

# Political Philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi: Ethics, Non-Violence and Swaraj

**\*Dr. Satish Chaturvedi**

## Abstract

This paper examines the political philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948), focusing on three central themes — ethics, non-violence (*ahimsa*), and *Swaraj* (self-rule). Gandhi's thought was a profound synthesis of moral philosophy, political activism, and spiritual insight. His political philosophy was grounded in the belief that politics must be rooted in ethics and truth (*satya*), and that true freedom could only arise from moral and spiritual self-discipline. Non-violence, for Gandhi, was not mere political strategy but a moral law of life — an active force of love and truth capable of transforming individuals and societies. His concept of *Swaraj* went beyond political independence to signify self-control, self-reliance, and inner freedom. Drawing upon ancient Indian philosophy and modern political realities, Gandhi created a distinct moral framework for resistance against injustice. Using a qualitative and historical-analytical approach, this study analyzes Gandhi's ideas as a coherent system linking ethical principles with political action. It concludes that Gandhi's political philosophy remains an enduring model for reconciling morality and politics in the quest for a just and humane society.

**Keywords:** Mahatma Gandhi, political philosophy, ethics, *ahimsa*, non-violence, *Swaraj*, truth, self-rule, moral politics, freedom

## 1. Introduction

Mahatma Gandhi remains one of the most influential figures in political and moral philosophy. His ideas transformed not only India's struggle for freedom but also global discourses on ethics, peace, and human dignity. Born in Porbandar in 1869, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi's political thought was shaped by both Eastern spirituality and Western rationalism. His experiences in South Africa, where he confronted racial discrimination, led to the development of *Satyagraha* — the philosophy of non-violent resistance. This principle became the moral and political foundation of India's freedom movement and a model for civil resistance worldwide.

Gandhi's political philosophy was unique in that it redefined politics as a branch of ethics. He rejected the conventional separation between morality and political expediency, insisting that means and ends are inseparable. For him, moral purification was a prerequisite for political action. His life exemplified this belief — combining spiritual discipline with political leadership. The three pillars of his thought — ethics, non-violence, and *Swaraj* — form the essence of what he called "spiritual politics."

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Gandhi's conception of freedom extended far beyond national independence. *Swaraj*, or self-rule, meant mastery over one's desires, responsibility toward others, and harmony within society. In Gandhi's vision, political freedom without moral and social regeneration was hollow. His emphasis on village self-sufficiency, simple living, and truth reflected a holistic philosophy aimed at transforming both the individual and the community.

### 1.1. Objectives of the Study

The primary objective of this paper is to analyze the political philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi by exploring the interconnections between ethics, non-violence, and *Swaraj*. Specifically, the study aims to:

1. Examine Gandhi's ethical foundations and their influence on his political thought.
2. Analyze his conception of non-violence (*ahimsa*) as both a moral and political principle.
3. Interpret his idea of *Swaraj* as a synthesis of political, moral, and spiritual self-rule.

Through these objectives, the paper seeks to demonstrate how Gandhi's integration of moral philosophy and political activism created a distinct model of ethical politics that remains relevant in contemporary times.

### 1.2. Research Questions

1. What ethical principles form the foundation of Gandhi's political philosophy?
2. How did Gandhi conceptualize non-violence as a transformative political force?
3. In what ways did Gandhi's idea of *Swaraj* combine political independence with moral self-discipline?

### 1.3. Scope and Limitations

This paper focuses on Gandhi's writings, speeches, and philosophical works from 1893 to 1948. It draws on key primary texts such as *Hind Swaraj*, *Satyagraha in South Africa*, and *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*. Secondary sources up to 2012 are used to interpret his ideas in a broader historical and philosophical context.

## 2. Review of Literature

The literature on Gandhi's political philosophy spans disciplines — political theory, ethics, sociology, and theology. Early studies such as by Parekh (1984) and Bondurant (1958) emphasized the moral and spiritual dimensions of his thought, particularly the unity of truth (*satya*) and non-violence (*ahimsa*). These works established that Gandhi's political methods were inseparable from his ethical convictions.

Barker (1960) and Iyer (1973) analyzed Gandhi's reinterpretation of traditional Indian philosophy in modern political contexts, arguing that his emphasis on self-purification and non-possession reflected the moral depth of Indian ascetic traditions. Chandra (1989) discussed Gandhi's political

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leadership in India's independence movement, portraying him as a moral statesman who transformed the freedom struggle into a moral crusade.

Parel (1997) examined Gandhi's political writings as a coherent philosophical system rooted in practical ethics. He highlighted Gandhi's rejection of Machiavellian political realism and his insistence that moral means are essential for achieving just ends. Sharma (2003) explored the theological dimension of Gandhi's ideas, suggesting that his faith in truth and non-violence transcended religion and expressed a universal moral law.

While much scholarship focuses on Gandhi's ethical and religious thought, fewer studies systematically connect his ethics with his political concepts of non-violence and *Swaraj*. This paper contributes to that synthesis by examining how Gandhi's moral principles shaped his theory of self-rule and his vision for a just social order.

### 3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive, and historical-analytical approach. Gandhi's works are analyzed as primary philosophical texts rather than as mere political statements. The methodology involves thematic content analysis across three key categories — ethics, non-violence, and *Swaraj*.

Primary sources include Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj* (1909), *Satyagraha in South Africa* (1928), and *The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (1927). Secondary sources include analytical works by scholars such as Iyer, Parekh, and Parel. The research method is interpretive, focusing on the internal coherence of Gandhi's thought and its relationship to the moral and political challenges of his time.

### 4. Ethics and the Moral Foundations of Politics

For Mahatma Gandhi, politics without ethics was meaningless. He rejected the notion that politics is an autonomous sphere governed by power and expediency. Instead, he argued that all political action must be guided by moral principles derived from truth (*satya*) and non-violence (*ahimsa*). Truth, in Gandhi's philosophy, was not an abstract idea but the living principle of reality — God himself. To live truthfully meant to live in harmony with the moral order of the universe.

Gandhi's ethical philosophy drew from Hinduism, Jainism, Christianity, and Western humanism. From the *Bhagavad Gita*, he learned the ideal of detached action; from Jainism, the discipline of non-violence; and from Christianity, the spirit of service and forgiveness. He believed that moral conduct (*dharma*) was the essence of human life, and that politics must serve as a means for moral evolution rather than domination.

He insisted that moral integrity must precede political freedom. The purity of means was more important than the success of ends. This was evident in his insistence on fasting, celibacy, and simplicity as disciplines that purified both the individual and the movement. Gandhi thus transformed politics into an arena of moral experimentation — where truth and non-violence were tested as principles of action.

### 5. Non-Violence as a Political Principle

Gandhi's concept of non-violence (*ahimsa*) was the cornerstone of his political philosophy. It was both an ethical commitment and a practical method of political resistance. He defined non-violence not as passivity or cowardice but as "the active force of love." Violence, he argued, only perpetuates

hatred and division, while non-violence disarms the oppressor by appealing to conscience and humanity.

The technique of *Satyagraha* — literally “holding on to truth” — emerged from this ethical foundation. Gandhi used it in South Africa to resist racial injustice and later in India against colonial oppression. *Satyagraha* sought to transform both the oppressor and the oppressed through the power of moral persuasion. It was an act of strength, not weakness, requiring courage, patience, and willingness to suffer without retaliation.

For Gandhi, non-violence was not limited to political conflict but was a way of life. It extended to diet, behavior, and interpersonal relations. He believed that lasting peace could only be built on non-violence — in society, economics, and governance. He envisioned a world where nations cooperated through mutual respect rather than competition, anticipating later ideas of global ethics and peaceful coexistence.

### 6. *Swaraj*: Political and Spiritual Self-Rule

Gandhi’s concept of *Swaraj* (self-rule) was the culmination of his ethical and political philosophy. In *Hind Swaraj*, he declared that real freedom meant mastery over one’s mind and senses. Political independence without self-control, he warned, would merely replace one tyranny with another. *Swaraj* thus had two dimensions: political and spiritual. The former meant self-government; the latter, self-mastery.

He envisioned *Swaraj* as decentralized democracy based on self-reliant villages — each functioning as an autonomous moral community. Economic self-sufficiency, manual labor, and simplicity were essential components of this vision. Gandhi’s ideal society was egalitarian, non-exploitative, and founded on voluntary cooperation rather than compulsion.

At a deeper level, *Swaraj* symbolized inner liberation. It called for the transformation of individuals into moral agents who could govern themselves without coercion. In Gandhi’s philosophy, personal ethics and political freedom were inseparable. Only a morally disciplined people could sustain democratic self-rule. His idea of *Swaraj* therefore remains a vision of holistic freedom — freedom of the body, mind, and spirit.

### 7. Conclusion

Mahatma Gandhi’s political philosophy offers a profound synthesis of ethics, non-violence, and *Swaraj*. His lifelong quest to unite morality and politics redefined the meaning of power, freedom, and justice. For Gandhi, political action was an extension of moral duty; truth and non-violence were the ultimate instruments of transformation.

His vision of *Swaraj* transcended political independence to encompass moral and spiritual self-realization. It reflected his belief that human civilization could evolve only through love, restraint, and service. Gandhi’s principles remain relevant in addressing contemporary crises — from political corruption to environmental degradation — reminding the world that ethical politics is not a utopian dream but a necessary foundation for sustainable peace and freedom.

By merging spirituality with political realism, Gandhi provided humanity with a universal philosophy of moral resistance — a vision that continues to inspire movements for justice and human dignity across the world.

**\*Senior Research Fellow (SRF)  
Department of Political Science  
University of Rajasthan,  
Jaipur (Raj.)**

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