting consequences for society. What appear as “disturbing signs” as a result of these transformations in social assemblages are, in Foucauldian terms, effects of new technologies of power—the dynamic forces that reshape how learning, merit, and freedom are understood and lived. If left unchallenged, these transformations will shape how future generations think about, relate to, and imagine their place in society. For this reason, the reterritorialisation of the profit-oriented assemblage of the educational field is necessary to reclaim education as a site of critical thought and collective becoming.

A vast majority of private higher education institutions operate according to market logics, where learning is subordinated to profitability and institutions are managed as competitive enterprises. Recent media reports highlight the challenges posed by the profit-driven market model, as 30 engineering colleges in the state of Karnataka are set to close soon due to financial difficulties. The fact is that some of these institutions have been listed for sale through various internet platforms. Following a study of college intake over the past five years across the country undertaken by the All-India Council for Technical Education (AICTE), India Today reported in September 2017 that 800 engineering colleges were at risk of shutdown. This is indeed one indicator to judge the severity of the evolving scenario.

There are not enough discussions taking place in the country about the status and role of these institutions, particularly their social impact. Recently, Pritam Singh, former director of the public business school Indian Institute of Management (IIM) Lucknow, made a valuable observation about the state of private business schools in India:

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While certain private institutes have managed to break away from the stereotypes attached and emerged as quality Institutes, there are still several problems plaguing the private sector today. The most important one is that owners of private colleges consider them to be businesses rather than educational institutes. More importance is put on infrastructure rather than research work, and the quality of faculty is bad. Quality faculty are not willing to take up such jobs because such institutes don't pay well or give their teachers autonomy and freedom for research (Mathews 2017).

Similarly, eminent Indian journalist T.J.S. George, in his column in *The Star of Mysore*, brought to public attention the pathetic state of certain private professional institutions in the country. By citing an incident that had happened in Vellore, Tamil Nadu, in which the chairman (who began his career as a usurer) of an engineering college was hacked to death by a gang armed with sickles, George questioned not only the commercialisation of education but also how the institutional culture driven by such commercialisation was quickly rendering these spaces into a breeding ground for criminal elements (T.J.S. George, 2017). The opening up of higher education to private capital has brought together a complex assemblage of heterogeneous actors and flows, including steel and liquor tycoons, politicians, and caste and religious institutions, transforming education into a site where political power, capital flows, and institutional desires compete for profit.

Private investment in higher education and its unbridled pursuit of profit have threatened to undermine the principles on which a university ought to be based – the free pursuit of knowledge as a collective, emancipatory endeavour. Universities have become a crucial node in a larger assemblage where finance, technology, and managerial rationalities converge. The private universities I taught at in Kolkata and Punjab were efficient enterprises, akin to manufacturing factories, striving for and taking pride in numbers – the number of admissions, courses, classes, lectures, tutorials, tasks, activities, counselling sessions, and, finally, the number of degrees produced. In this never-ending game of numbers, education ceases to be an encounter with thought but becomes a senseless, codified commodity, meticulously packaged for consumption. In this broader assemblage of flows – of capital, information, and desire – universities lose their humanistic moorings.

The choice of students as consumers in this complex assemblage is less defined by freedom than it is an illusion. The autonomy that liberal discourse celebrates is, in reality, an effect of a dynamic reconfiguration of power that classifies, organises, and normalises

individuals in accordance with the rationalities of capital. The choices are pre-inscribed by a complex assemblage of economic stratification, cultural codes and institutional governance. The choices are not spontaneous; instead, this broader assemblage decides who will study where, whether in private, public, religious, or familial institutions. Choices function as a technology of control, whereas the subject lives in the illusion of free will. This arrangement is biopolitics in operation, where regulation is achieved through the management of aspirations, affordability, and access.

Individuality lacks an independent essence; rather, it is a programmable node within an ever-evolving assemblage, and the self is an always-circulating set of information—a data point within a larger network of power and control. The university operates as an assemblage of heterogeneous elements; a dynamic network of desires, technologies, governance, and capital shapes the flows of affect, aspirations, and investments. Its function is not to expand the horizon of understanding but rather to modulate what kind of degree maximises return, status and employability. Consequently, individuals no longer behave like thinking subjects but as calculating nodes within the broader assemblage of capital formation.

In these newly proliferating private universities of India, *discipline* and *hard work* are appropriately promoted as marketable virtues. Time is effectively controlled through measurement, partitioning, and optimisation, and is transformed into a productive resource under a dynamic disciplinary regime, while the organisation of space internalises docility. Both students and teachers learn where to sit, when to move, and how to behave. As a result, the university became a regime of power, invested in enforcing compliance and punishing those who defied it. Some private universities where I have taught even restrict off-campus movement. Modern technologies, such as CCTV cameras and internet-based management applications, are used to surveil and control teachers and students alike, converting them into docile agents for the accumulation of profit. Internet-based applications are regularly used to manage time for teachers; clerical tasks are distributed through Facebook-like online profiles to engage both teachers and students in various activities. In such panopticon fields, which I encountered in my teaching experiences in private universities, both teachers and students become data points within a grid of perpetual observation.

Nevertheless, this trend also marks the shift from a disciplinary society to what Deleuze calls “societies of control”—an effect of a change in the functioning of power as it ceases to operate through enclosures and the partition of space, instead modulating life through

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digital feedback loops. Internet-based platforms and social media interfaces distribute tasks and monitor performance in real time, blurring the boundaries between work and life, as well as between learning and leisure.

A 2009 report by India's Ministry of Human Resource Development highlighted the practice among private "deemed universities" of appointing family members to key positions of authority, which would ultimately compromise the institution's autonomy. Although proper management is a vital component of institutional governance, most private institutions rely solely on management strategies. The lack of democratic student and faculty associations in private institutions, combined with the prevalence of a contract labour system, bears testimony to this situation.

Education today has become a lucrative business; anyone with the means can invest and reap a profit. Universities advertise themselves in this lucrative market by showcasing their facilities and infrastructure. The education they provide is often of questionable quality. In a convocation address at the Birla Institute of Technology, Mesra, on 10 January 2016, *The Times of India* reported that the then-President of India, Pranab Mukherjee, said that 'Growing levels of private higher education "have resulted in greater access but have caused alarming distress in the quality of the education' (Deogharia 2016). The pursuit of profit has evolved into an assemblage of heterogeneous elements creating a complex biopolitical mechanism that thoroughly organises, exploits and exhausts life. Life within this assemblage loses vitality and becomes a programmable node. This situation often compels those caught up in the profession of teaching to warn of the coming of a technocratic society.

It is within this environment of continuous surveillance that Derrida, in *Without Alibi*, wrote about the "university without conditions". It imagines freedom in a world where every gesture is continuously monitored, timed, and recorded. Derrida, for instance, writes:

This university without conditions does not, *in fact*, exist, as we know only too well. Nevertheless, in principle and in conformity with its declared vocation, its professed essence, it should remain an ultimate place of critical resistance – and more than critical – to all the powers of dogmatic and unjust appropriation (Ibid: 2002: 204).

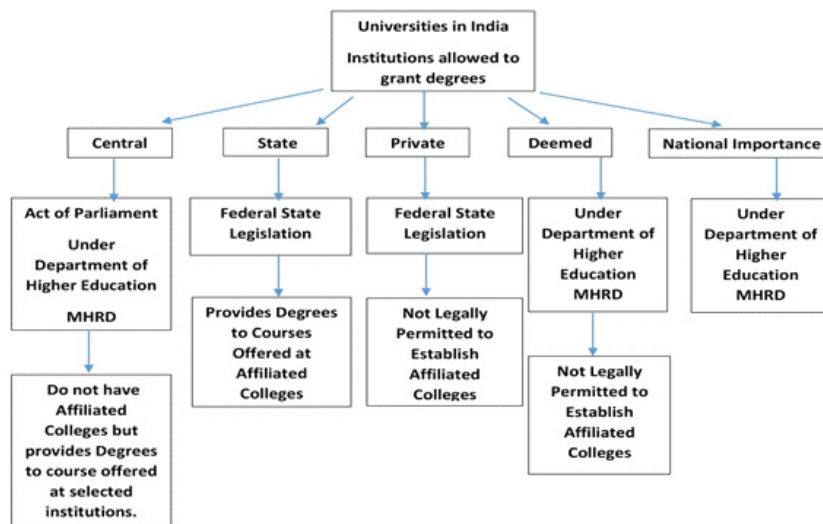
## II

India has a very young population, and it is expected to add 480

million people to the existing workforce of 430 million in the next 20 years. A quarter of the globe’s incremental increase in the working population is set to occur in India. Education, consequently, remains the key means “to convert this demographic dividend into a viable economic resource and to harness the latent potential of the human capital” (Gautam and Singh et al. 2016).

The architecture of higher education in India comprises five main groups of institutions: Central, State, Private, Deemed Universities, and Institutions of National Importance. They, in fact, constitute a complex and dynamic system responsible for the development of theoretical and practical knowledge across a diverse range of human endeavours. It is also a dense assemblage of power and knowledge, a dynamic network of people, institutions, political and economic discourses, governance and technologies. Within this system, universities are not static structures but rather sites of continuous negotiations, where politics, economic interests, funding mechanisms, accreditation frameworks, syllabi, and desires and aspirations interact and mutually shape one another. The Indian Institutes of Technology, National Institutes of Technology, and prominent medical colleges, including the All India Institute of Medical Sciences, are among these institutions. According to the University Grants Commission, there are 56 Central Universities, 460 State Universities, 147 Deemed Universities, 361 State Private Universities, 159 institutes of National Importance (including IITs, AIIMS, and NIMs), 37,204 colleges, and 11,443 stand-alone institutions in India.

Figure 1: Universe of Higher Educational Institutions in India



This system of institutions, with established norms and historically formed practices, is one of the largest in the world, ranking only behind the US and China. The University Grants Commission, the main governing body, “enforces its standards, advises the government, and helps coordinate between the centre and the state.” The University Grants Commission (UGC) also oversees Open and Distance Learning (ODL) throughout the country, including Correspondence Course Institutes (CCIs), the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), and the State Open Universities (SOUs). Although the system has undergone substantial changes at both the structural and systemic levels, it continues to underperform. According to WIPO’s annual World Intellectual Property Indicators (WIPI) report, innovators across the globe filed 3.17 million patent applications in 2017. Global trademark filing activity totalled 12.39 million, while industrial design filings totalled 1.24 million. China has recorded the highest number among major economies, with 1,306,019 patents, 6,381,512 trademarks, and 857,753 industrial designs, while the US filed 524,835 patents, 1,650,723 trademarks, and 353,707 industrial designs in 2017. In the same year, India nevertheless could only file 27,985 patents, 271,972 trademarks, and 10,253 industrial designs.

This persistent underachievement is an effect of how power circulates through the assemblage of the higher education system in India. The inherited colonial rationalities that shape institutional practices, modes of thought, and subjectivities create inertia in adapting to systemic changes across the social, financial, economic, and technological domains, at both the global and national levels. This sedimentation of disciplinary and epistemological formations effectively resists change, as well as tempts adherence to historically formed norms and practices that are irrepressible. The result is a lack of support for innovation within the assemblage. This conformity, nonetheless, is the result of institutional discourses, administrative hierarchies, and the micro practices of academic life, fostering a particular way of knowing and living. Besides, Thomas Macaulay’s “civilising mission” had reconfigured the affective and cognitive map of Indian subjectivity, instilling an inferiority complex in unwitting Indian minds; the modern Indian education was (and, to some extent, still remains) a colonial project that cold-bloodedly wiped out the age-old tradition of *gurukul* education. Generally speaking, the modern Indian spirit is covertly shaped even today by a combination of a certain but trivial sense of inferiority and an often-inconsistent resistance to everything traditional, particularly to the traditional Indian education.

However, the modern Indian higher education system is not

without its moments of transformation. New forms of subjectivities and thoughts were emerging from within its complex web of relations. Nevertheless, for the vitality of the system, it must not fix itself as a sedimented, static structure but rather as a dynamic assemblage of historical, political, economic, technological, affective, and institutional forces that continuously produce and reproduce its own condition of existence. A change from within is necessary to correct the present top-down model of management; the need of the time is an effective reform for a bottom-up, student-centric, learning-driven model of education.

### III

Across the globe, higher education is undergoing substantial changes to adapt to shifts in social, political, economic, financial, and technological realms. In the democratic world, particularly in the US, serious debates over the future of American higher education center on critiques of the existing system. Within these debates, *Forbes* observed the standardisation and centralisation tendencies in the American higher education policies: “Americans are rightly increasingly angry about our colleges and universities. While many critics of higher education have outlined many sins (Victor Davis Hanson is particularly noteworthy), we can say the four biggest ones are that college is too costly, involves too little learning, is increasingly intolerant or contemptuous of free expression and diversity of opinion, and graduate students who increasingly are “underemployed”, taking relatively unskilled jobs for which college training did next to nothing to improve labour productivity. It is no wonder that 2016 is the fifth consecutive year of falling enrolments.” The federal financial assistance programs for students associated with the centralisation of higher education under the federal government, the article argued, have indeed resulted in ‘a reduced proportion of recent graduates coming from the bottom quartile of the income distribution’, leading above all ‘to lower academic standards and an aggravation of the underemployment problem amongst college graduates.’

Apart from the centralisation and standardisation tendencies, which may be considered as the consolidation of governmentality in a Foucauldian sense, the decentralisation and privatisation of higher education, along with their social and cultural ramifications, are also problematised within the evolving discourse on education. This section outlines some of the central concerns that shape the evolving discourse of higher education.

Although the overall trend in the US is towards greater

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standardisation and centralisation, higher education remains a significant concern for the states. Although the American Constitution recognized education as a right, it reserved this power to the states. Thus, the influence of the Constitution, drafted in 1787, is still evident today. The prevailing trend towards a more solidified federalism is, in fact, an outcome of exchanges between the state and national leaders; and for that reason, various aspects of American higher education – curriculum, teachers, workforce, and identities – are still an outcome of decentralising tendencies (Jennifer DeBoer 2012, pp. 510 – 513). Hence, the vivid multicultural fabric of American society is, to a great extent, reflected in the making of the education system.

The advent of ‘decentralisation’ as one of the organising concepts, nevertheless, is an outcome of the neoliberal turn in the Western economic and political order. The American and British neoconservative politics of the 1980s, with their emphasis on excellence, high performance standards, ability, institutional competition, and deregulation, have reintroduced the classical liberal ethos in diverse forms, transforming the prevailing political and economic discourses. This era marked the end of the social democratic political ideology in Western Europe. The resultant change in Western attitudes and behaviour has significantly devalued some of the central concepts of the hitherto political and economic order, such as equity, needs, access, regulations, enforcement, and social and welfare concerns, thereby considerably transforming the discourse on education.

This shift has been accompanied by a new organising lexicon that now emphasises quality and excellence; as a result, the question of equality has been systematically marginalised in public discourses on education. Boyd, for instance, has identified five Ds – disestablishment, deregulation, decentralisation, de-emphasis and diminution – and three Cs – core content, moral character and choice of school – as central to the new organising lexicon (Boyd 1991). Still, such a shift has been an effect of complex, yet slow, changes within the education system, which is adapting to broader shifts in the social, political, ideological, and economic environments. Though this had taken a decisive form by the time the Thatcher and Reagan administrations introduced education reforms in the US and UK.

In the 1970s, a bipartisan consensus had prevailed in the US and UK on at least minimal state intervention to ensure the smooth running of the economy, favouring a form of social democratic political ideology. During Johnson’s presidency, tangible education policy was crucial for the nation’s overall development. Johnson and his administration viewed education as part of the solution to reducing disparities based on family and socio-economic circumstances.

Education was seen as a form of freedom, as it empowers individuals to pursue new economic opportunities and thereby lift themselves out of poverty. Johnson, for instance, had stated, “The answer for all our national problems comes to a single word. That word is ‘education.’”

However, with the formation of the new lexicon in the 1980s, the discourse on education had significant social and economic implications; thereafter, education failed to garner attention as a national project aimed at improving the standard of living for the common person. Consequently, the schemes to address social and economic disadvantages through compensatory education, positive discrimination through early childhood education, and comprehensive secondary education have all become outdated strategies. In the neoliberal discursive formation, education loses its vital purpose. It is no longer a force of emancipation; rather, it itself is subjected to the vim of the market. The neoliberal discourse has instead elevated individuals to the position of free agency, enabling them to choose what they want. Education, consequently, has become one of many choices.

The neo-conservatives have challenged the prevailing social democratic political ideology, accusing the political parties that had agreed to the “bipartisan political consensus” on state intervention in social and educational policies of causing their country’s serious economic decline and lack of international competitiveness. It was indeed partly due to their campaign against the social democratic policies of the previous governments that both Thatcher, in May 1979, and Reagan, in November 1980, achieved political office (Ibid). Though the commitment for excellence in higher education differed depending on time and the strength of their arguments, by the end of the decade, “both administrations, nevertheless, had come to similar points in the transformation of their respective education systems. Both in the US and UK, the commitment to equal opportunities has given way to an emphasis on consumer or parental choice, and this resulting change was indeed seen as a way of raising academic standards” (Ibid).

By the mid-1990s, both in the US and the UK, higher education had undergone substantial changes to the extent that it could no longer be considered a “system”. In Britain, the central government had played a key role in diversifying the school system. The reduction in the federal role in the US decentralised power to the states and schools themselves. Both countries have created a range of school types and educational institutions, often not funded or supported by the state or public institutions. Individual schools – often public, private, or parent- or religious-run – are being encouraged to foster their own

initiatives and developments.

Since these reforms, higher education in the US has become heavily privatised; for-profit arrangements have often excluded low-income people and members of disadvantaged racial groups, leading to the reinforcement of existing social and economic inequalities. On a recent scandal, David A. Love writes: “The revelations caused shock and outrage across the world, but they should not have. The scandal revealed nothing new. One of the worst-kept secrets of American education is that it is a rigged system. The deck is stacked in favour of the wealthy, who can buy the best education possible for their children, and at the expense of those without means, power or privilege” (Love 2019).

The “continental model” of the higher education system offers much more to improve the Indian system than the Anglo-American model. In continental Europe, both the German and Italian higher education systems belong to the “continental model”. In such a model, the primary actors are the state and the academic corporation. The state “finances the system, frames macro-strategies, and defines a general set of rules concerning students’ access and careers, and the features of the degrees that students may earn,” while the corporation of the academics governs the regular activities of the system, particularly managing the colleges and the universities, recruiting faculty, and deciding what to be taught to students (Ballarino 2011).

The German higher education system, however, has a federal governance structure. The majority of the activities governing the German higher education system are decentralised from the central government to the regions and the states. The decentralised and federal configuration of German higher education is rooted in its history. The German higher education system was consolidated prior to the development of the German state apparatus. It evolved as a dispersed network of intellectual, ecclesiastical, and civic authorities, a field of power/knowledge that redefined the relations between the state, science, and society. Furthermore, the World War II German political environment had a profound impact on the formation of attitudes towards and expectations from Germany’s higher education systems in its Eastern and Western parts. East Germany, under Soviet rule, continued the Third Reich-style centralised higher education system, whereas the West adopted a more Western-style governance of the higher education system. The Italian higher education system, on the other hand, is largely centralised; the autonomy that the central government granted universities in 1990 has been progressively reduced due to various administrative and budgetary constraints. As a result, the Italian education system is a centralising and standardising

force.

The cases discussed above reveal how the higher education system evolved through indirect discursive formations. The deeper forces that reorder discourses, institutions, and practices are largely historically formed and therefore intangible when the system changes from within. These transformations are not linear progress but rather the effects of complex relations of power – a process in which new alignments of discourses, technologies, and governance replace old ones, transforming the system from within. The historical unconscious of societies shapes these shifting assemblages, for instance, the lingering effects of colonialism in India, the impact of a multicultural social formation on the US education system, or the effects of post-World War II politics on the German education system. Historical memory (and its conscious and unconscious modalities) plays a crucial role in governing any cultural and social institution (Henderson 1988). Historical memories circulate through power relations and micro-politics, shaping everyday practices, moral codes, and institutional norms that define who can say what and where. In this process, the higher education system emerges as a heterogeneous assemblage of politics, technologies, cultural memories, subjectivities, and affects that creates its own conditions of existence.

These changes, therefore, are not instantaneous, but rather, they are the effects of a dynamic process – in other words, a temporal unfolding of historical forces. Hanson, for instance, writes:

Decentralisation does not come with the passing of laws or signing decrees. Like most types of reform, it is built rather than created. It happens slowly because the organisational culture (e.g., “the way we’ve always done things around here”) must be transformed, new roles learned, leadership styles altered (e.g., shifting from controlling to supporting behaviours), communication patterns reversed, planning procedures revised (e.g., bottom up and top down), and regional policies and programs developed (Gabriele, 2011).

For effective functioning, power must not concentrate to form hierarchical structures but circulate within the system. Rather than mere decentralisation of administrative authority, with the reorganisation of the microphysics of power and the dispersal of authority within networks of relations, each node, whether individual or institution, began to participate in the production of knowledge and administration. Granting relative autonomy to academic and administrative actors allows localised knowledge to emerge, thereby enhancing the system’s reflexivity. This requires a dynamic assemblage of teachers, students, administrators, technologies, and discourses to

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reproduce the conditions for the effective functioning of the system. Some studies on the German higher education system have revealed that nurturing such relations at the local level improves efficiency, as familiarity with people and situations fosters social capital among the agents, enabling the system to resolve local issues effectively (Op. cit., 2011).

The decentring of power opens a multiplicity of interfaces where knowledge, affects, and information circulate. This rhizomatic assemblage will effectively transform the vertical mode of command into horizontal networks of relations, where authority operates through dispersed practices of observation, communication, and participation. Decentralised governance activities enhance accountability, as more people are directly involved in decision-making. Such decentralised governance activities, as the higher education reforms in Germany demonstrate, would expand the system's ability to transform through heterogeneous, localised knowledge. Through collecting a diversity of data at the local level, the assemblage becomes adaptive, complex, and self-organising.

In an increasingly interconnected world, power runs through complex assemblages that transcend national and institutional boundaries, where states, societies, economic and cultural processes, and institutions interact and operate as nodes within a shifting network of forces; in such a formation, when development does not unfold linearly, local tactics and strategies need a larger vision to maintain organic growth. Even when the virtual network and digital infrastructure traverse and create defined boundaries, transforming both the material and the imagined geographies, Foucault reminds us that power is immanent, that is, everything unfolds within power relations. Therefore, specific sites, such as colleges, universities, research institutions, digital platforms, and urban centres, become strategic surfaces where global assemblages crystallise, mutate, and reproduce themselves. Human social practices, thus, have an irreducible territorial dimension.

These systemic transformations require theoretical tools and methods for mapping the contingent interplay of forces. In a complex assemblage, each element redefines itself through interactions with its surrounding elements. In *The Dreams of Reason*, Heinz Pagels wrote that science has, to a certain extent, exposed the micro-cosmos and the macro-cosmos; "the greatest unexposed frontier is complexity" (Roger, 1993, p. 10). Power in such complex assemblages operates not as a sovereign force from above but as immanent forces through networks of knowledge, technology, and institutional practices, producing both order and possibilities. One of the central insights of

complexity theory is that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, a perspective that transcends traditional thinking about the relationship between the whole and its constituent parts. For that reason, the system is no longer in a state of self-balancing equilibrium. Consequently, this interface between nodes, whether they are individuals or institutions, and their relationship with the overall environment changes the boundaries that separate them. Capra, for instance, writes: 'I am defined by my relationships...the boundaries of my own identity are quite ambiguous and contextual.' Life itself is, therefore, connected to a web of life, relations, and networks (Capra, 1996).

Education systems, institutions, and practices function as complex assemblages, as networks of human and non-human forces configure and reconfigure themselves in relation to changes in social, economic, cultural, and technological changes. The system itself rests in this "domain of emergence"—a human system. Managing such a system requires an ecological approach (Eshleman, 2018). As a system of nodes, they organise themselves by sensing their relationships to other nodes and the overall environment, constantly recreating their own condition of existence.

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# Gandhian Ethics in/as Graphic Writing: The Ideology of Non-violent Protest and Suffering in Marjane Satrapi's *Women, Life, Freedom*

Preeti Kumar

## ABSTRACT

*The Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia is often cited as the sole successful instance of Gandhian civil resistance in the Middle East, a region marked by theocratic rule, authoritarian regimes and entrenched gender hierarchies. In September 2022, Marjane Satrapi published *Woman, Life, Freedom*, an anthology of graphic narratives documenting the Iranian protest movement that erupted after the death in custody of Mahsa Amini, who had been arrested for an alleged hijab violation. The nationwide outrage against state violence, religious authoritarianism and cultural repression drew thousands of men and women into the streets, sustaining protests through 2025 despite severe crackdowns. This paper argues that the *Woman, Life, Freedom* movement is a powerful manifestation of Gandhian protest. Both Gandhian philosophy and the Iranian protest movement, though emerging from different cultural histories, affirm non-violence as strength, truth-telling as resistance, and symbolic action as a catalyst for moral and political transformation, even as the movement's limited success invites reflection on what constitutes authentic satyagraha.*

**Key words:** *Gandhi, Satyagraha, Iran, graphic narrative, Non-violence and Truth*

**G**ANDHIAN PRACTICES OF resistance – truth, non-violence, satyagraha, and suffering – have been a method of political and social

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agitation in countries and cultures far removed from Vedantic philosophy: the Civil Rights Movement in the USA, the Anti-Apartheid Struggle in South Africa, the Solidarity Movement in Poland, the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia and the prolonged protest against the military rule by Aung Sang Sui Kyi in Burma amongst others. Regarded as “the figure whose actions and ideas have most crucially influenced the development of civil resistance in the twentieth century,” (Randale 1994, p. 52) Gandhi’s ideals continue to hold profound relevance and practical value in the 21<sup>st</sup> century – an era dominated by militarized regimes and hegemonic ideologies that ruthlessly suppress dissent and equate any form of civic activism with treason. In such a context, the only viable form of resistance to tyrannical power lies in a mode of action that simultaneously garners public support, draws on collective will, and depends on individual moral courage and determination – the path articulated by Mohandas Gandhi: non-violent civil disobedience.

In the Middle East, a region known for its authoritarian rulers and severe suppression of opposition, the first instance of Gandhian ideology in practice was the “Arab Spring” Uprising in the 2010s. However, though the early stages of the revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia demonstrated the efficacy of street demonstrations and sit-ins that led to the toppling of some enduring dictators, the movement soon lapsed into a violent struggle. It was seen as proof of the inapplicability of Gandhian principles in complex situations. In September 2022, riots erupted all over Iran in protest against the death of the Kurdish-Iranian Mahsa Amini under suspicious circumstances following her arrest by the Iranian morality police for wearing her headscarf (*hijab*) “incorrectly.” The outrage against police brutality, religious chauvinism, and political and cultural oppression brought campaigning and sloganeering women and men into the streets in a collective demand for justice – demonstrations that continued into 2025 despite being met with brutal repression. Protests formed around the political slogan “Jin, Jian, Azadi” (Woman, Life, Freedom), a rallying cry that had originated in the Kurdish Women’s Rights Movement and became the chant for solidarity rallies against patriarchal and political oppression of women across Iran and the world. The movement that included men and women agitating in the streets and on social media was met with a stringent and brutal crackdown by the Iranian regime – with arrests, imprisonment, torture, and executions. In 2024, Marjane Satrapi collated a groundbreaking depiction of the uprising in the collective non-fiction graphic book *Woman, Life, Freedom* in collaboration with artists, activists, academics, and journalists, to trace the history of the women’s revolution in Iran

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and to support of the cause of the protestors from across the globe. The project sought to mobilise Western public opinion and to reassure Iranians – men and women – of a global solidarity with their struggle.

This paper situates the anthology *Woman, Life, Freedom* within the scholarly conversation on visual activism and explores how the graphic novel's thematic concerns enable resistance against political and epistemic control. This paper contends that the *Woman, Life, Freedom* movement, as depicted in Marjane Satrapi's graphic anthology, is both illustrative of and, in itself, a form of Gandhian protest. Though emerging from distinct historical and cultural contexts, both Gandhian philosophy and *Woman, Life, Freedom* articulate the ideals of non-violence as strength, witnessing Truth as resistance, and symbolic action as a means of transforming political and moral consciousness.

### **Historical Context:**

Women's rights in Iran have had a chequered history. From 550 B.C., during the Achaemenid era, to modern times, when women played a significant role in the Persian Constitutional Revolution, women have participated in public affairs and articulated their concerns on issues such as the right to education and inheritance. A major advance in the civic role of women came with the overthrow of the Qajar dynasty and the installation of Reza Khan as the Shah of Iran in 1925 – women were granted various rights, such as compulsory basic education, financial aid to study abroad, desegregation of gendered spaces, as well as a range of legal protections. However, the Shah's controversial edict banning the burqa in public spaces, in a push to modernise Iranian society, met with resistance from orthodox sections of society including women, and in 1979, the Iranian Revolution against the Shah, led by Ruhollah Khomeini, saw protesting women in large numbers demonstrating their support for Khomeini by wearing *chadors*<sup>1</sup>.

The collapse of the Pahlavi regime, however, ushered in an era of stringent curtailment of women's public presence, effectively relegating them to domestic spheres, restricted to the tending of families and household tasks. The veil was made mandatory in 1979 and stringently enforced by the Iranian Islamic Moral Police patrolling the streets. Unveiled women were forbidden from public places at the risk of punishment by whipping (74 lashes) according to the Islamic Punishment Law of 1983. After Khomeini's death, the two succeeding Supreme Leaders of Iran – Ali Khamenei and Mohammad Khatami – made concessions to women's rights movements, and women became increasingly vocal in demanding the restoration of their civil and political rights. However, in the 2004 election to the Iranian Parliament, Islamic conservatives defeated the reformists, and the only women

in government were conservative, since the all-male Council of Guardians had prohibited the activist women in the previous Majlis from contesting the elections.

The Islamic Republic of Iran has since mandated discriminatory laws against women with respect to marriage and divorce, inheritance, child custody, travel, education, and employment. In 2022-23, hundreds of schoolgirls were poisoned using chemical compounds to prevent them from attending school. Dancing and singing are banned for women because Shia clerics believe that these activities could be sexually stimulating and provocative, and dress-code violations, like wearing a 'bad' *hijab* by revealing a little hair, are punishable by fines and imprisonment. Between 2018 and 2022, Iran intensified its crackdown on women activists protesting compulsory *hijab* or defending those who removed their *hijab*. Human-rights lawyer Nasrin Sotoudeh was sentenced to 38 years in prison and 148 lashes, activists like Saba Kord Afshari and Shaparak Shajarizadeh received long sentences or were forced into exile for removing their *hijab* in public, and in 2022, the arrest and televised forced confession of Sepideh Rashnu, who was hospitalised with internal bleeding after her arrest, highlighted the continuing violence and torture faced by dissenters. That year, Iran introduced stricter dress-code laws, including surveillance and penalties for women posting photos without a *hijab* online.

### **Woman, Life, Freedom Movement**

On 16 September 2022, Mahsa Jina Amini, a 22-year-old Iranian Kurdish woman died in custody following her arrest by Iran's moral police for allegedly violating the country's strict *hijab* regulations. During the nationwide outrage and spontaneous protests ignited by her death women publicly removed their *hijabs*, cut their hair, and organised strikes from schools and workplaces. What began as an agitation against gender-based discrimination evolved into a broader movement against systemic corruption, state violence and ethnic marginalisation – unified under the slogan "Jin, Jiyan, Azadi," a rallying cry for autonomy in Kurdish meaning "Women, Life, Freedom". Despite having to counter massive human rights violations, the movement has persisted through individual acts of civil disobedience as well as sustained social and cultural change. The movement galvanised international solidarity through an outpouring of digital activism, public demonstrations, and diplomatic advocacy.

In 2024, Marjane Satrapi curated a collaborative volume of graphic narrative style essays to depict the uprising, working with seventeen graphic artists and three experts – political scientist and journalist

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Jean-Pierre Perrin; researcher and Iran specialist Farid Vahid; and historian Abbas Milani – to demonstrate solidarity with Iran and the cause of women’s freedom across the world. Satrapi, a French Iranian graphic novelist, cartoonist, illustrator, and children’s book author and listed by Comics Alliance as one of the twelve women cartoonists deserving of lifetime achievement recognition, had gained widespread renown for her autobiographical graphic novels, *Persepolis* and *Persepolis 2*, which described her childhood in Iran and coming of age in Europe. Despite her permanent residence in Europe because of the repressive gender policies of the Iranian government, Satrapi has been politically active on issues concerning Iran, including the Iranian elections in 2009 and the Mahsa Amini Protests in 2022. *Woman, Life, Freedom*, collated by her, was first published in French in 2023 (*Femme, Vie, Liberté*) and in English in 2024. In her interview with the Guardian, Satrapi states how her aim in creating the novel was “taking action through art” on an issue so vitally important that she felt, significantly, that “only a comic book narrative will work” (Chrisafis 2024). Graphic novels have played a pivotal role in global protest movements, offering a visual immediacy and emotional force that traditional literature cannot replicate. While critics have examined Satrapi’s *Persepolis*, the broader *Woman, Life, Freedom* protests, and the political force of graphic storytelling, the anthology *Woman, Life, Freedom* itself remains under-theorized. This paper seeks to fill that critical gap.

### **Literature Review: Gender-based protests and Graphic Novels on Iran**

Recent scholarship on the Woman, Life, Freedom protest movement has foregrounded the role of visual and graphic media in shaping feminist resistance narratives within and beyond Iran. Studies such as *Woman, Life, Freedom: Revolting Space Invaders in Iran* (2024) examine how protesters disrupt gendered spatial restrictions, reframing women’s bodies as insurgent presences in public space and situating the movement within broader feminist and urban resistance theory. Analyses like “Unveiling a Feminist Strike” (2024) an intersectional study of the politics of gender repression and the efficacy of strikes as a tool against oppression and restriction, and *A Nation in Turmoil, A Field in Crisis* (2023), which examines how uprising positions women as the primary catalysts of change, are part of a surge in studies on gender-based violence, political repression, and the struggles of women under authoritarian rule.

Scholarship on Iranian graphic narratives has expanded significantly over the past two decades, particularly as authors and artists have turned to illustrated life-writing: illustrated memoirs,

webcomics, and graphic narratives that intertwine personal testimony with collective trauma. Foundational works such as Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2000-2003) and *Embroideries* (2003-2005) established the graphic memoir as a powerful medium for articulating women's lived experiences in post-revolutionary Iran.

More recent scholarship examines how graphic narratives extend beyond personal memoir to collective testimony. Works such as Amir and Khalil's *Zahra's Paradise* (2011) and Mana Neyestani's *An Iranian Metamorphosis* (2014) portray state violence while also revealing the gendered vulnerabilities that Iranian women face within state structures. Scholars argue that these texts operate as "counterarchives", preserving stories that official state media seeks to erase. The study "Informal and Revolutionary Feminist Placemaking" (2024) documents how online comics, illustrated protest art, and collaborative digital storytelling circulate feminist messages globally and "Feminist Graphic Narratives: The Ongoing Game of Eluding Censorship" (2019) details the capacity for graphic fiction to subvert suppression and silencing. Thus, Iranian graphic narratives function not merely as artistic representations but as political interventions, revealing both how gender-based violence is embedded in everyday life while also foregrounding agency, resilience, and collective resistance through the expressive possibilities of the graphic form. The Iranian protest, symbolised in the slogan "Woman, Life, Freedom" and illustrated in the graphic novel, may be seen as a modern articulation and exemplar of another kind of politics – the Gandhian ideal of satyagraha anchored in truth, voluntary suffering, and non-violent resistance.

#### **Ethical Context and Gandhian Ethics in Application:**

The essence of Gandhian civil disobedience lay in mass civil resistance – non-violent protest undertaken collectively by large sections of the public that offered individuals "a means for checking and correcting the excesses of state power and governmental authority" (Hardiman 2003, p.39). Central to its efficacy was its ability to appeal to the moral conscience of the broader liberal world, drawing attention to state oppression through the protestors' public endurance of suffering and even martyrdom. Gandhian civil resistance proved especially powerful in democratic and semi-democratic contexts, where governments rely on public cooperation for the smooth functioning of political and economic systems. In such societies, violent uprisings invite harsh legal countermeasures, but non-violent protests carried on with discipline and moral purpose cannot be easily and legitimately suppressed. Consequently, civil disobedience emerged as a credible and potent method through which the oppressed could advance their

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cause by “adopting a position of moral superiority” (Hardiman 2003, p.50). Markovits (2004) notes how Gandhi used three interrelated terms for ‘non-violence’ – ‘*ahimsa*,’ a Jain doctrine of refusal to kill or harm any living creature; ‘*satyagraha*,’ an amalgamation of two Sanskrit words coined by Gandhi translated as ‘truth-force’ or ‘soul-force’ and finally, the English term ‘non-violence’ (pp.148-49). To these may be added his key principle of Truth, which, together with the others, articulates his comprehensive vision of civil resistance and social reconstruction. Read through a Gandhian ethical lens, the visual rhetoric of Satrapi’s *Woman, Life, Freedom* reveals how the Iranian resistance aligns with the principles of Satyagraha grounding the political and cultural struggle in truth, non-violence, satyagraha, and moral self-sacrifice.

### 1. Satyagraha

Satyagraha is Gandhi’s distinctive moral and political method of resistance, often translated as ‘truth-force’ or ‘soul-force’. It is an amalgamation of two Sanskrit words ‘*satya*,’ meaning truth and ‘*agraha*,’ or taking and seizing – the implication being that of seizing and holding fast to the Truth. Satyagraha may be seen as the practical application of Gandhi’s ideals of *ahimsa* through its insistence on absolute non-violence and Truth. According to Gandhi, the method, far from being a form of ‘passive resistance’ was an active, principled, and disciplined confrontation with injustice, operating through a courageous willingness to endure suffering rather than inflict it. It works by refusing to obey or submit to unjust laws and by “bearing the hardship which such resistance brings in its train,” seeking to awaken the moral conscience of the oppressor (Gandhi 1968, p.61). The satyagrahi must respect not only himself but also his opponent, and approach the opponent not with hatred or revenge, but with the power of inner strength and moral clarity. Writing in the *Harijan* in 1939, Gandhi declares, “The appeal is never to his fear, it is, it must be always to his heart. The satyagrahi’s object is to convert, not to coerce, the wrongdoer” (Terchek 2011, p.124). Gandhi’s insistence was unswervingly on voluntary suffering – which he believed would prove the steadfastness and dedication of the satyagrahi and lead to the understanding and conversion of the opponent. Also, it provided for the possibility of error in the event that the cause was unjust – since only the person using it suffers for his mistake. The purpose of satyagraha was negotiation and persuasion through which an unjust system was transformed, enabling a moral uplift and fostering a more humane order through “suffering love”.

### 1.1 Refusal to submit

The two central tenets of satyagraha – refusing to submit while courageously confronting injustice, and embracing self-imposed suffering to awaken social conscience – are vividly illustrated throughout Satrapi’s anthology. The book opens with scenes of mass mobilisation, where “Iranian men flowed into the streets of the capital and other towns to express their anger” (Akrami and Vahid 2024, p.21). The narrative describes the honking of cars signalling protest, the chants of “Death to the dictator,” and the crowds at Masha’s funeral where women cast off their veils in defiant fury (Akrami and Vahid 2024, p.21). This refusal to yield manifests both collectively and individually, echoing Gandhi’s insistence that non-violent resistance is sustained by ordinary people acting from moral conviction. Another key prose narrative recounts the experience of the young male singer, Shervin Hajipour, who composed “Baraye” (“For” in Persian), which he posted on Instagram two weeks after Amini’s death and instantaneously became the anthem of the “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement. Though he was arrested the following day and the post was erased, the song, which had gone viral overnight, “had already transcended borders, becoming an anthem for the movement worldwide” (Adiban and Vahid 2024, p. 30). He was forced to retract his activism under pressure, but when accepting a Grammy for Best Song for Social Change, reclaimed his voice, declaring: “We have won” (Adiban and Vahid 2024, p. 30). His story exemplifies what Gandhi described as satyagraha: “a method by which men, enduring pain, secure their rights” (Gandhi 1997, p.90).

A compelling set of examples of individual resistance appears in the section “Names That Will Go Down in History.” From the two Iranian women journalists – Niloofar Hamedei who visited the hospital where Mahsa Amini lay in a coma and tweeted a photograph of the girl’s father and grandmother in tears, and Elaheh Mohammadi who published a report on her death that prevented the regime from concealing its responsibility – to the many protesters who endured torture and death, these figures embody the essence of Gandhian individual *satyagraha*, in which men and women confront unjust laws through morally charged acts. Among the seven stories, the most searing is that of sixteen-year-old Nika Shakarami, who participated in the demonstrations and “disappeared” after being filmed burning her veil. When her panic-stricken family was finally summoned to identify her body, they discovered unmistakable signs of torture: “a crushed nose and caved-in skull” (Akrami and Vahid 2024, p.170-71). She was buried on what would have been her seventeenth birthday.

Another account tells of twenty-four-year-old doctor Ebrahim Rigi, who was beaten to death for treating injured protesters. In his final Instagram post, he wrote: “I didn’t know that to treat the wounded and condemn the murders of our fellow brothers and sisters was a sin... Know simply that I no longer fear death or execution because I have perished many times in this land” (Vahid and Akrami 2024, p.172). These stories crystallise what Gandhi meant when he stated: “To lay down one’s life for what one considers to be right is the very core of satyagraha” (Gandhi 1948, p.59). Each of these individuals enacted resistance not through force but through unwavering moral courage, offering their lives in the pursuit of truth and justice. Their actions, grounded in personal integrity and an unyielding refusal to submit to oppression, stand as Iranian embodiments of Gandhian self-sacrifice and the power of individual conscience.

### 1.2 Self-imposed suffering

This willingness “to suffer till the end” was one of the key conditions for the success of satyagraha, according to Gandhi (Gandhi 1948, p.61). Voluntary suffering demonstrated the sincerity and resolve of the satyagrahi and infused the struggle with moral force. Satrapi’s anthology is filled with accounts of such self-sacrifice offered by Iranian women and men against the torture, intimidation and violent disciplining of the state. The story of the “Blue Girl,” 29-year-old Sahar Khodayari, reveals how an act as innocuous as attempting to watch a football match resulted in her arrest and threat of extended imprisonment – pressures that ultimately drove her to self-immolation (Coco and Perrin 2024, p.206-19). Denied her fundamental right to freedom from gender discrimination, and insisting on exercising her cultural right to participate in sport, she is compelled into a path that brings arrest, imprisonment, and, ultimately, her death. Another narrative centres on Nasrin, the lawyer who defended Iran’s political prisoners and was among the first to represent women charged for unveiling. Sentenced to eleven years for her activism, she begins a hunger strike to protest the conditions of incarceration. Her punishment intensifies: in 2018, she is condemned to 38 years in prison and 148 lashes for “conspiring against the system” (Wild and Perrin 2024, p.224). A third account focuses on the feminist activist Narges Mohammadi, sentenced in 2022 to eight years in prison and 80 lashes for questioning the torture-death of an undertrial detainee. From prison she publishes *White Torture*, a chilling collection of testimonies by 14 female political prisoners subjected to extreme solitary confinement in featureless white rooms. In these cells, “the whiteness starts to take over their body, their mind and soul ... and their

personality dissolves into nothingness” (Wild and Perrin 2024, p.227). The accompanying visual metaphors render this dissolution with stark clarity: figures fade into a blinding field of white; bodies blur into grey; even the panel borders erode, visually evoking the collapse of time, orientation, and selfhood. Together, these stories exemplify the “self-imposed suffering” that Gandhi saw as the moral engine of satyagraha – suffering that exposes injustice, demonstrates the tenacity of the satyagrahi and transforms private pain into public truth.

### **1.3 Symbolic action**

Symbolic action, which was another pillar of satyagraha, also pervades the text. The anthology describes women “discarding and burning their veils as an act of defiance against a regime entrenched in sexual apartheid” (Akrami and Vahid 2024, p.21). Like Gandhi’s Salt March, his sartorial choices, or the charkha, these gestures function as cultural performances that galvanise collective resolve. The recurring motif of women removing their headscarves and cutting their hair, even under threat, becomes a ritual of moral assertion: “Infuriated by her tragic death at the hands of Iran’s morality police, women paid their respects by shedding their veils” (Akrami and Vahid 2024, p.21). In this way, Satrapi’s anthology demonstrates how symbolic non-cooperation, grounded in courage and truth, sustains satyagraha.

## **2. Ahimsa and non-violence**

The concept of Ahimsa at the heart of Gandhian ethics drew on the philosophical foundations of the Upanishads, Jainism, and Christianity. It was valorised in the *Bhagavad Gita*, a text which profoundly influenced Gandhi, as “*ahimsa paramo dharma*” (Ahimsa is the highest religion). Gandhi was also influenced by the Jain ideal of nonviolence and the teachings of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. For Gandhi, ahimsa meant more than mere avoidance of physical violence; it encompassed a complete absence of hatred, anger, and ill will, and a cultivation of love, empathy and compassion, not only for the human, but for all creation. Stressing that emotional and mental violence was as corrosive as physical violence, Gandhi extended ahimsa to every realm of human conduct. Writing in *Young India* (21 May 1925), he declared, “*Ahimsa* means not to hurt any living being by thought, word, or deed” (CWMG 27: 443). *Ahimsa* was the philosophical ideal that underpinned Gandhian ethics, but his conception of non-violence in practice was more nuanced and conditional. Gandhi elaborated on non-violence in *Hind Swaraj*, declaring to the reader that the existence of the world itself is testimony to the principle of non-violence, since if violence were successful, the world would long have been destroyed (Gandhi

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1997, p. 89). For Gandhi, non-violence was “without exception infinitely superior to violence”, implied complete self-purification, and guaranteed certain victory, as he stated in his “axioms on non-violence” in the *Harijan*, 1935 (Bandhopadyaya 1960, p. 61). He considered the term ‘passive resistance’ as a misnomer for ‘non-violence’ because the former was the weapon of the weak, while the latter connoted superior courage, formidable strength, an indomitable will, and an immense capacity for suffering and love. “Wherein is courage required – in blowing others to pieces from behind a cannon or with a smiling face to approach a cannon and be blown to pieces?” (Gandhi 1997, p.93). Non-violent opposition could, therefore, be offered by anyone – whether alone, untrained, or physically weak. However, while he equated “non-violence in its dynamic condition” with “conscious suffering”, he simultaneously asseverated the importance of defending the weak and dependent – with violence if necessary: “where there is only a choice between cowardice and violence, I would advocate violence” (Bhandopadhyaya 1960, pp. 5-6). He further clarified how non-violence means exercising moral restraint in the face of intense provocation: “non-violence comes into play only when it comes in contact with violence. One who refrains from violence when there is no occasion for its exercise is simply un-violent” (Borman 1986, p.15). Whereas *ahimsa* represents an absolute moral commitment to non-injury in thought, word, and deed, Gandhi’s political non-violence acknowledged the complexities of social struggle, allowing for calibrated resistance and context-sensitive use of arms.

### 2.1 Collective and individual civil disobedience

As central forms of non-violent resistance in Iran, the graphic text powerfully portrays mass mobilisation, protests, demonstrations, strikes, boycotts, civil disobedience, and courting arrest. One of the earliest sections traces the emergence of the slogan “Jin, Jiyan, Azadi,” showing how collective action grows organically from shared histories of oppression. The two-page layout uses parallel panel structures – three tiers of two juxtaposed panels each – to emphasise continuity across time and geography. This is a technique called ‘braiding’ in comic studies, in which panels are linked through non-narrative correspondences. On the left-hand page, Kurdish women workers in Turkey raise flags as the slogan takes shape twenty years ago; on the facing page, Iranian women echo the same cry as they raise their veils, transforming the veil into the symbolic equivalent of a flag. The second tier of panels reinforces this mirroring: women in northern Syria agitate for equality and democracy a decade earlier, visually matched with identical panel frames on the right-hand page showing

Iranian women demonstrating against the killing of Mahsa Amini. The clenched, upraised fist of a Syrian protestor on the left side page becomes, on the facing page, the upraised arms of Iranian women brandishing their veils – linking the past and present struggles for equality and dignity. In the third tier, female militants with guns confront the masked militia of the Islamic State; this is paralleled by Iranian women holding placards and veils emblazoned with the “Woman, Life, Freedom” slogan. This visual pairing equates the moral force of non-violent protest with the physical courage required in armed resistance, suggesting that the Iranian women’s movement is no less courageous or determined. The final panels on both pages are especially striking: on one side, armed women glare defiantly; on the other, the slogan reverberates across the world, signalling the global resonance of their cause. The concluding caption “Today that mantra has transcended borders and languages: the Iranian woman’s revolution is in full swing” (Catel and Perrin 2024, p.27) shows the unstoppable momentum of the non-violent uprising. This visual and narrative structure is deeply significant in the Gandhian sense. First, it demonstrates that non-violence does not arise from weakness. The mirrored images of women underscore that those committed to non-violence are as fully capable of resistance by force as those who armed themselves against a formidable militia. The panels therefore embody Gandhi’s insistence that non-violence is powerful precisely because it is chosen from a position of strength. Second, the spread of the slogan across Turkey, Syria, Iran, and the world illustrates another Gandhian insight: genuine non-violent protest, rooted in truth and collective suffering, cannot be confined by borders and is bound to succeed.

Gandhi also argued that anyone can undertake non-violent resistance – regardless of age, gender, strength, or social position – and Satrapi’s work mirrors this inclusivity. The section titled “They’re Watching You” introduces an unlikely resister: an elderly, bald, bespectacled man whose fearful backward glance reveals his own threatening shadow that holds a phone, emblematic of the pervasive surveillance that makes trust impossible in Iran. He is presented as “Mr. Jafari, a middle-class Iranian family man who would rather lead a quiet life and not get involved in politics” (Neyestani and Vahid 2024, p.90). Yet his transformation begins when his daughter joins the protests, prompting him to desire participation in the revolution. The narrative underscores the regime’s relentless efforts to “trick, unsettle and distress him,” illustrating how authoritarian systems weaponise intimidation to suppress even the mildest impulses toward dissent (Neyestani and Vahid 2024, p.90). Satrapi’s long, horizontally stretched panels visually communicate the suffocating uniformity of state

propaganda. Televisions broadcast the looming figures of religious and military authorities, sensationalised entertainment, and coerced confessions from protesters – tactics designed to destabilise citizens and erode solidarity. The atmosphere of paranoia and misinformation fractures social cohesion, making opposition appear futile. A striking borderless black panel depicts a religious leader metaphorically dismembering the nation’s diverse communities – “left, right, Kurds, Persian, Balochs, Arabs, poor, middle-class, celebrities, men, women, nurses, pensioners...” – revealing how the regime thrives on division (Neyestani and Vahid 2024, p.96). This fragmentation is followed by the image of a Goliath-like militia figure crushing the diminutive Mr. Jafari underfoot, warning him to comply “if you want your country to stay in one piece,” (Neyestani and Vahid 2024, p.97). This illustrates what Gandhi termed ‘coercion,’ which he described as any pressure exerted on the soul that violates or constrains its freedom, and which was akin to violence (Borman 1986, p. 16). The imbalance of power is overwhelming, yet the narrative arc does not end in defeat. In the final six uniform panels, Mr. Jafari appears boxed in, visually representing mental confinement and social paralysis. But the last panel dramatically breaks this structure: he bursts out of the frame, demanding whether the reader, too, has fallen under the regime’s control. This rupture signifies the reclamation of agency and affirms that even the most vulnerable – frightened, isolated, and elderly – retain the capacity for resistance. Satrapi thus suggests that in a climate of fear, the courage of ordinary individuals becomes the most radical expression of non-violence.

## 2.2 Ahimsa

The anthem of the movement, “Baraye,” penned by Hajipour, expresses the Gandhian ideal of *ahimsa*, which for Gandhi embraced “the whole of creation ... not only human” (Bhandopadhyaya 1960, p.63). The lyrics articulate a capacious moral empathy that cuts across gender, class, environment, and national borders. It calls for individual freedom (“For the sake of dancing in the street”), solidarity between the genders (“For my sister, your sister, our sisters”) and demands attention to economic suffering (“For the shame of the penniless ... for the dreams of street children”). It extends compassion to the natural world (“For this polluted air ... withered streets”) and recognises the vulnerability of migrants and the precariat (“For the Afghan children”). The song also gestures toward the struggles of students, thinkers, and the young (“For our future ... for our imprisoned intellectuals”), and ends by invoking the basic rights to dignity and livelihood (“For the houses in rubble”). Its final affirmation, the emblematic slogan of

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the movement, “For liberty,” ties these scattered experiences of injustice into a message of universal reach (Vahid and Adiban 2024, pp. 31-43). Taken together, these invocations embody the quintessential Gandhian vision of love as an active, expansive force that reaches out to all creation. The anthem does not merely catalogue grievances; it aspires to universal human rights, echoing Gandhi’s insistence that true non-violence begins in an ethic of universal care. In articulating a solidarity that is at once personal and planetary, the song exemplifies the Gandhian belief that *ahimsa* arises from recognising the interconnectedness of all life.

### 3. Truth

The ethical core of Gandhian philosophy and the underlying principle of his life was his adherence to Truth, grounded initially in the conviction that “God is Truth,” which later evolved into the more radical formulation: “Truth is God. There is no higher God than Truth” (Gandhi 1925). For Gandhi, Truth was not a dogmatic doctrine but an evolving ideal to be continually discovered through introspection, humility, and disciplined self-knowledge. This is reflected in the title of his autobiography, *Satya Na Prayogo* (“Experiments with Truth”), where “Atmakatha” (autobiography) appears only as a subtitle – signalling that the pursuit of Truth, rather than the narrative of his life, was of primary importance. His lifelong search for God was therefore predicated not on adherence to any specific religious tradition, but on the relentless pursuit of Truth as the highest form of spiritual realisation as he declared in his editorial of *Young India* on 8 January 1925. Gandhi’s spiritual identification of God as Truth and Love transformed politics into an arena for moral action. Truth required radical transparency: openness in public conduct, honesty in ideas and decisions, and a firm rejection of secrecy, deceit, manipulation, and fraud – all of which he saw as subtle forms of violence. As Gandhi asserted in the *Young India* editorial of 1931, “Truth hates secrecy. The more open you are, the more truthful you are likely to be” (Bandhopadyaya 1960, p. 56). Truth could be realised through service to humanity, especially the poor, by defending the dignity of every individual and resisting discrimination and violence (Brown 2011, p. 55). Gandhi’s political method rested on the deep interrelatedness of Truth and *ahimsa*. Opponents were not enemies but fellow seekers of truth, and therefore political engagement required negotiation grounded in mutual respect. As he famously stated, “The way of peace is the way of truth... A truthful man cannot long remain violent” (Gandhi 1926). Terchek (2011) observes that Gandhi believed one approached Truth more fully through love rather

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than hate, through rational dialogue rather than passion, and by confronting injustice rather than preserving superficial order (p. 118). In conflating Truth and *ahimsa*, Gandhi crafted a moral-political philosophy in which ethical self-discipline and active non-violence became indispensable paths to realising the Truth.

### 3.1 Moral authenticity

Borman (1986) highlights Gandhi's understanding of truth as a form of moral authenticity. As he explains, "Moral authenticity means the effort to bring inner states and outer conduct into congruence by speaking and acting one's convictions. Gandhi believes that this effort brings into the world the moral quality denoted by Truth, and this justifies his absolute prescription for moral authenticity and forthrightness" (Borman 1986, p. 15). This is exemplified by "The Art of Rebellion" by Deloupy and Farid Vahid, where, in a sequence of wordless panels, a young woman moves through her day, which culminates in a full-page declaration of her everyday acts – remaining single, living alone, running, wearing makeup, showing hair, playing music, drinking, smoking, flirting, travelling alone, rejecting motherhood, deciding to sleep with a man ... or a woman, before affirming: "Being Free! All these small acts ... are far from trivial. As the famous Persian proverb goes: 'The ocean is made of single drops.' The art of rebellion is an everyday battle." (Deloupy and Vahid 2024, p. 203). She lives an authentic life even when she realises she could be severely punished by the regime, embodying Gandhi's notion of 'truth force' which demands bearing witness, confronting injustice, suffering and steadfastly refusing to submit.

Similarly, "In the Hellhole of Evin Prison" recounts the detention, torture, and coerced confession of a woman named Nasrin, who scratches "Just keep going Nasrin" onto the walls of the notorious prison beside an image of a stick figure with a clenched fist raised in defiance. The narrative leaves unclear whether she is the human rights lawyer Nasrin Sotoudeh, or another anonymous Nasrin imprisoned for removing her headscarf and dancing "like a whore" in the street (Vahid and Neyestani 2024, p. 55). Panels record prisoners marking days of captivity with tally marks, while Nasrin's fear is rendered through her hunched posture and tear-streaked face. Just before her forced confession and release, she breaks down: "I can't, I can't stand this anymore." (Vahid and Neyestani 2024, p. 56). Her coerced confession is visually paralleled with Galileo's: the guard transforms into an inquisitor, both invoking "God's law" as the basis of their practice (Vahid and Neyestani 2024, pp. 55, 58), exposing how religious authority is weaponised against reason – whether scientific or

gendered. Nasrin's anguished face is juxtaposed with Galileo's signature; his declaration, "The future shall be the judge," is followed by a panel of her parents awaiting her release. A sequence of wordless panels shows Nasrin embraced by her parents, then walking forward as the stick figure she once drew leads her. In the final full-page panel, she removes her headscarf in defiance while a man informs on her and a guard pursues her, as she repeats the words she once etched on the prison wall: "Just keep going." (Vahid and Neyestani 2024, p. 67). Nasrin's open defiance echoes Gandhi's idea that Truth is not validated by majority consent; it must be upheld even when in a minority, even in solitude.

### **3.2 Refusal to maintain superficial peace**

In the pursuit of Truth, Gandhi held that one must confront injustice directly rather than preserve a superficial peace. When persuasion failed, he strategically created "a crisis that leads to conflict albeit non-violently," urging those long "dominated to protest actively and struggle for their autonomy" (Terchek 2011, p. 177). This Gandhian dynamic is visually illustrated in "A Demonstration in Iran". Two young men step out to join a protest march; as they walk, others – men and women – quietly fall into step, all smoking cigarettes as a subtle sign of solidarity and rebellion. They wait with deliberate patience until their numbers swell, and then, at a collective signal, the women "throw off their scarves" while the crowd shouts, "Death to the Dictator" (Rabate and Perrin 2024, p. 48). The state's response is immediate: riot police on motorbikes and the *Lebas Shakhsi*, the vicious vigilante force "these guys beat up on you like madmen, they're real killers" (Rabate and Perrin 2024, p. 49) chase the crowd with teargas and batons. Once home, the demonstrators check on those arrested, respond to anxious queries from families, check hospitals for the injured and are eventually heartened to know that "There's videos of the march online, it'll go viral, it wasn't all for nothing" (Rabate and Perrin 2024, p. 51). When one asks, "And tomorrow?" the response is firm and stoic: "We go again" (Rabate and Perrin 2024, p. 51). This episode illuminates three facets of Gandhian Truth: transparency – the protesters act in full visibility unmasked and welcome the spread of the video online; resistance to unjust authority – by staging the march and removing their scarves, they deliberately provoke an incident that exposes systemic injustice; and courageous persistence – despite arrests and violence, they commit to returning, fully aware that any of them may be next. Through their actions, the demonstrators embody the Gandhian ethic of truth-force in a contemporary, gender-inclusive struggle for dignity.

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### Conclusion

Satrapi's 259-page anthology of graphic narratives, comprising 25 historical accounts, testimonies, and visual documents, reveals striking resonances with Gandhian ideology. The book is anchored in the moral force of protest: a refusal to accept injustice and a determination not to submit to illegitimate authority. Its very conception, Satrapi notes, is meant "to take tangible action" rather than merely express outrage (Satrapi 2024, p. 2). She states her purpose with clarity: "to explain what's going on in Iran ... for a non-Iranian readership ... [and] to remind Iranians that they are not alone" (Satrapi 2024, p. 3). This is a subversive act for any Iranian – even in exile – given the regime's tight control over state narratives. The graphic form itself becomes a mode of resistance. It can depict what traditional media, photographs, and videos might be censored from showing, rendering state violence, repression, and dissent in stark, uncompromising visual terms. Satrapi's anthology both depicts and is itself an act of resistance: documenting abuses, amplifying testimonies, and 'speaking truth to power' in a profoundly Gandhian ethical sense.

Further, the form reinforces Gandhian ideals of truth, non-violence, and collective resistance. Colour dialectics, with visually austere, stark black-and-white dialectics, evoke documentary witnessing and the severity of repression. Where colour is introduced, it continues dialectical logic heightening contrasts. The austerity and severity of authority figures – often rendered in monochromatic tones – are set against the vibrancy of ordinary life. Red appears strategically: sometimes marking the dramatic violence of blood against a black-and-white field, at others signalling rebellion. The young girl's traces of red in "The Art of Rebellion" – lipstick, dress, or scarf – rupture subdued palettes, suggesting that defiance restores vitality, agency, and emotional intensity to a regulated existence. Similarly, violence is presented without spectacle; events are shown, not sensationalised. The panel structure slows perception, and the gutters invite reflection, not identification. This formal restraint embodies Gandhian discipline of resistance through control, not retaliation. Finally, the sequential build-up of protest across panels mirrors the gradual, collective momentum of Gandhian mass mobilisation.

Yet, as the anthology demonstrates, non-violent struggle against the Iranian regime has been long and arduous. Non-violence historically works most effectively against governments with at least minimal democratic accountability and responsiveness to public opinion. Mandela famously observed that "Non-violent passive resistance is effective as long as your opponent adheres to the same

rules as you do.. But if peaceful protest is met with violence, its efficacy is at an end” (Mandela 1994, pp. 146–147). Highly repressive regimes often respond to peaceful protests with disproportionate force and censorship, which undermines political visibility. Without institutional checks, civil liberties, or systems for negotiation, non-violence can become fragmented, co-opted, or transformed to armed resistance. Gandhi, himself, famously advised the Jews to offer themselves for mass slaughter to Hitler, since they were inevitably dying in millions. The crucial difference lies in his insistence on moral courage – the conviction to sustain struggle without rancour despite overwhelming repression. Significantly, there have been moments, even in Nazi Germany, when German officers admitted that non-violent resisters posed greater difficulty than guerrilla fighters (Hardiman 2003, p. 61). Globally, non-violent uprisings have succeeded against entrenched autocracies: the Shah in Iran (1979), Marcos in the Philippines (1986), Pinochet in Chile (1989), Ceausescu in Romania (1989), Milosevic in Yugoslavia (2000), Shevardnadze in Georgia (2003), and Omar al-Bashir in Sudan (2018–19).

Where religious ideology and authoritarian economics converge, dismantling tyranny becomes harder, yet Iran’s limited but real gains show that change is possible. Success depends on the patience, persistence, and strategic provocation that awaken public conscience – a principle Gandhi insisted on when dialogue and persuasion are exhausted. Iranian women have demonstrated that they do not need to be “saved”; they claim their own agency and drive their own transformation. As the narratives throughout the anthology demonstrate, the sacrifices, moral commitments, and resistant techniques of Iranian women and men embody Gandhian principles: detached self-sacrifice, deliberate and courageous action, social conscience, and environmental and ethical responsibility. *Woman, Life, Freedom may, therefore, be read as Gandhian ideology in action.*

This study could be further extended by examining the anthology’s wider thematic range beyond non-violence – for instance, human rights violations documented throughout the anthology, and how visual testimony contributes to global rights discourse, its representations of gendered surveillance, feminist embodied resistance, revolutionary structural challenge, digital resistance, trauma, and the politics of exile, diaspora, and long-distance nationalism. Future studies could also explore how Satrapi’s visual strategies contribute to global solidarity movements and reshape the graphic narrative as a transnational tool of witnessing and protest.

## Notes

1. Chador is a Persian term for a loose-fitting full body cloak that covers the hair and body. Burqua is an Arabic term for a loose-fitting garment that covers the hair, body, and face, and sometimes features a mesh screen for the eyes. A hijab is a headscarf that covers the hair and neck, leaving the face visible.

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# Lobelia and Mud: A Cross-Cultural Analysis of Thomsonian Medicine and Gandhian Nature Cure

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## ABSTRACT

*This study compares two alternative medical movements that challenged dominant biomedical paradigms: Samuel Thomson in early nineteenth-century America and Mahatma Gandhi in the twentieth century India. Both were sceptical of institutional medicine and promoted healing grounded in self-reliance, simplicity, and trust in the body's natural restorative capacities. Thomson opposed practices such as bleeding, calomel use, and mineral drugging, and developed a system based on the principle of vital heat, using lobelia, capsicum, vapour baths, and enemas. Gandhi, in contrast, criticised hospital-centred, drug-dependent medicine in colonial India and promoted Nature Cure based on the five elements such as earth, water, ether, sunlight, and air, also through mud therapy, hydrotherapy, fasting, dietary control, and spiritual discipline. The study highlights how such systems emerged as accessible and environmentally responsive healing traditions.*

**Key words:** *Thomsonian Medicine, Gandhian Nature Cure, Naturopathy, Community Health, Lay Healing*

## Introduction

ALTERNATIVE HEALING SYSTEMS have frequently emerged throughout medical history as acts of defiance against the dominance of conventional medical wisdom. These methods were closely related to broader questions of who gets to define health, whose knowledge matters, and how care should be provided; they went beyond

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experimentation with novel treatments. Such systems represent the continuing human quest for independence, self-respect, and purpose in the face of institutional authority. The American herbalist Samuel Thomson (1769–1843) claimed that illness resulted from the disruption of the body's essential heat. Thomson proposed a new therapeutic approach that included enemas, steam baths, stimulants, botanical remedies, and emetics to restore bodily temperature. Thomson's system, which empowered lay people to treat illness at home, was more than a medical approach; it constituted a democratic challenge to professional medical monopoly. In the second half of the nineteenth century, Mohandas K. Gandhi (1869–1948) advanced his philosophy of Nature Cure in a markedly different cultural and political landscape. Gandhi's model drew upon European naturopathic literature, traditional Indian medical practices, and his own experiments with health. According to Gandhi, disease resulted from violations of nature's laws, and health could be restored by returning to elemental resources such as earth, water, air, sunlight, and ether, combined with dietary reform, fasting, and spiritual discipline. Gandhi established his therapeutic vision on moral and social reform, connected with self-control and voluntary service. His core focus was mainly on the reconstruction of village life for individual and collective health (CWMG 50: pp. 28–31). His Nature Cure thus functioned not merely as a therapeutic system but as a social programme and medical philosophy that reinforced self-reliance and *Swadeshi* values.

This study is primarily based on a comparative analysis of Thomsonian medicine and Gandhian Nature Cure, and on the examination of their therapeutic practices, philosophical foundations, and institutional visions within their respective socio-historical contexts. In early nineteenth-century America, Thomsonian medicine placed a high priority on household autonomy and acute intervention. It provided physiologically uncertain but technically detailed treatments with a minor emphasis on preventive measures. Gandhian Nature Cure, on the other hand, created a preventive, ethically integrated, and village-focused health model appropriate to colonial India. Village reconstruction initiatives connected physical care with moral reform, leading to economic independence and communal life. The paper shows that these two traditions are complementary rather than antagonistic frameworks for easily accessible, community-based health systems. It further contends that Gandhian Nature Cure, with its focus on safety, cultural congruence, cost-effectiveness, prevention, and reconstruction-oriented health practice, offers a more sustainable model for village-based Indian society. In contrast, Thomsonian herbalism offers important insights into acute steam- and plant-based

therapeutics. To contribute to both the history of medicine and current discussions on integrative, people-centred health care, the study proposes a layered health-care model in which Gandhian Nature Cure serves as the basis for village-scale practice, with selective adaptation of Thomsonian acute interventions in trained referral settings.

### **Literature Review**

Academic work on Samuel Thomson's system of medicine has consistently highlighted its dual character as both a therapeutic innovation and a populist medical movement. In her essay, *Samuel Thomson's Botanic System: Alternative Medicine in Early Nineteenth-Century Vermont*, Joanna Smith Weinstock writes that, by refusing practices such as bleeding and calomel and by challenging the medical profession's monopoly, Thomson won the trust of rural families and artisans. These communities, already wary of orthodox physicians, saw in his system a more open, accessible approach to healing that aligned with their values of independence and fairness. This populist orientation is further contextualised in Alex Berman's classic study, *The Thomsonian Movement and Its Relation to American Pharmacy and Medicine*, which frames Thomsonianism as an organised revolt against the "mineral faculty" and "medical elitism", deeply rooted in Jacksonian individualism and anti-authoritarian sentiment. John Uri Lloyd has carefully traced the evolution of Thomson's therapeutic system in *Samuel Thomson and the Early History of Thomsonianism*, which provides a bibliographic and textual analysis of successive editions of Thomson's manuals. Lloyd shows how Thomson progressively refined his *Botanic Materia Medica*, particularly the use of lobelia emetics, steam baths, stimulants, and injections; while consciously tailoring medical knowledge for household use rather than professional control. Susan E. Fillmore's article, *Samuel Thomson and His Effect on the American Health Care System*, stated how Thomsonian practice reshaped public attitudes toward medical self-reliance and helped legitimise domestic and non-institutional healing practices in early republican America. Both studies claim that Thomson's therapeutic toolkit was embedded not merely in herbalism but in a broader political and cultural impulse towards medical democracy. The Becker Medical Library offers a helpful overview that places Thomsonianism within the broader American scepticism toward medical monopolies. It also anticipated later traditions in different sectors, such as herbal medicine, hydrotherapy, and home remedies. Turning to Mahatma Gandhi, his own writings remain central to understanding the philosophy of Nature Cure. In his works such as *Nature Cure, Guide to Health, and Key to Health*, Gandhi lays out

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a system rooted in the five natural elements: earth, water, sunlight, air, and ether. Gandhi placed practices such as mud poultices, hydrotherapy, simple diets, fasting, and spiritual discipline at the very core of his vision of health. For him, true well-being meant prevention, moral self-control, and living in harmony with nature, rather than simply treating illness once it appeared. This experimental and open-ended dimension of his philosophy is highlighted by Koilpillai J. Charles in *Gandhi's Views on Health*, where Gandhi emerges as an evolving thinker, willing to accept milk, surgery, and limited biomedical interventions, yet still deeply distrustful of allopathy.

Joseph S. Alter, in *Gandhi's Body, Gandhi's Truth: Nonviolence and the Biomoral Imperative of Public Health*, shows how Gandhi's dietary experiments, celibacy, and nature cure practices were inseparable from his political ethics. Alter argues that Gandhi's concern with the body was not just personal but profoundly political. It is a biomoral project in which individual health serves as a necessary foundation for Swaraj and collective well-being. The philosopher Akeel Bilgrami revisits Gandhi's critique of modern medicine in *Gandhi on the Wider Significance of Science*, situating his medical scepticism within a broader resistance to Western scientism and its clash with indigenous healing traditions. Finally, Prashant Khattri and P. C. Joshi, in *Biomedicalisation and Gandhi's Vision of Health: Observations from Sevagram*, explore the postcolonial afterlife of Gandhian health ideas. Their study reveals how Gandhian naturopathy has been reshaped within institutional and biomedical frameworks, exposing tensions between decentralised care, state patronage, and the pressures of corporate medicalisation.

Both the medical philosophies of Thomsonian medicine and Gandhian Nature Cure have been examined within the broader histories of medical pluralism. James C. Whorton, in *Crusaders for Fitness*, situates Thomsonianism amid early American health reform, explaining its emphasis on personal autonomy, moral discipline, and suspicion of centralised expertise. Gadulally, Gandhi's naturopathy has been read as part of Swadeshi thought and village reconstruction, in which health became inseparable from moral reforms, economic self sufficiency, and agrarian life. Despite the richness of these studies, the two traditions are usually discussed apart, though they belonged to different worlds. What tends to be overlooked is how much they share: a preference for therapeutic minimalism, an ethic of selfregulation, and a deep resistance to the authority of professional medicine.

### **Thomsonian Medicine: An Introduction to its Practice and Therapeutics**

*Lobelia inflata* stood at the centre of Samuel Thomson's therapeutic programme and quickly became the most distinctive and controversial element of Thomsonian practice. Samuel Thomson repeatedly defended *Lobelia*, presenting it as a safe emetic and antispasmodic even as regular physicians condemned it as toxic and dangerous. In his manuals and public statements, he insisted that the plant's effects were widely misunderstood, arguing that harm came not from *Lobelia* itself but from its careless or improper use. This emphasis on safety was central to his larger rhetorical strategy: botanical remedies were portrayed as natural, open, and trustworthy, set deliberately against the bleeding, mercury, and mineral drugs that defined orthodox medicine.

Alex Berman has shown that *Lobelia* became so closely identified with Thomsonianism that it functioned as the movement's emblem, appearing repeatedly in legal proceedings against Thomsonian practitioners and symbolising the broader conflict between botanical medicine and professional authority (Berman 1951). Beyond *Lobelia*, Samuel Thomson turned to a host of fiery stimulants meant to strengthen the body's "vital heat" and keep perspiration flowing. At the centre of this approach was cayenne pepper, which he praised as a universal stimulant. Alongside it, his popular "composition powders," a blend of bayberry, ginger, and other botanicals, became household staples (Lloyd 1907, pp. 6-7). Thomson's remedies also included a wide assortment of bitters, plasters, ointments, syrups, and drops, but the real backbone of his system lay in six numbered preparations. These were designed to make treatment systematic and reproducible, so that ordinary families could practice medicine at home without relying on professionals. "No. 1" was built around *lobelia inflata*, given as a tincture for asthma or mixed with other herbs in enemas, serving as the system's main emetic. "No. 2," a pungent mix of capsicum, ginger, and black pepper, was used to preserve internal warmth and encourage free perspiration. "No. 3" comprised bayberry, white pond lily root, hemlock bark, sumac bark, leaves and berries, witch-hazel leaves, wild red raspberry leaves, and squaw-weed, and was used to scour the stomach and bowels and remove what Thomson described as "canker." "No. 4" consisted of bitter tonics, including barberry, balmony, poplar bark, bitter root, and Ohio kercuma, designed to correct bile and restore digestion. "No. 5," a syrup for dysentery, aimed to strengthen weakened stomachs and bowels and included poplar bark, barberry, peach or cherry stone meat, sugar,

and brandy. “No. 6,” commonly known as the Rheumatic Drops, was a high-wine alcoholic compound containing gum myrrh and cayenne, with spirits of turpentine and gum camphor added when used externally; it functioned as a powerful stimulant and counter-irritant in severe or collapsed conditions (Fillmore 1986, pp. 188–191). Through this numbered system, Thomson transformed household medicine into a structured, teachable, and standardised therapeutic programme, enabling lay practitioners to apply what he regarded as systematic medical knowledge outside institutional and professional control (Thomson 1832, pp. 25–60). This systematisation transformed household medicine into a portable, teachable, and repeatable therapeutic programme rather than an improvised collection of folk remedies.

Steam baths and injections completed the Thomsonian therapeutic regimen and exemplified Thomson’s emphasis on methodical procedure. Detailed instructions were provided for administering steam baths, with particular stress on the simultaneous use of stimulants and warm beverages to maintain an open, sweating state. Warm liquid infusions served both to evacuate the system and to circulate heat internally. The careful sequencing of these interventions, along with attention to timing, repetition, and bodily response, gave Thomsonian practice a structured and predictable character that strongly appealed to lay users. As Fillmore has observed, this procedural clarity was central to the popular reception of Thomsonian medicine, especially in rural communities where professional medical care was scarce, costly, and often distrusted (Fillmore 1986, pp. 67–78). Underlying these therapeutic techniques was a distinctive philosophy of accessibility and medical autonomy. Thomson repeatedly asserted that “the power to cure disease is in every man’s hands,” presenting his manuals and medical kits as instruments through which ordinary people could reclaim authority over their own bodies. Professional physicians were portrayed as monopolists who concealed simple therapeutic truths behind Latin terminology and institutional privilege. In this sense, Thomsonian medicine functioned not merely as a therapeutic system but as a democratic project (Warner 1986, pp. 99–127; Whorton 2002, pp. 45–72). The crisis-oriented logic of Thomsonian medicine reflected the socio-medical insecurity of early republican America. Disease often struck suddenly, physicians were unevenly distributed, and therapeutic authority remained contested. Thomson’s emphasis on vital heat, perspiration, and emesis can therefore be understood not simply as a therapeutic doctrine but as a practical response to the material and political realities of early nineteenth-century American life, in which household autonomy

served as a necessary substitute for institutional medical provision.

### **Gandhian Nature Cure: An Introduction to its Practice and Therapeutics**

Gandhi's engagement with Nature Cure was shaped not only by philosophical conviction but also by sustained, hands-on therapeutic practice spanning continents, domestic spaces, prisons, and villages. From an early stage, Gandhi expressed a desire to study medicine, a path repeatedly blocked by his ethical opposition to dissection and vivisection practices, which he regarded as morally indefensible and incompatible with religious principles. His hostility to allopathic medicine stemmed less from ignorance than from a deep aversion to what he saw as its reliance on bodily violence, chemical intervention, and experimental exploitation of living beings. However, Gandhi's rejection of allopathy did not translate into therapeutic passivity. On the contrary, he assumed the role of healer with remarkable intensity, treating family members, co-workers, prisoners, labourers, and villagers through direct observation, detailed case analysis, and continuous experimentation. He prescribed fasting, dietary restriction, enemas, wet-sheet packs, mud poultices, sun and air baths, controlled physical labour, breathing exercises, and prolonged walking, often supervising treatment personally and attending to minute bodily details, including bowel function, stool examination, and dietary preparation. His interventions in cases of typhoid, anaemia, asthma, plague, malaria, dyspepsia, blood pressure disorders, fractures, burns, and wounds reveal a mode of practice grounded in empirical attentiveness rather than doctrinal rigidity. Gandhi was willing to defy medical authority, rejecting meat, eggs, and beef tea when prescribed. However, he also acknowledged the risks involved in such unorthodox experimentation, expressed anxiety during critical cases, recorded setbacks, and repeatedly cautioned against treating his health views as unquestionable truth (Bandyopadhyaya 1970, pp. 52-58).

Crucially, Gandhi's therapeutic authority extended beyond treatment into pedagogy and discipline. Illness became an occasion for moral instruction, self-restraint, and behavioural reform. Patients were required to give up smoking, excess salt intake, pulses, and sedentary habits; fasting and walking were prescribed as both physiological and ethical correctives. At the same time, Gandhi was not opposed to all biomedical intervention in principle. He accepted vaccination during cholera outbreaks, underwent surgery for appendicitis, and openly acknowledged the limits of naturopathy gestures that underscore his pragmatic recognition of medical

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contingency. His later establishment of the Nature Cure centre at Uruli Kanchan, equipped without mechanical devices and oriented toward preventive care, free knowledge-sharing, and fixed allowances for doctors, reflected his conviction that health must be democratised, *Swadeshi*, and ethically regulated rather than commodified. Gandhian Nature Cure was neither a marginal eccentricity nor a purely symbolic critique of modern medicine. It functioned as a lived, labour-intensive practice through which Gandhi enacted an alternative medical modernity, one grounded in observation, self-experimentation, prevention, moral authority, and intimate clinical engagement. Nature Cure thus operated as a mode of ethical governance over the body, linking healing to discipline, responsibility, and social reform rather than to professional specialisation or pharmaceutical dependence (Bandyopadhyaya 1970, pp. 60–65).

The conviction that health was inseparable from obedience to nature lay at the foundation of Mahatma Gandhi's medical philosophy. In Nature Cure and related writings, Gandhi argued that the science of natural therapeutics rested upon the five fundamental elements: earth, water, ether (akash), sunlight, and air and that disease arose primarily from violations of nature's laws rather than from isolated physiological malfunction (Gandhi 1942, pp. 1-20; Alter 2000, pp. 1-35). Recovery, in his view, required a disciplined return to elemental living through dietary reform, simple physical therapies, and rigorous self-restraint. Unlike biomedical models that locate disease primarily in pathogens or bodily mechanisms, Gandhi linked healing to the cultivation of moral character and ethical discipline. As S. N. Kumar has observed, Gandhi's conception of health was as ethical as it was physical, binding bodily recovery to the transformation of habits, conduct, and the inner life (Kumar 2007, pp. 15-38).

Earth treatment formed one of the most distinctive components of Gandhian Nature Cure and reflected his engagement with European naturopathic ideas, particularly Adolf Just's Return to Nature. Gandhi recommended Mud Poultrices for a wide range of ailments, including headaches, boils, local inflammation, and constipation (CWMG 50: pp. 45–47). He also described instances in which he used abdominal mud packs to relieve digestive distress in cases such as typhoid fever. These applications were governed by strict procedural rules: the earth had to be clean, heated to sterilise it, and reused only after thorough drying (CWMG 48: pp. 112–114). Gandhi even proposed mud poultrices as substitutes for commercial antiphlogistine plasters, underscoring his effort to replace industrial medical products with locally available, non-commercial alternatives. (Alter 2000, pp. 36–78; Hardiman 2009, pp. 101–130).

Hydrotherapy constituted another central pillar of Gandhi's therapeutic system and drew heavily upon the methods of Louis Kuhne. Gandhi described hip and sit baths in considerable detail, specifying tub dimensions, water temperature, duration, and expected bodily sensations (CWMG 48: pp. 95–99). He also recommended wet sheet packs for conditions such as fever and insomnia, noting their capacity to induce sweating or sleep and, in some cases, to reduce body temperature measurably. Foot baths, compresses, and steam inhalations further expanded this repertoire. While these treatments required procedural precision, they relied on simple household implements, such as earthen tubs, wooden planks, and blankets, thus aligning with Gandhi's broader commitment to village self-sufficiency and low-cost care. Gandhi distinguished himself from more dogmatic naturopaths by carefully recording failures and modifying practices in response to patient outcomes (Charles 2004, pp. 22–44). Gandhi also employed steam and artificial sweating, particularly for rheumatism and joint discomfort, but deliberately excluded herbal additives. The therapeutic aim, he insisted, was the physiological effect of perspiration itself rather than pharmacological stimulation. To minimise risk, he advised enclosing steaming vessels within blanket tents and cautioned against the dangers of open flames. In this respect, Gandhi echoed aspects of earlier thermal therapies while simplifying them to reduce dependence on drugs and specialised expertise, prioritising safety and reproducibility in domestic and village settings (Whorton 1982, pp. 91–118).

Sunlight therapy formed another important element of Gandhian Nature Cure. Drawing upon contemporary European accounts of heliotherapy for chronic ulcers and tuberculosis, Gandhi advocated gradual morning sun exposure as a general tonic. At the same time, he warned against overheating in India's climate, advising that the head be protected with cool mud packs during sunbaths. His approach illustrates how Gandhian Nature Cure selectively adapted transnational medical ideas while embedding them within local environmental realities (Bilgrami 2016, pp. 361–382). Air and akash occupied an equally significant place in Gandhi's health philosophy. He encouraged constant exposure to fresh air, open windows, and uncluttered living spaces, conceiving akash as the encompassing spatial condition in which life and health unfolded. This emphasis anticipated later ecological understandings of health by linking architectural design, environment, and bodily well-being (Hardiman 2009 pp. 131–160). Dietary regulation and fasting were integral to Gandhi's therapeutic framework. He advocated moderation, careful mastication, and simple vegetarian diets, consistently warning against

overeating and habitual drug use. Although he initially rejected milk on ethical grounds, Gandhi later permitted its use for the weak and convalescent, citing his personal experience of illness. Alter has interpreted this shift as emblematic of Gandhi's experimental and pragmatic orientation, in which ethical principles were continually tested against lived bodily experience rather than rigidly imposed (Alter 1996, pp. 301–322). For Gandhi, health was inseparable from spirituality. He placed Rama-nama, the remembrance of God, at the centre of mental hygiene and moral discipline, while explicitly rejecting faith healing as superstition. Spiritual practice, he argued, amplified the effectiveness of natural therapies only when accompanied by dietary restraint, ethical conduct, and obedience to natural law. At the same time, Gandhi clearly acknowledged the limits of Nature Cure, conceding that spiritual discipline could not replace surgical intervention where bodily damage was irreversible. His own acceptance of surgery underscored a practical distinction between ethical aspiration and medical necessity (Charles 2004, pp. 45–67).

Gandhi incorporated Nature Cure into his broader vision of village reconstruction and appropriate technology. In Nature Cure, he outlined the design of village clinics equipped with earthen tubs, wooden planks, and locally trained workers operating without salaried hierarchies, integrated with agriculture, sanitation, and education. The village's clinics functioned not merely as therapeutic sites but as institutional expressions of Gandhi's commitment to self-reliant community life and decentralised health care. Taken together, Gandhian therapeutics constituted a coherent moral, social, and medical system in which disease was understood as a consequence of alienation from nature, and healing as a process of disciplined return to elemental practices, ethical self-regulation, and collective responsibility. By combining European naturopathy with Indian village realities, Gandhi transformed Nature Cure into a form of medical practice inseparable from his wider project of Swaraj, rural reconstruction, and moral reform (Bilgrami 2011, pp. 415–437).

### **Comparative Analysis of Thomsonian Medicine and Gandhian Nature Cure**

Despite their shared rejection of orthodox medical authority, Thomsonian medicine and Gandhian Nature Cure diverged sharply in how they conceptualised intervention, regulation, and responsibility in healing. These differences were not incidental but arose from the distinct social environments in which each system took shape. Thomson's medical practice addressed conditions of medical scarcity and acute illness by privileging rapid, forceful therapeutic action. In

contrast, Gandhi's Nature Cure responded to the structural problems of colonial India by prioritising prevention, restraint, and the ethical management of everyday life. The comparative analysis that follows, therefore, focuses on how each system organised therapeutic theory, bodily regulation, materia medica, ethical meaning, and institutional practice, in order to show that they represent contrasting yet complementary approaches to lay-centred healing rather than variations of a single alternative medical tradition.

### **Comparative Framework and Therapeutic Theory: Heat, Energy, and Elemental Balance**

A comparative examination of Samuel Thomson's medical system and Mahatma Gandhi's Nature Cure reveals both important points of convergence and decisive divergence, shaped by their distinct social, political, and epistemic contexts. Both traditions emerged as populist critiques of dominant medical orthodoxies and articulated a shared distrust of professional monopoly, drug-heavy intervention, and institutional medicine. Each sought to relocate healing authority within nature and the ordinary individual. However, beyond this common oppositional stance, Thomsonian medicine and Gandhian Nature Cure developed fundamentally different therapeutic logics, reflecting the contrasting historical imperatives of early nineteenth-century America and colonial India. At the level of therapeutic theory, heat and energy occupied a central position in both systems, though they were conceptualised and operationalised in markedly different ways. For Samuel Thomson, vital heat constituted the single governing principle of life and health. Disease resulted from its obstruction, depletion, or suppression, and cure required its rapid restoration. Therapeutic practice, therefore, focused on inducing perspiration and internal stimulation through steam baths, lobelia-induced emesis, pungent stimulants such as cayenne, and repeated "Courses of Medicine" (Thomson 1832, pp. 61–110). Perspiration functioned as the decisive physiological sign that morbid matter had been expelled and vitality re-established. Heat, in this framework, was not one factor among many but the explanatory axis around which pathology and cure revolved.

Gandhi likewise recognised the therapeutic significance of heat and sweating, yet he refused to elevate them into a singular explanatory principle. In Gandhian Nature Cure, steam baths and sun exposure were valued not as crisis-inducing techniques but as regulatory practices embedded within a broader elemental and ecological system. Health, for Gandhi, depended on balanced interaction among earth, water, air, sunlight, diet, and disciplined

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living, rather than on the aggressive mobilisation of any single force (Gandhi 1942, pp. 21–40). Sweating was understood as beneficial only insofar as it restored harmony between the body and its natural environment, not as a mechanism for forcibly expelling disease through physiological shock (Alter 2000, pp. 133–160). This difference marks a fundamental conceptual divide. Thomson’s system reduced disease to a physiological imbalance correctable through decisive intervention, reflecting a reductionist logic well suited to acute illness and medical insecurity (Lloyd 1907, pp. 59–90). Gandhi’s framework, by contrast, articulated a pluralistic understanding of health in which bodily processes were inseparable from environmental conditions, moral discipline, and everyday behaviour (Alter 2000, pp. 161–190). Heat functioned as one element within an interdependent system rather than as a sovereign therapeutic agent. The divergence between these therapeutic frameworks reflects their respective historical contexts. Thomsonian medicine developed in early republican America, where access to physicians was limited, professional authority was widely distrusted, and rapid intervention was culturally valued in conditions of medical uncertainty (Samuel Thomson 1832, pp. 111–160). Gandhian Nature Cure, by contrast, emerged within a colonial society confronting mass poverty, chronic illness, and the political project of national reconstruction. Its emphasis on balance, regulation, and prevention responded to the need for low-risk, reproducible practices compatible with everyday village life (Gandhi 1942, pp. 41–70). Thus, while both systems invoked nature as a therapeutic authority, they did so through fundamentally different medical logics, one centred on crisis-oriented physiological correction, the other on gradual ecological and ethical realignment.

### **Elimination, Regulation, and the Logic of Therapeutic Intervention**

The conceptual divergence between Thomsonian medicine and Gandhian Nature Cure becomes more pronounced in their respective approaches to elimination and bodily regulation. Both systems treated the removal of waste and obstructions as central to recovery. However, they differed sharply in how elimination was achieved and in the degree of physiological intensity deemed desirable. These differences reflect not only contrasting therapeutic philosophies but also distinct assumptions about the body’s capacity to tolerate intervention. In Thomsonian medicine, elimination was comprehended as an essential and urgent prerequisite for restoring health. Thomson structured his therapeutic regime around the systematic evacuation of the body through emetics, injections, steam baths, and sustained stimulation. Lobelia-induced vomiting was employed to cleanse the stomach, while

rectal injections evacuated the bowels and steam baths opened the pores to induce profuse perspiration. These interventions were organised into repeated “Courses of Medicine,” each designed to drive disease out of the body through an induced physiological crisis (Thomson 1832, pp. 161–200). Disease, in this framework, was conceived as a foreign obstruction requiring forceful expulsion rather than gradual adjustment. This interventionist logic reflected the socio-medical conditions of early nineteenth-century America, where illness often presented acutely and professional medical assistance was either inaccessible or mistrusted. Rapid, visible therapeutic action reassured patients and reinforced the appeal of Thomsonian practice among rural and working-class communities. As Berman has shown, the expectation of swift, dramatic results was a key part of Thomsonian medicine’s populist credibility (Berman 1951, pp. 250–280).

Gandhian Nature Cure adopted a markedly different approach to elimination, favouring gradual regulation over dramatic expulsion. While Gandhi acknowledged the importance of removing waste from the body, he generally rejected violent or pharmacologically driven evacuation. Instead, he emphasised wet-sheet packs, hip and sitz baths, fasting, dietary reform, controlled breathing, and sustained physical activity as primary methods for restoring bodily order (Gandhi 1942, pp. 71–95). These techniques worked by regulating bodily rhythms—circulation, digestion, and metabolism, rather than by inducing crisis. Elimination, in this framework, was a continuous process aligned with disciplined living rather than an event triggered by aggressive intervention. Although enemas were known within broader naturopathic traditions and occasionally mentioned by Gandhi, they did not occupy the central position they held in Thomsonian practice. Gandhi generally preferred methods that could be safely applied by laypersons without specialised knowledge or risk, reinforcing his emphasis on accessibility and prevention. Healing was conceived as a slow realignment with nature’s laws, achieved through sustained self-regulation rather than immediate physiological shock. The contrast between these approaches highlights a deeper divergence in therapeutic temporality (CWMG 50: pp. 20–22). Thomsonian medicine privileged immediacy: disease demanded decisive action, and cure was expected to follow visible intervention. Gandhian Nature Cure privileged duration: recovery unfolded through patient adherence to dietary restraint, cleanliness, physical labour, and environmental exposure. This difference reflects their respective moral economies of care. Thomson’s system responded to moments of crisis, while Gandhi’s addressed the long-term cultivation of bodily discipline.

Elimination was not merely a technical act but part of a continuous

process of ethical self-governance. Thus, while both Thomson and Gandhi recognised the therapeutic importance of bodily cleansing, they diverged fundamentally in method, intensity, and purpose. Thomson's evacuation-based therapies sought to expel disease through crisis-oriented intervention, whereas Gandhi's regulatory practices aimed to prevent disease by sustaining balance over time (CWMG, 50: pp. 28–31). These contrasting logics underscore the broader distinction between an interventionist and a preventive model of alternative medicine.

### **Materia Medica and the Meaning of "Natural" Therapy**

The divergence between Thomsonian medicine and Gandhian Nature Cure becomes especially clear in their respective understandings of materia medica and, more fundamentally, in what each system meant by "natural" therapy. Although both rejected mineral drugs and the dominant pharmacological practices of orthodox medicine, they differed sharply in the degree to which therapeutic efficacy was vested in substances versus practices, and in how far medicine was separated from everyday modes of living. Thomsonian medicine developed a highly structured botanical materia medica designed to function as a practical substitute for professional pharmacology. Thomson did not reject drugs as such; instead, he rejected mineral medicines and chemical compounds associated with elite medical practice. In their place, he systematised a repertoire of plant-based preparations; lobelia, capsicum, bayberry, ginger, and related botanicals are organised into numbered remedies that could be easily learned, stored, and administered within the household (Thomson 1832, pp. 201–230). This systematisation was not incidental. As Lloyd demonstrates, Thomson's numbered preparations represented a deliberate attempt to standardise domestic treatment and render therapeutic practice reproducible outside professional settings (Lloyd 1907, pp. 181–210). Botanical drugs were thus central to Thomsonian medicine, functioning as tools of intervention that allowed lay practitioners to act decisively in moments of illness.

The reliance on pungent stimulants and emetics reveals that Thomsonian "naturalness" did not imply therapeutic mildness. On the contrary, many of Thomson's preparations were intentionally powerful, designed to provoke strong physiological responses such as vomiting, sweating, and heightened circulation. As Berman has shown, this approach reflected both popular expectations of visible therapeutic action and a broader cultural confidence in the body's ability to withstand aggressive botanical intervention when guided by natural principles (Berman 1951, pp. 281–310). Nature, in Thomson's

system, was understood as a source of potent remedies capable of rivalling and morally surpassing the orthodox drugs, rather than as a model for restraint or balance. Gandhian Nature Cure advanced a radically different conception of *materia medica*. Gandhi consistently minimised the role of medicinal substances, even botanical ones, and instead defined therapy through the disciplined use of elemental resources: earth, water, sunlight, air, diet, and regulated activity. Mud poultices, hydrotherapy, sun exposure, fasting, and controlled breathing were not medicine supplements but constituted medicine itself (Alter 2000, pp. 55-83). In this framework, therapeutic efficacy lies not in the chemical properties of substances but in the body's capacity to recover when relieved of excess, corrected in habit, and reoriented toward natural rhythms.

Gandhi's rejection of elaborate pharmacology was closely tied to his ethical and political commitments. Drugs, whether mineral or botanical, represented forms of dependence on markets, experts, and institutions, that undermined self-reliance. By contrast, earth, water, air, and sunlight were universally available and morally neutral, accessible to the poorest villagers without mediation (CWMG, 50: pp. 20-22). As Alter argues, Gandhi's approach transformed medicine into a biomoral discipline, in which health emerged from restraint, simplicity, and ethical self-regulation rather than from interventionist treatment. Nature Cure thus collapsed the distinction between therapy and daily life, redefining medicine as a way of living rather than a set of remedies. This contrast also shaped each system's relationship to indigenous knowledge (Alter 1996, pp. 301-322). Thomsonian medicine, while rooted in North American herbal traditions, sought to formalise and standardise plant knowledge into a quasi-pharmacological system. Gandhian Nature Cure, by contrast, explicitly resisted formal codification, encouraging reliance on locally transmitted knowledge and situational judgment rather than fixed prescriptions. Gandhi acknowledged the value of Ayurveda but refused to elevate it into a professionalised system, preferring instead a flexible, experiential approach grounded in observation and moral responsibility (Bilgrami 2011, pp. 415-437). The differing conceptions of *materia medica* thus reveal deeper philosophical distinctions. Thomson treated nature as a repository of powerful substances that could be mobilised to combat disease directly. Gandhi treated nature as a moral order to which the body must submit through discipline and restraint. One system expanded the domestic pharmacopoeia; the other deliberately contracted it. However, both strategies served a common purpose, undermining dependence on institutional medicine and restoring agency to ordinary people. In this sense, Thomsonian

medicine and Gandhian Nature Cure articulated two distinct trajectories within the history of alternative medicine. Thomson offered a botanical counter-pharmacology capable of matching the intensity of orthodox medicine while rejecting its substances. Gandhi offered a post-pharmacological model in which medicine dissolved into ethics, environment, and everyday practice.

### **Ethics, Authority, and the Management of Risk**

The ethical foundations of Thomsonian medicine and Gandhian Nature Cure shaped how each system understood medical authority and risk. In Thomsonian practice, ethical legitimacy was derived primarily from the redistribution of technical knowledge. Thomson framed healing as a practical skill that laypeople could master, and responsibility lay in correct execution rather than moral restraint. Risk was acknowledged but deemed acceptable when weighed against the dangers of orthodox medicine, reinforcing a model in which decisive intervention justified therapeutic intensity (Berman 1951, pp. 311–340). Gandhian Nature Cure, by contrast, located ethical responsibility in self-discipline rather than technical competence. Gandhi consistently linked illness to excess, indiscipline, and detachment from natural living, making moral regulation central to therapy. This orientation produced a cautious therapeutic style that prioritised mild methods and continuous observation over dramatic intervention. Gandhi openly recorded doubt, anxiety, and failure, and warned against treating Nature Cure as universally applicable or infallible (Bandyopadhyaya 1970, pp. 72–74). Risk was managed through restraint, humility, and ethical accountability rather than procedural confidence. These differing ethical logics shaped attitudes toward medical authority. Thomson displaced professional authority by equipping households with therapeutic tools, while Gandhi displaced it by redefining health as a moral practice embedded in everyday life. Consequently, Thomsonian medicine functioned most effectively as a crisis-oriented alternative. In contrast, Gandhian Nature Cure operated as a preventive and socially integrative health philosophy, designed to minimise harm in lay and village settings.

### **Institutional Design, Community Practice, and Scalability**

The institutional implications of Thomsonian medicine and Gandhian Nature Cure reveal how each system imagined the social organisation of health beyond individual therapy. Both rejected hospital-centred medicine, yet they proposed markedly different models for extending care across communities. These differences reflected contrasting assumptions about scale, sustainability, and the relationship between

health and everyday social life (CWMG 50: pp.62–65). Thomsonian medicine scaled primarily through print culture and portable practice. Manuals, formularies, and domestic medical kits allowed therapeutic knowledge to circulate widely without fixed institutions. This model privileged household autonomy and rapid dissemination but remained loosely organised, relying on individual competence rather than collective infrastructure (Lloyd 2000, pp. 211–240). As a result, Thomsonian practice travelled easily but lacked mechanisms for long-term coordination, standard oversight, or integration with broader social reform. Gandhian Nature Cure, by contrast, was explicitly institutional in design, though anti-bureaucratic in spirit. Gandhi envisioned village-based clinics integrated with sanitation, agriculture, manual labour, and moral education rather than standalone medical facilities. Health practice was embedded within everyday village routines, making treatment inseparable from cleanliness, diet, work discipline, and social responsibility (Gandhi 1942, Bandyopadhyaya 1970, pp. 75–80). This model prioritised prevention and collective participation over therapeutic specialisation.

Scalability followed different logics. Thomsonian medicine expanded horizontally by replicating each household as a site of intervention. Gandhian Nature Cure expanded vertically through integration, embedding health within village institutions and ethical life. While the former maximised speed and reach, the latter prioritised durability and social coherence. These contrasting strategies help explain why Thomsonian medicine functioned most effectively as a flexible, crisis-responsive alternative (CWMG, 50: pp. 62–65). In contrast, Gandhian Nature Cure operated as a long-term public health philosophy aligned with rural reconstruction.

### **The Importance of Gandhian Nature Cure in the Indian Context**

Gandhi conceived Nature Cure not as a specialised or elite therapeutic alternative but as a public health philosophy explicitly shaped by India's social, economic, and moral conditions. His sustained engagement with healing practices emerged from a recognition that the vast majority of Indians, particularly in rural areas, remained structurally excluded from institutional medicine due to poverty, distance, and infrastructural scarcity. Across his writings, Gandhi consistently framed health as inseparable from self-reliance (Swaraj), village reconstruction, and everyday discipline, arguing that dependence on hospitals and professional doctors reproduced both economic dependency and moral passivity (Gandhi 1909, pp. 52–53; 1948, pp. 1–18). This orientation is vividly illustrated in *Bahurûpî Gandhi*, where Nature Cure appears as an extension of Gandhi's broader programme of ethical

self-governance and decentralised social organisation (Bandyopadhyaya 1970, pp. 72–74). The practical organisation of Gandhian Nature Cure reflected this vision of decentralised care. Gandhi advocated small clinics and ashram-based health centres equipped with minimal, locally sourced materials such as, earthen tubs, mud packs, wooden planks, and open-air spaces. Precisely to ensure that treatment remained reproducible beyond institutional settings. He repeatedly resisted the expansion of expensive hospitals, maintaining that instruction in cleanliness, diet, sanitation, and regulated living would reduce disease more effectively than curative intervention alone (Bandyopadhyaya 1970, pp. 89–91). David Arnold noted that this emphasis on prevention closely aligned with the epidemiological realities of colonial India, where illness was driven less by isolated pathology than by overcrowding, malnutrition, and environmental stress (Arnold 1993, pp. 142–170; Alter 1996, pp.301–322).

Gandhi's importance in the Indian context also lay in his deliberate synthesis of indigenous knowledge and selective engagement with Western science. Rather than rejecting tradition or modernity outright, he encouraged the use of locally known herbs and Ayurvedic insights while retaining anatomical and physiological concepts where they proved empirically helpful. He explicitly rejected the assumption that medical legitimacy required foreign training, insisting instead that health knowledge must remain intelligible and accessible to villagers themselves (Bandyopadhyaya 1970, pp. 84–88).. Gandhian Nature Cure addressed not only bodily illness but the psychological and moral strain produced by colonial modernity as an epistemological critique of biomedical authority(Bilgrami 2011, pp. 276–305) Crucially, Gandhi treated conditions such as constipation, fatigue, hypertension, and nervous disorders as symptoms of disordered living rather than discrete diseases, prescribing a regulated diet, physical labour, walking, breathing practices, and mental discipline. His stress on fasting, moderation, and open-air living anticipated later concerns with lifestyle-related illness while remaining firmly grounded in village life and agrarian rhythms(Alter 1996, pp. 306–330). At the same time, Gandhi consistently warned against dogmatism. He openly recorded anxiety, physical setbacks, and experimental failures, cautioning readers not to treat Nature Cure as an infallible doctrine and emphasising humility, observation, and self-critique as essential to ethical healing practice (Bandyopadhyaya 1970, pp. 78–80).

Gandhi articulated a strong moral critique of modern professional medicine, arguing that routine medical intervention often weakened self-discipline rather than restoring health. He maintained that many

illnesses arose from excess, negligence, or moral lapse, and that drug-based treatment merely suppressed symptoms without correcting underlying behaviour. Medical relief, he argued, insulated individuals from the natural consequences of indulgence and encouraged dependence on external cures rather than self-restraint. As Gandhi himself put it, "How do these diseases arise? Surely by our negligence or indulgence. I overeat, I have indigestion, I go to a doctor, he gives me medicine, and I am cured. I overeat again, I take his pills again. Had I not taken the pills in the first instance, I would have suffered the punishment deserved by me, and I would not have overeaten again. The doctor intervened and helped me to indulge myself. My body thereby certainly felt more at ease; but my mind became weakened. A continuance of a course of medicine must, therefore, result in loss of control over the mind"(CWMG 10: pp.36–38, *Hind Swaraj* 1909, pp. 52-53). For Gandhi, this erosion of moral control transformed medicine into an ethical problem, particularly when compounded by hospitalisation, animal experimentation, and the prioritisation of bodily comfort over spiritual responsibility.

The account of Dattoba's treatment in *Stray Glimpses of Babu* offers a concrete illustration of Mahatma Gandhi's practical engagement with nature cure and dietetics. While imprisoned at Yeravda in 1930, Dattoba suffered from chronic pain in his foot, for which the prison authorities initially administered conventional medicine without success. With official permission, Gandhi assumed responsibility for his treatment, asserting that diet was the central element of healing. The regimen he prescribed consisted of fasting, bodily cleansing through an enema, and a carefully regulated vegetable diet, adjusted according to the patient's condition. Kalelkar notes that this non-pharmaceutical and low-cost intervention led to a marked improvement in Dattoba's health, enabling him to walk without difficulty. The episode reflects Gandhi's broader medical philosophy, which rejected invasive therapies and emphasised simplicity, self-discipline, and ethical responsibility in healing. Gandhian therapeutics thus emerge not merely as an alternative medical practice but as a moral and social intervention, grounded in everyday care and accessible to ordinary people, even within the restrictive environment of colonial prisons.

Finally, Gandhi's willingness to acknowledge the limits of Nature Cure strengthened rather than undermined its credibility. He accepted vaccination during epidemics, permitted surgical intervention when necessary, and publicly reflected on his own appendectomy as evidence that natural healing could not replace all forms of medical intervention (Gandhi 1948; Bandyopadhyaya 1970, pp.83–85). In an Indian context

marked by poverty, medical pluralism, and uneven access to care, Gandhian Nature Cure thus emerged not as a rejection of medicine but as an ethically grounded, preventive, and socially embedded approach to health aligned with village life, moral discipline, and collective responsibility (Alter 2000, pp.55-83).

### **Operational Implications and Conceptual Synthesis in the Indian Socio-Environmental Context**

Although neither Samuel Thomson nor Mohandas K. Gandhi articulated their medical systems in the modern language of protocols or primary-care hierarchies, their writings nevertheless lend themselves to a layered model of contemporary adaptation that integrates practice, ethics, and institutional design. Gandhian Nature Cure, with its emphasis on mud poultices, hydrotherapy, sun and air exposure, dietary regulation, and disciplined routine, is particularly amenable to household- and village-level application, where care can be delivered through simple, low-cost means with minimal risk. These methods can be scaled up at the community clinic level through supervised hydrotherapy, basic monitoring of bodily responses, and standardised hygienic practices, without transforming village health spaces into specialised institutions (CWMG, 50:pp.33–35). More intensive Thomsonian interventions, such as structured steam therapies and botanical emetics, would require restriction to referral settings with trained supervision and monitoring, reflecting their crisis-oriented logic and higher physiological demands. Both traditions underscore the importance of anticipatory guidance: Gandhi through detailed observational instructions and ethical restraint, and Thomson through precise sequencing and dosing. Taken together, they suggest a model in which safety is ensured not by technological escalation but by appropriate placement of intervention within a graded system of care. From a research perspective, this synthesis also opens productive avenues for evaluation rather than reverence. Gandhi's case-based observations of hydrotherapy and earth treatment invite systematic validation through pragmatic trials and outcome audits, while Thomson's repeated claims regarding botanical safety warrant controlled assessment under monitored conditions. Conceptually, this layered approach reflects a more profound philosophical complementarity: Thomson's reductionist logic offers clarity in moments of acute crisis. At the same time, Gandhi's pluralistic, element-based framework sustains preventive and community health. Technical empowerment and moral self-regulation thus emerge not as opposing values but as interdependent principles, suggesting that a historically informed integration of these traditions can contribute

meaningfully to low-cost, people-centred primary health care without replicating the excesses of institutional biomedicine.

### **Conclusion**

This study has undertaken a comparative examination of Thomsonian medicine and Gandhian Nature Cure in order to illuminate how alternative healing systems emerged as historically situated responses to professionalised biomedicine. Although separated by geography, culture, and chronology, both systems articulated critiques of medical authority that foregrounded lay participation, natural processes, and resistance to toxic pharmacology. However, their therapeutic logics, institutional imaginaries, and ethical orientations diverged in ways that reflected the distinct socio-medical conditions of early nineteenth-century America and colonial India. Thomsonian medicine developed within a context marked by distrust of professional monopoly, uneven access to physicians, and widespread dissatisfaction with aggressive allopathic practices such as bleeding and mercury purging. Its emphasis on vital heat, emesis, and botanical stimulants produced a tightly structured, interventionist system oriented toward acute illness and domestic autonomy. Gandhian Nature Cure, by contrast, emerged from a colonial society characterised by mass poverty, rural marginalisation, and plural medical traditions. Gandhi's framework privileged prevention over crisis intervention, integrating elemental therapies with ethical discipline, dietary regulation, and village reconstruction. Health, in this model, was not merely a physiological condition but a moral and social practice embedded in everyday life.

Placing these traditions in dialogue reveals that they represent not competing alternatives but complementary responses to different historical imperatives. Thomson's system offered a technically assertive means of addressing acute disease in contexts of medical scarcity. At the same time, Gandhian Nature Cure articulated a sustainable, low-cost, and ethically integrated model of health suited to long-term community wellbeing. Together, they demonstrate that alternative medicine has functioned both as a mode of therapeutic intervention and as a framework for organising social relations, moral responsibility, and access to care. By moving beyond isolated national or biographical studies, this comparison contributes to the historiography of medicine by foregrounding the diversity of lay-oriented healing systems and their capacity to generate coherent medical philosophies outside institutional biomedicine. It underscores the need to understand medical pluralism not as a residual or oppositional category, but as a historically productive field in which therapeutic knowledge, social ethics, and material conditions intersect. In doing so, the study affirms

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that the history of medicine is shaped as much by vernacular practices and moral imaginaries as by professional institutions and scientific authority.

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## *Notes & Comments*

# Rethinking Civilian Honours: Democratic Equality, Constitutional Values, and a Gandhi-Kumarappa- Deendayal Upadhyaya Critique of the Padma Awards

*A M Jose*

*Jos Chathukulam*

### **Introduction**

THE CONFERMENT OF civilian honours by modern democratic states raises enduring questions concerning equality, recognition, and the moral authority of the state. In India, the Padma Awards occupy a prominent symbolic space, representing state recognition of exceptional service to the nation. Instituted in 1954, these awards were intended to honour merit without recreating the colonial system of titles and privileges that the Indian freedom movement had decisively rejected. Nevertheless, from their inception, the Padma Awards have generated debate over whether such honours are

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compatible with India's constitutional commitment to equality and its philosophical inheritance rooted in Gandhian thought.

The tension is particularly salient in the Indian context because the Constitution explicitly abolishes titles under Article 18 and affirms equality before the law under Article 14. Moreover, the moral vision of the Republic, articulated in the Preamble (Constitution of India, 1950), emphasises justice, equality, fraternity, and human dignity. While the Supreme Court of India has upheld the constitutional validity of the Padma Awards, this legal determination does not exhaust the normative inquiry.

As Upendra Baxi (2002)<sup>1</sup> has argued, constitutional legality and constitutional morality are not always coextensive. This article, therefore, seeks to explore whether the Padma Awards, though legally permissible, are philosophically and ethically consistent with the deeper egalitarian commitments of the Indian constitutional order and Gandhian–Kumarappa ideology. This ethical concern is not limited to Gandhian thought but is also reflected in Deendayal Upadhyaya's Integral Humanism, which rejects elitist valuation of individuals in favour of social harmony grounded in dharma (Upadhyaya, 1965/2016)<sup>2</sup> Upadhyaya's foundational text presents Integral Humanism as an indigenous alternative to individualism and collectivism, emphasising organic social unity, dignity of labour, and non-hierarchical recognition.

### **Constitutional Equality and Symbolic Hierarchy**

Article 14 of the Constitution guarantees equality before the law and equal protection under the laws. Judicial interpretation has clarified that this provision prohibits arbitrary state action while permitting reasonable classification based on intelligible differentia and a rational nexus with a legitimate objective. However, equality under Article 14 is not merely formal; it embodies a broader commitment to equal civic status and dignity (Dworkin, 2000)<sup>3</sup>.

Civilian honours, although they do not confer legal privileges, create symbolic distinctions among citizens. By officially designating some individuals as exceptionally worthy of national honour, the state implicitly establishes a hierarchy of social esteem. While such distinctions do not violate Article 14 in a strictly legal sense, they raise normative concerns regarding equal respect among citizens. As Rawls (1971)<sup>4</sup> observed, inequalities of recognition rooted in socially constructed notions of merit can reinforce moral arbitrariness, particularly when access to recognition is shaped by unequal social and cultural capital.

Article 18(1) of the Constitution provides that “no title, not being

a military or academic distinction, shall be conferred by the State.” The historical context of this provision reflects the Constituent Assembly’s determination to eliminate the feudal and colonial practice of honouring individuals with titles that conferred social rank and distinction. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar explicitly emphasised that the Republic should recognise citizens as equals, without gradations of honour imposed by the state (Ambedkar, 1949)<sup>5</sup>. During the Janata Party’s rule after the Emergency (1975–1977), civilian honours such as the Bharat Ratna and Padma Awards were discontinued under Article 18. They were reinstated in 1980 after the return of the Indian National Congress government.

In *Balaji Raghavan v. Union of India* (1996)<sup>6</sup>, the Supreme Court held that national awards such as the Padma Awards and the Bharat Ratna do not constitute “titles” within the meaning of Article 18. The Court reasoned that these honours neither confer hereditary privileges nor alter the legal status of recipients. It further directed that awardees should not use these honours as prefixes or suffixes to their names. While this judgment resolved the constitutional challenge in formal terms, it implicitly acknowledged that the misuse of honours could undermine the spirit of Article 18 (Government of India, 2019).

The distinction the Court draws between titles and decorations, though doctrinally sound, leaves unresolved the deeper question of whether symbolic hierarchies created by state honours are compatible with the constitutional goal of social equality. As Mahajan (1998)<sup>7</sup> argues, democratic equality is not limited to legal status but extends to social relations and collective self-understanding.

### **Constitutional Morality and the Preamble**

The Preamble to the Constitution affirms justice, liberty, equality, and fraternity as foundational values of the Republic. These principles inform what the Supreme Court has increasingly described as “constitutional morality,” a normative framework that guides the interpretation and application of constitutional provisions beyond their textual meaning. Constitutional morality requires the state to act in ways that uphold equal dignity and mutual respect among citizens (Baxi, 2002).

Civilian honours, by ranking citizens according to state-defined criteria of excellence, risk diluting the fraternity principle by elevating some individuals above others in symbolic terms. While recognition of contribution is not inherently incompatible with equality, a system that privileges individual distinction over collective welfare may erode the sense of shared civic belonging that the Preamble seeks to foster. This concern becomes more pronounced when honours

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disproportionately accrue to individuals from socially advantaged backgrounds, thereby reinforcing existing inequalities of recognition (Beteille, 2000)<sup>8</sup>.

### **Gandhian Ethics and the Rejection of Hierarchical Honour**

Mahatma Gandhi's ethical philosophy offers a powerful critique of systems that valorise individual distinction and social hierarchy. Central to Gandhian thought is the principle of *sarvodaya*, or the welfare of all, which rejects competitive individualism in favour of collective upliftment. Gandhi consistently opposed honours and titles, including those offered by the British colonial state, viewing them as instruments of ego, domination, and moral corruption (Gandhi, 1958)<sup>9</sup>. For Gandhi, true service (*seva*) is intrinsically valuable and does not require external validation. Recognition through honours risks transforming service into a means of personal advancement rather than a moral duty. In *the Constructive Programme, Gandhi (1962)* emphasised that social work should be motivated by conscience and compassion, not by the prospect of reward or prestige. From this perspective, civilian honours are ethically problematic because they reintroduce distinctions that undermine humility and equality. Gandhi's emphasis on non-possession (*aparigraha*) and non-attachment further reinforces his rejection of honours. Accumulating symbolic capital through awards, even when conferred for public service, risks entrenching ego and social stratification. In a Gandhian moral order, the highest virtue lies not in being recognised as exceptional, but in dissolving the very categories that separate the "distinguished" from the ordinary citizen.

### **J. C. Kumarappa and the Critique of Centralised Recognition**

Kumarappa extended Gandhian ethics into the domains of economics and social organisation, articulating a vision of society grounded in decentralisation, sustainability, and moral equality. In *Economy of Permanence*, Kumarappa (1945)<sup>10</sup> critiqued centralised systems that concentrate power and value in the hands of a few, arguing that such systems inevitably marginalise local communities and informal labour. Applied to civilian honours, Kumarappa's critique suggests that centralised, state-driven recognition mechanisms tend to privilege forms of achievement that are visible, institutionalised, and elite. Contributions rooted in village economies, care work, ecological stewardship, and community resilience often go unnoticed by national award committees. This selective recognition undermines the Gandhian ideal of the dignity of labour and reinforces hierarchical valuations of social contribution (Kumarappa, 1951)<sup>11</sup>. Kumarappa's emphasis on moral economy further challenges the assumption that

excellence must be competitively ranked and publicly distinguished. In a morally ordered society, recognition would be diffuse, participatory, and embedded in community life rather than concentrated in ceremonial state functions.

### **Deendayal Upadhyaya and Integral Humanism: A Convergent Ethical Critique**

Upadhyaya's philosophy of *Integral Humanism* (*Ekatma Manav Darshan*) provides an additional indigenous ethical framework for critically examining state-conferred civilian honours. Developed in the mid-twentieth century as an alternative to both Western liberal individualism and collectivist socialism, Integral Humanism emphasises the holistic development of the human person situated within society, culture, and moral order (Upadhyaya, 1965/2016). Central to this philosophy is the rejection of artificial hierarchies and excessive individual glorification that fragment social unity. Upadhyaya conceptualised society as an organic whole, where everyone performs a functional role analogous to organs within a body. Within this framework, dignity does not arise from distinction or superiority but from harmonious contribution to collective life (Upadhyaya, 1965/2016). State practices that elevate certain individuals above others through formal honours risk disrupting this organic balance by privileging individual achievement over social interdependence. In this respect, Integral Humanism aligns closely with Gandhian *sarvodaya* and Kumarappa's moral economy, all of which resist competitive valuation of human worth.

Integral Humanism also places significant emphasis on *dharma* as the governing principle of social life. Dharma, in Upadhyaya's thought, is not merely religious duty but an ethical order that ensures justice, restraint, and mutual responsibility. When the state institutionalises honours based on selective criteria of excellence, it implicitly endorses a competitive, individualistic ethic that may conflict with a dharma-based social equilibrium. Recognition grounded in dharma would prioritise quiet, sustained, and collective service rather than visible or extraordinary accomplishments alone.

Furthermore, Upadhyaya strongly critiqued elitism and centralisation, warning that systems that concentrate prestige and recognition at the top alienate common citizens and undermine social cohesion (Upadhyaya, 1984). Civilian honours such as the Padma Awards, conferred through centralised committees and national ceremonies, risk reinforcing precisely such elite-centred valuation. Contributions rooted in village life, manual labour, caregiving, and local self-governance—areas that Integral Humanism treats as

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foundational—remain structurally disadvantaged in national recognition frameworks. Upadhyaya’s insistence on the dignity of labour resonates with both Gandhian ethics and constitutional ideals of equality. From this perspective, honouring only “distinguished” service implicitly devalues ordinary but essential forms of work. This symbolic differentiation sits uneasily with the constitutional vision of fraternity and equal respect, as well as with Article 14’s broader moral commitment to equal citizenship (Sharma and Nain, 2018)<sup>12</sup>. While Integral Humanism does not reject appreciation or gratitude, it favours socially embedded and non-hierarchical modes of acknowledgment over formalised state honours.

Thus, when read alongside Gandhi–Kumarappa–Upadhyaya, it strengthens the normative argument that civilian honours, though legally permissible, may conflict with India’s indigenous ethical traditions that prioritise social harmony, humility, and collective dignity over individual distinction.

Taken together, the ethical frameworks of Gandhi, Kumarappa, and Upadhyaya converge on a shared normative position that is deeply sceptical of hierarchical, state-mediated recognition. Despite their distinct intellectual trajectories, all three reject ego-based distinction, affirm the moral equality and dignity of ordinary labour, and express discomfort with centralised systems that monopolise symbolic valuation. Recognition, in these traditions, is meaningful only when embedded in community life, grounded in humility, and oriented towards collective welfare rather than individual elevation (Iyer, 1973<sup>13</sup>; Sen, 2005). Making this convergence explicit underscores that the critique of civilian honours advanced here is not derivative of a single philosophical source, but reflects a broader, indigenous egalitarian ethic within Indian political thought.

The normative unease surrounding civilian honours can be further clarified by situating them within the broader tension between competition-centric and cooperation-centric moral psychologies. Modern competitive orders often rely—explicitly or implicitly—on an atomised conception of the person, in which recognition becomes a scarce positional good and social esteem is organised through visible ranks and titles. In contrast, the ethical traditions invoked here do not reject the individual as such; instead, they reject possessive or ego-centric individualism that detaches achievement from social interdependence and moral duty. Gandhian ethics places self-realisation within humility, restraint, and service, warning that public honours can convert *seva* into status-seeking; Kumarappa extends this critique to the political economy of valuation, arguing that centralised, competitive systems privilege “visible” elite achievement

over the dignity of ordinary labour and local contributions; and Upadhyaya's Integral Humanism similarly resists excessive individual glorification, emphasising social harmony, dharma, and the organic interdependence of persons and communities (Hirsch, 1976<sup>14</sup>; Frank, 1985<sup>15</sup>). Read in this light, the Padma Awards are not only a constitutional-moral problem of equality and symbolic hierarchy, but also an institutional reinforcement of a competitive prestige economy that these Indian traditions seek to displace with more relational, community-embedded conceptions of human worth.

### **Indian Knowledge Systems and the Ethics of Recognition**

Read together, the ethical perspectives of Gandhi, Kumarappa, and Upadhyaya may also be understood as part of a modern Indian Knowledge System (IKS) that articulates a civilisational alternative to competitive, status-driven institutional design. Indian intellectual traditions have historically conceived the human person as relational and duty-bearing, embedded within community and governed by dharma rather than by the pursuit of positional advantage. Recognition, within this worldview, is not a scarce reward to be competitively allocated by a central authority, but a diffuse social process grounded in shared obligation, moral restraint, and collective well-being (Radhakrishnan, 1953; Mahadevan, Bhat, & Pavana, 2025). From this standpoint, state-bestowed civilian honours such as the Padma Awards represent not merely a constitutional anomaly but a more profound epistemic dissonance between modern prestige economies and indigenous Indian ethical conceptions of dignity, service, and social harmony.

### **Philosophical Perspectives on Merit and Recognition**

Beyond the Indian context, political philosophers have questioned the moral foundations of merit-based recognition systems. Rawls (1971) argued that natural talents and social advantages are morally arbitrary, and that social institutions should not amplify inequalities arising from them. State honours that reward individual achievement risk legitimising unequal outcomes that are not wholly attributable to personal effort. Theories of recognition, particularly those advanced by Honneth (1995)<sup>16</sup>, emphasise the importance of social esteem for individual self-realisation. However, Honneth also cautions that recognition systems can become exclusionary if they privilege certain forms of contribution while marginalising others. When the state becomes the arbiter of merit, recognition risks reflecting dominant cultural norms rather than inclusive democratic values. Sen's and Nussbaum's capabilities approach further underscores the importance

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of equal respect for persons as ends in themselves (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2006). From this standpoint, honours that elevate some citizens above others symbolically may conflict with the equal dignity owed to all.

### **Counterarguments and Normative Rebuttal**

Proponents of the Padma Awards often argue that such honours promote excellence, inspire public service, and provide role models for society. From this perspective, recognising distinguished individuals does not undermine equality but celebrates exemplary contribution that can motivate others. While these arguments carry intuitive appeal, they rest on the assumption that excellence must be institutionally ranked and ceremonially endorsed by the state. From a Gandhian and constitutional-moral perspective, this assumption is contestable. Excellence and public service can be encouraged through education, public discourse, and community-based forms of appreciation without creating hierarchical distinctions. Moreover, the motivational value of honours becomes ethically ambiguous when recognition shifts the emphasis from service to status, encouraging the pursuit of prestige rather than the intrinsic value of social contribution.

An additional concern, often under-acknowledged in defences of civilian honours, relates to their vulnerability to political instrumentalisation. Once recognition is centralised and symbolically hierarchical, it can be drawn into electoral politics, functioning as a means of symbolic appeasement, group signalling, or identity-based mobilisation in competitive democratic contexts. This possibility does not require attributing partisan intent in individual cases; rather, it arises structurally from the concentration of symbolic authority in the state. Such instrumentalisation weakens the moral legitimacy of honours by linking recognition to political calculation rather than ethical universality.

The Supreme Court's validation of the Padma Awards establishes their legality but does not foreclose ethical critique. As constitutional democracies evolve, practices once considered acceptable may be reassessed in light of deeper commitments to equality, dignity, and fraternity. Recognition could instead take decentralised, collective, and participatory forms that highlight community service rather than individual elevation. Comparative experience suggests that community commendations, occupational or group citations, and public narratives of service can affirm social contribution without conferring enduring symbolic hierarchy, aligning recognition more closely with Gandhian humility and democratic equality.

### **Conclusion**

The Padma Awards occupy a legally sanctioned and culturally significant place in India's public life. Yet, when examined through the lenses of constitutional equality, Gandhian ethics, Kumarappa's moral economy, and Deendayal Upadhyaya's humanism, they reveal normative tensions that merit serious reflection. While not unconstitutional in a formal sense, civilian honours risk undermining the Republic's egalitarian ethos by reinforcing symbolic hierarchies of merit and recognition. A democracy committed to equal dignity and collective welfare must continually reassess its institutions to ensure they serve rather than subvert its foundational values. Taken together, the convergent philosophies of Gandhi, Kumarappa, and Upadhyaya articulate a distinctly Indian egalitarian ethic that questions the moral legitimacy of state-sponsored hierarchies of honour in a democratic republic.

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### **Notes**

1. Baxi's discussion of constitutional morality and dignity informs the normative distinction between legal validity and ethical legitimacy.
2. Upadhyaya's foundational text presents Integral Humanism as an indigenous alternative to individualism and collectivism, emphasising organic social unity, dignity of labour, and non-hierarchical recognition.
3. Dworkin's conception of equality as equal concern and respect strengthens the argument that symbolic hierarchies endorsed by the state raise concerns of unequal civic esteem.
4. Rawls's conception of moral arbitrariness in talent and achievement provides philosophical grounding for scepticism toward merit-based state honours.
5. Ambedkar's speeches during the Constituent Assembly debates provide authoritative insight into the intent behind Articles 14 and 18, particularly the rejection of hierarchical titles and inherited privilege.
6. This Constitution Bench judgment is the leading case on the constitutional validity of the Padma Awards, interpreting Article 18(1) and clarifying that national awards do not amount to prohibited titles.
7. Mahajan's work on democratic equality and social justice is useful.

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in assessing how symbolic distinctions can affect inclusive citizenship in plural societies.

8. Beteille's sociological critique of hierarchy, recognition, and institutional privilege provides an important framework for analysing state-sponsored honours in egalitarian democracies.
9. Gandhi's writings across these volumes articulate the ethical rejection of honours, ego-driven recognition, and status hierarchies, especially in relation to selfless service and *sarvodaya*.
10. Kumarappa's foundational work critiques centralised economic and social systems and advocates an ethical order grounded in equality, community, and sustainability
11. This text situates economic and social recognition within Gandhian moral philosophy and reinforces opposition to elite-centred reward structures.
12. Sharma and Nain situate Integral Humanism within modern Indian political philosophy, demonstrating its relevance to constitutional values such as equality, fraternity, and democratic decentralisation.
13. Raghavan N. Iyer's *The Moral and Political Thought of Mahatma Gandhi* (1973), published by Oxford University Press, is a scholarly analysis elucidating the core principles of Gandhi's philosophy. The book explores the relationship between means and ends, examining concepts of truth (Satyagraha), non-violence (Ahimsa), freedom, and obligation.
14. Fred Hirsch's *The Social Limits to Growth* (1976) argues that as societies achieve material affluence, the pursuit of individual economic growth is constrained by "social limits," specifically the exhaustion of "positional goods".
15. In *Choosing the Right Pond: Human Behavior and the Quest for Status* (1985), Robert H. Frank argues that the universal desire for social status profoundly influences human economic decisions and challenges traditional economic theory's assumption of people as "economic automatons" concerned solely with absolute consumption.
16. Honneth's theory of recognition is relevant in evaluating whether state honours foster inclusive recognition or reinforce selective and exclusionary forms of social esteem.

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## *Book Reviews*

**Ethics in Politics and Governance (Mahatma Gandhi Memorial Lecture No.3), A Ravindra, 2025, Institute for Social and Economic Change (ISEC), Bengaluru.**

*MAHATMA GANDHI MEMORIAL Lecture on Ethics: Ethics in Politics and Governance* by A. Ravindra is a reflective exploration of ethics in public life through a Gandhian moral framework. Drawing on decades of administrative experience, Ravindra examines the ethical foundations of political institutions, governance structures, sectoral policies, international relations, and emerging technological challenges such as artificial intelligence. Rather than offering a purely theoretical treatise, the booklet blends normative reflection with insights drawn from public administration. The central concern running through the work is straightforward yet profound: can democratic governance survive without ethical commitment?

The volume opens with a thoughtful preface by M. V. Nadkarni, who situates the lecture series within the broader tradition of Gandhian ethical inquiry. Nadkarni recounts how financial constraints prevented the establishment of a Centre for Ethics Studies at the Institute for Social and Economic Change (ISEC), leading him to initiate a Gandhi Lecture Series on Ethics from his own personal savings. This gesture is both morally powerful and symbolically Gandhian: an individual stepping in where institutions hesitate. At the same time, it raises an uncomfortable question about institutional priorities. How can a premier social science institution founded by V. K. R. V. Rao struggle to establish even a modest centre dedicated to ethics? The episode highlights a deeper problem—the marginalization of ethical inquiry within social science research and policy discourse. Ethics is often treated as peripheral rather than foundational to economics, governance, and development.

Ravindra begins his lecture by examining parliamentary ethics. While India possesses institutional safeguards such as codes of conduct,

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registers of members' interests, and the Model Code of Conduct for elections, enforcement remains weak. Ravindra argues that ethical standards in public life were stronger in the early decades after independence, when political leaders occasionally resigned on moral grounds. Today, such acts of ethical accountability are rare. He cites controversies such as opaque electoral financing, "cash-for-questions" scandals, and the electoral bonds scheme as symptoms of declining transparency and accountability. The growing influence of what he calls the "three-M power"—money, muscle, and media—has further eroded the ethical foundations of electoral democracy.

The discussion then turns to the judiciary, described as both the guardian of the Constitution and an institution vulnerable to ethical pressures. Ravindra recalls the constitutional crisis during the Emergency (India 1975–1977), when courts struggled to uphold civil liberties. Contemporary debates surrounding judicial appointments, particularly the controversy over the National Judicial Appointments Commission Act, raise the enduring question of who guards the guardians. If the judiciary appoints itself, does this undermine the principle of separation of powers? Beyond institutional debates, Ravindra highlights structural problems such as massive case backlogs, shortages of judges, and prolonged detention of undertrial prisoners. From a Gandhian perspective, judicial legitimacy cannot rest solely on constitutional authority; it must also be sustained through ethical restraint, transparency, and sensitivity to the vulnerable.

One of the most compelling sections of the booklet examines the nexus of politics–bureaucracy–business and its consequences for the Indian civil services. Ravindra contrasts contemporary administrative realities with the vision articulated by Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, who described the civil service as the "steel frame" of India. According to Ravindra, the steel frame has gradually rusted due to politicization, frequent transfers, pressure from interest groups, and the growing influence of patronage networks. Drawing on personal experience, he describes how administrative decisions often involve complex negotiations among politicians, bureaucrats, and external actors. Recruitment, postings, and contracts may be shaped less by merit than by political considerations, while the convergence of political and corporate interests has deepened systemic corruption and weakened institutional credibility.

Ravindra also extends the discussion of ethics to sectoral governance. In public health and education, he argues, commercialization has increasingly undermined equity and public responsibility. These sectors, once conceived as public goods, now risk becoming market-driven services that deepen social inequality.

The author also reflects on the ethical complexities surrounding caste, reservation politics, and identity-based mobilization. While affirmative action remains essential to social justice, he cautions that identity politics can sometimes turn legitimate grievances into arenas of political competition, thereby complicating social cohesion.

The lecture further situates ethics within global politics. Referring to contemporary conflicts such as the Russia–Ukraine War and the Israel–Hamas War, Ravindra reflects on the persistent moral dilemmas of war. He questions the ethical legitimacy of violence, including historical events such as the atomic bombings during World War II, and points to the limited effectiveness of institutions like the United Nations in preventing conflict. These reflections underscore the continued relevance of Gandhian nonviolence as a normative critique of modern geopolitics.

Finally, the booklet addresses the ethical challenges posed by emerging technologies, particularly artificial intelligence. Ravindra suggests that the dilemmas created by AI are not merely technical but civilizational. Technologies must remain subordinate to human values and ethical responsibility. Here, the Gandhian moral compass—truth (*satya*), nonviolence (*ahimsa*), trusteeship, and moral accountability—serves as the guiding framework. Echoing Mahatma Gandhi, Ravindra emphasizes that ethical means are as important as political ends.

Overall, the booklet is best understood as a reflective meditation on the moral health of Indian democracy and the global order. By invoking Gandhian ethics alongside constitutional morality, Ravindra reminds readers that the survival of democratic institutions ultimately depends on the ethical character of those who inhabit them. Institutions alone cannot guarantee justice; they require individuals committed to moral responsibility.

Concise yet thought-provoking, this work will interest policymakers, scholars of governance, civil service aspirants, and trainees at the Lal Bahadur Shastri National Academy of Administration. More broadly, it invites readers to reconsider an often-neglected question: whether politics and governance can endure without a strong ethical foundation.

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**The Dawn of Life: M.K. Gandhi in South Africa** by Prabhudas Gandhi, Tr. by Hemang Ashwinkumar, Gurugram: Viking, (Hardcover): ISBN-10.0143475878, Price: 1039.00,

*THE DAWN OF LIFE: M.K. Gandhi in South Africa* (2025) by Prabhudas Gandhi originally published in 1948 in Gujarati and translated by Hemang Aswinkumar revisits one of the most decisive phases in Mahatma Gandhi's intellectual and political evolution — his South African years — and convincingly argues that this period served as the foundational laboratory for his later philosophy of nonviolence, satyagraha, and ethical politics. Rather than treating South Africa merely as a prelude to Gandhi's Indian leadership, the book places this phase at the centre of understanding his transformation from a young barrister into a moral and political innovator of global significance.

The author situates Gandhi within the racialised and hierarchical social order of colonial South Africa, where legal discrimination, segregation, and economic exploitation shaped the everyday lives of Indians and Africans alike. The book effectively demonstrates how Gandhi's encounters with systemic injustice compelled him to rethink both political resistance and personal ethics. The humiliations he endured — famously exemplified by incidents such as his ejection from a train — are explored not simply as biographical anecdotes but as catalysts that redirected his political consciousness toward collective struggle and moral experimentation.

A notable strength of the work lies in its careful tracing of Gandhi's evolving ideas. The book shows how his early attempts at legal petitions gradually gave way to mass-based strategies rooted in non-cooperation and civil resistance. It explores the emergence of satyagraha as both a political technique and a spiritual discipline, emphasizing how Gandhi linked public action with personal self-restraint. The narrative also highlights the influence of religious pluralism, community networks, and transnational intellectual exchanges in shaping Gandhi's ethical framework.

Importantly, the book does not romanticise Gandhi's development. It engages critically with the tensions and contradictions of his South African experience, including debates over race, class, and the limits of his political imagination during that period. By doing so, it contributes to contemporary scholarship that seeks to view Gandhi as a complex historical figure rather than a static moral icon. This balanced approach deepens the book's analysis and makes it accessible to both scholars and general readers.

The prose is clear and historically grounded, drawing on archival

material and secondary scholarship to reconstruct the socio-political environment in which Gandhi's ideas matured. The author successfully connects local struggles in South Africa to broader global questions of colonialism, identity, and resistance, showing how Gandhi's early experiments would later influence anti-colonial and civil rights movements worldwide.

If the book has a limitation, it lies perhaps in its relative brevity in engaging with African perspectives beyond their influence on Gandhi's evolution. While the focus remains deliberately on Gandhi, further exploration of African political contexts could have enriched the analysis and widened the comparative frame.

Overall, *The Dawn of Life: M.K. Gandhi in South Africa* is a valuable contribution to Gandhian studies and the broader history of nonviolent resistance. By foregrounding the South African phase as the crucible of Gandhi's intellectual and moral awakening, the book deepens our understanding of how personal experience, ethical reflection, and political action converged to produce one of the most influential thinkers of the modern world. It will interest scholars of peace studies, colonial history, and political thought, as well as readers seeking insight into the formative roots of Gandhi's enduring global legacy.

**JOHN S MOOLAKKATTU**  
Chief Editor



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## *In Memoriam*

# Professor Ramchandra Pradhan

*John S. Moolakkattu*

PROFESSOR RAMCHANDRA PRADHAN, a revered Gandhian scholar, prolific writer, and dedicated teacher, passed away on February 24, 2026, at the age of 86. As a former political science professor at Ramjas College, University of Delhi, he was known for blending deep academic rigour with active participation in civic causes, including his leadership of the Lokayan initiative and his involvement in international peace and democracy movements. Over seven decades, he produced significant works such as *Raj to Swaraj* and *Reading and Reappraising Gandhi*, as well as a recent five-volume biography of Ramnandan Mishra. His lifelong dedication to nonviolence, social justice, and mentoring generations of scholars left an enduring mark on the study of India's national movement.

Professor Pradhan's many contributions to *Gandhi Marg* as a scholar were invaluable; his insightful articles enriched the journal's discourse on Gandhian philosophy and its relevance to contemporary social reform, making him an indispensable figure in advancing Gandhian scholarship through this important platform. The field remains deeply indebted to his intellectual legacy and principled commitment.

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