

BEYOND IDEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORKS: UNDERSTANDING GANDHI AS GANDHI

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ABSTRACT

War always transforms human thinking patterns and lifestyles. After World War II, various ideologies such as postmodernism, feminism, environmentalism, and postcolonialism challenged liberalism and nurtured their own worldviews. One ideology that has constantly remained present in contemporary times is Gandhism. It is interesting to note that Gandhi has been understood within various ideological frameworks, such as his status as a feminist, as an environmentalist, Gandhi, as a postcolonial thinker and as a postmodernist thinker. Methodologically, this study employs a comparative and conceptual analysis of primary Gandhian texts, including Hind Swaraj, his public speeches, published views in newspaper and magazine and his autobiographical writings, along with relevant secondary scholarship. The analysis draws on textual interpretation to map key concepts, interpreting Gandhi's own language within the context of major ideological frameworks, including feminism, environmentalism, postcolonialism, and postmodernism. Through this approach, the paper systematically situates and contrasts Gandhian positions with those of each movement, while also identifying the limitations of such categorisations. Accordingly, the paper is divided into six parts. The first section introduces the emergence of various ideologies after WWII and sets the stage for understanding their intersections with Gandhism. The second section argues that Gandhi can be viewed as a feminist thinker, demonstrating how his ideas and actions challenged traditional gender roles and supported women's participation in both public and private spheres. The third section examines Gandhi as an environmentalist thinker, arguing that his principles of non-possession, self-restraint, and reverence for nature anticipate many aspects of contemporary environmental philosophy. The fourth section elaborates on Gandhi as a postcolonial thinker by showing how he critiqued Western modernity and colonialism, advocated for indigenous models of development, and promoted decolonisation of the mind. The fifth section analyses Gandhi as a postmodernist thinker, exploring how his scepticism of grand narratives and emphasis on situational truth align with postmodern perspectives. Finally, the sixth and concluding section proposes that Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy transcends modern ideological boundaries, functioning as an organic "spiritual science" that cannot be confined to a single ism.

KEY WORDS: Ideology, Feminism, Environmentalism, Postmodernism, Postcolonialism, Gandhi

INTRODUCTION

Political thinking, like human life, is a continuous process. A systematic pattern of thinking or belief about any phenomenon, with embedded goals and values, is considered 'ideology'. Ideology is a set of values or beliefs accepted as fact or truth by a group. It is composed of sets of attitudes toward the various institutions and processes of society. It provides the believer with a picture of the world both as it is and as it should be, and, in doing so, organises the world's tremendous complexity into something fairly simple and palatable. (Sargent. 1978) Ideological movements and social changes are closely related. Human ideas do not emerge in a vacuum; rather, they are products of social, economic and political turmoil. Since the last century has witnessed two world wars and many civil wars across the globe, it has been the century of the emergence of various ideologies. All the then newly emerged ideologies like

feminism, environmentalism, postcolonialism, and postmodernism were basically narrating their discomfort with Liberalism. In the same timeline, Mahatma Gandhi emerged as a thinker who was analysed and situated in all the ideological frameworks. The present paper examines Gandhi as a feminist, environmentalist, postcolonial, and postmodern thinker; and, at last, takes the stands that Gandhi was an original spiritual thinker and scientist who cannot be confined to a single framework.

GANDHI AS FEMINIST THINKER

During the national movement, Gandhi was considered a social reformer and leader who sought to mobilise Indians for the goal of *swaraj* against the British regime. After the WWII, Gandhi was analysed as a feminist thinker. But there are various controversial reflections on considering Gandhi as

same. In one reflection, it can be said that he was primarily concerned with the nationalist issue of attaining India's Independence. He had sidelined the issue of 'women's reservation and women's freedom for the larger goal of India's independence. He argued, I want women to take their proper place by the side of men. The timing is wrong. Indians need to struggle against the British; this franchise campaign will waste your energy. Women should use their energies to help their men fight a common foe; liberate themselves and the menfolk from the death grip of the existing government, which is the greatest of all evils, crushing society. (Gandhi, M.K., 1920:2)

But at another juncture, looking deeper into Gandhian virtues, goals, and tactics, it is self-evident that Gandhi himself was full of feminine virtues. He taught us that maleness and femaleness were qualities, not biological essentialism, that men should be more like women rather than vice versa, and that, in principle, androgyny was the superior form of gender orientation. (Gregg, 1965) To understand his views on women more deeply, we can classify Gandhi's thought and practices under following sub headings -

(a) Locating Gandhi in idea of Gendered Virtues

It became very clear with the emergence of the second wave of Western feminism that gender is a social and cultural construct. It has social connotations that refer to the roles, behaviours, expressions, and identities of individuals, often categorised as masculine, feminine, or non-binary. While sex is a biological identity, gender is a social identity. The statement "One is not born but becomes a woman" (De Beauvoir, 1949: 330) is a famous quote by Simone de Beauvoir, a French existentialist philosopher. For instance, masculinity is associated with the virtues of 'rationality', 'strength', 'aggression', which is ultimately 'public', that is 'male' and femininity is associated with the virtues of 'emotionality', 'weakness', nurturing, care, sacrifice, that is ultimately 'private', which is 'female'. It is self-evident from Gandhi's personality that gender is merely a social construction, as Gandhian virtues such as compassion, patience, ahimsa (non-violence), nurturing, and self-sacrifice are mainly feminine. By adopting virtues conventionally deemed "female" to lead a massive "public" and "male" political movement, Gandhi's life supports the notion that gendered roles are not biologically fixed. He challenged the binary that relegated nurturing, care, and sacrifice purely to the "private" sphere.

However, it is important to critically engage with the feminist critiques of Gandhi. Some feminist scholars, while recognising the progressive aspects of Gandhi's approach to gender, point out the limitations and contradictions within his views. For example, Gandhi has been criticised for occasionally reinforcing traditional roles for women, emphasising their role

as mothers and caregivers, and sometimes expressing essentialist ideas about women's innate moral superiority. Others have argued that, despite advocating women's participation in public life, Gandhi's feminism did not always question patriarchal structures and often upheld the primacy of women's domestic responsibilities. Some feminists, such as Madhu Kishwar, have argued that Gandhi's stress on self-sacrifice and purity risked perpetuating ideals that limit women's agency, while others highlight that his emphasis on women's nonviolent and nurturing qualities could inadvertently maintain gendered hierarchies. Furthermore, several critics have suggested that his advocacy for women's participation was sometimes instrumental, prioritising the interests of the nationalist movement over genuine gender equality. In response to these critiques, it is important to acknowledge the historical context in which Gandhi operated. While his views may fall short by contemporary feminist standards, his reimagining of the feminine as a site of political strength, his disruption of gender binaries, and his encouragement of women's leadership in public life marked a significant break from dominant norms of his time. Moreover, Gandhi himself engaged in self-reflection and occasional revision of his positions, indicating a willingness to grapple with these tensions. These criticisms suggest that Gandhi's contribution to feminist thought, while significant, was not free from ambiguity and must be understood with an awareness of both its advances and its limitations. Ultimately, a nuanced evaluation requires recognising both the empowering and constraining aspects of his legacy for women's liberation in India and beyond.

(b) Gandhi and controversy regarding celibacy

The sub-theme heading in the research paper may make readers uneasy for several reasons. Gandhi's experiments with celibacy are among the most controversial aspects, as many staunch followers of Gandhi criticised these experiments, and several individuals even left the *Aashram* because of them. Nevertheless, despite such controversies, it is equally true that Gandhi's words and actions created possibilities for women not only to move beyond the confines of the household but also to work alongside men in public or political spheres.

(c) The Gandhian method suits women more

It is a universally acknowledged fact that Mahatma Gandhi transformed the entire framework of resistance against cruelty and oppression. He also reshaped both the thought and methods of anti-colonial agitators and popularised *Satyagraha* as a powerful method of mass agitation. This method was comparatively more accessible to women. However, Gandhian methods were also criticised by many; some argued that because of Gandhi's path of passive resistance, India achieved independence much later. Yet another important aspect of this

historical reality is that Gandhi transformed fragmented protests into a broad-based mass movement. One of the greatest achievements of this movement was that it provided opportunities to those sections of society that had long remained marginalised, whether due to social position, occupation, or other structural factors. In this context, one of the most remarkable features of the Gandhian movement was the participation of women across social and religious boundaries. This participation began significantly during the Champaran movement. Among the major nationwide movements led by Gandhi, the Non-cooperation movement and the Civil Disobedience movement were withdrawn at their peak. However, it is also true that the extraordinary success and mass character of these movements were largely shaped by women's active participation.

A significant point to note is that from 1917 to 1942, while Gandhi continuously opened avenues for women's participation in public movement, he simultaneously emphasised the sacredness of women's domestic responsibilities. After the withdrawal of the non-cooperation movement, Gandhi appealed to the women participants to return to their homes, and during the civil disobedience movement, he placed women in the third number under the leadership of Sarojini Naidu. Why Gandhi adopted such an approach is a deeply rooted question, and its answer lies in his broader vision of future Indian society.

Gandhi often remarked that women were morally stronger and more creative than men in practising satyagraha, nonviolence, fasting, and self-sacrifice, as reflected in his autobiography *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*. In this context, feminist scholar Manmohan Kaur observed that in the process of National Integration, Gandhi accepted women as dedicated workers of nation-building. For this purpose, he placed the tool of Satyagraha in one hand while simultaneously recognising women's domestic rights and responsibilities in the other (Kaur, 1989, P 270-271)

(d) Gandhi and Women's Political Participation

In the search for the answer to this sub heading, Gandhi appears to have been highly strategic regarding women's participation in nation-building. His strategy, as described by Vina Majumder, was to ensure respect and dignity for women without harming their roles as mothers and wives, while simultaneously entrusting them with responsibilities equal to those of men in the constructive tasks associated with the success of the Independence movement. (Majumdar, 1976) The reason behind such a strategy can be explored under two broad categories.-Cultural Perspective and Social Perspective

The Indian freedom movement was not led solely by the Congress under the leadership of Gandhi; it was also carried

forward by several groups and organisations, each pursuing its own methods and ideological approaches, and resisting colonial rule with the support of dedicated followers. Women participated actively in almost all of these movements, in association with such organisations. Several women's organisations were formed and functioned alongside male-dominated political parties, such as the Women's India Association, (WIA) All India Women Conference (AIWC) and various left-oriented women's organisations operating particularly in Bengal. Alongside these, some international Women's organisations, such as the Women's Freedom League (WFL), also contributed to ensuring women's participation in the freedom movement and shaping the nation's future.

Among these organisations, except for the WIA, the internal character of most organisations was either communal, radical or both. In this context, Gandhi was never fully in agreement with their policies and programmes for achieving independence. Gandhi's primary intention was not merely political freedom, but also the creation of faith and trust within society for the moral reconstruction of the nation. In this process, he envisioned two interconnected paths. For women, he first emphasised the respect and dignity recognised in religions and cultural traditions, because he believed their dignity was immeasurable. Second, he sought to secure a meaningful role for women in independent India, where they would continue to uphold honour and moral values. While the women who were using violent methods during the agitation were not only criticised but also kicked out of their homes. (Ronaldshay, 1925, pp. 83–84)

(e) Similarities between the Gandhian notion of power and Feminine Power

The central theme of the feminist approach revolves around the structure of power. In every sphere of philosophical thought, whether from rational Greek philosophy to the customary oriental east, the question of power can be traced within comprehensive intellectual structures. In Greek philosophy, from Plato to modern critical philosophers such as Karl Marx, thinkers have attempted to understand power through the self, its accommodations, and its nature, while also trying to develop an alternative model of power. However, in almost all such views and models, women were considered as subjugated to the male power holders. Hardly any examples can be found where women were considered an essential element in the construction and exercise of power. Such conditions within the philosophy of power are rightly identified and critically analysed by Simon de Beauvoir, who argued that women have historically been defined purely in relation to men. Everywhere, men appeared as subjects, while women were treated as objects. (Beauvoir, pp. 26-82).

However, these narratives concerning women began to change after the sixth decade of the 20th century very sharply and rapidly, particularly when Micheal Foucault explained power as diffused throughout social institutions, knowledge systems, and disciplinary mechanisms. This perspective opened new possibilities for feminist arguments, which have been emerging since the late eighteenth century. Gandhi has changed the core of power. Generally, power is understood as physical or military power, often associated with aggression and force. Gandhi has given new meaning to power. He talked about moral power based on sacrifice and goodness. For him, women were not the weaker sex; basically, it depends on how you define power. To call women the weaker sex is a libel; it is man's injustice to women. If by strength is meant brute strength, then indeed, a woman is less brute than a man. If by strength is meant moral power, then woman is immeasurably man's superior. Has she not greater intuition? Is she not more self-sacrificing? Has she not greater courage? Without her, a man could not be. If non-violence is the law of our being, the future is with women... Who can make a more effective appeal to the heart than a woman? (YI, 10-4-1930, p. 121)

In studying Mahatma Gandhi's principles, policies, and actions, one can observe a power structure that is significantly different from the Western philosophical understanding of power. In the Gandhian Model, power is decentralised, and in this arrangement every woman possesses equal dignity, importance and participation in the exercise of power. Gandhi's alternative model of power can be understood:

(i) Political Decentralisation of power through the Gram Panchayat

Historically, when India is described as one of the oldest examples of democracy, it refers to the traditions of the village republic, which served as an important political institution even during periods of monarchical rule. In Gandhi's views, these village republics were represented through the Gram Panchayat, which he considered the basic unit of national governance in independent India. In this sense, Gandhi's conception of power was community-based and oriented towards individual dignity with the objectives of ensuring the successful development of participatory democracy. According to Gandhi, political power should neither remain concentrated in the hands of the single authority nor monopolized by any particular groups, rather it should be decentralised at the grassroots level, so that every individual could actively participate in governance and decision-making.

All the above dimensions of Mahatma Gandhi's decentralisation of power were deeply driven by his core principles of Satyagraha and Ahimsa. Gandhi believed that women were naturally closer to these ideals and could be carriers of such

values; therefore, his conception of power was not based on becoming the most effective leader, but on compassion and participatory social order.

(ii) Economic decentralisation of Power through the principle of trusteeship:

Mahatma Gandhi was deeply influenced by the theory and practice of trusteeship as discussed in the Jain and Buddhist traditions. From a theoretical perspective, Gandhi held that all forms of wealth are gifts from God. In this regard, his ideas differ significantly from liberal economic theory, which generally regards wealth as the result of individual ability and effort. In contrast to Liberal theory, Gandhi already believed that an individual is merely a trustee of wealth, because wealth exists in nature and is only discovered by an individual. Gandhi's view on wealth paved the way for the idea of distributive justice, which argues that individual talent itself is also a contribution to society.

In practice, Gandhi emphasised that wealth should not merely be inherited from one person to another for personal accumulation. Rather, the theory of trusteeship holds that wealth should ultimately be used for public welfare and that, upon the trustee's death, it should revert to society for the greater benefit of humanity.

(iii) Society leaned on power through the theory of Sarvodaya.

Mahatma Gandhi's vision of the nation began with the concern for the "last person in the queue". He believed that a nation's true strength lies in empowering and uplifting the most marginalised section of society. In this context, Gandhi advocated the philosophy of Sarvodaya, which means the welfare of all. According to Gandhi, a nation can achieve humanity's true goal only by adhering to two fundamental principles.

First, there must be equal dignity for all kinds of labourers irrespective of social or occupational status. **Second**, there should be wage equality across professions, such as between an advocate and a barber. Through their ideas, Gandhi attempted to establish a society free from exploitation, hierarchy and any kind of discrimination.

The philosophy of Sarvodaya essentially reflects Gandhi's belief in coexistence, mutual cooperation and collective welfare. Later, this philosophy was strongly emphasised by his staunch

followers Vinola Bhawe, who successfully led the Bhoodan movement, often described as a bloodless revolution (Singh, 2015)

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However, many of Gandhi's ideas concerning decentralisation were crushed by nation builders. In the constituent Assembly, on the subject of the Gram panchayat, Dr Ambedkar reacted to it as a 'den of ignorance. Similarly, on the subject of trusteeship, Jawaharlal Nehru reacted.

Is it reasonable to believe? In the theory of trusteeship, to give unchecked power and wealth to an individual and to expect him to use it entirely for the public good. (Nehru, 1966, P. 1598)

The above view of Gandhi completely rejected any form of consolidation and discrimination, which, in the long run, paved the way for a more inclusive ideas of gender relations. In this sense, Gandhi is a real feminist.

GANDHI AS AN ENVIRONMENTALIST.

Environmental consciousness and the need for environmental protection have remained central ideas across religious boundaries since ancient times, and these concerns are well reflected in the hymns and teachings of most religions. In Vedic civilisation, nature was revered through the content of the *Panch Mahabhuta*, water, fire, air and space, which were considered the five basic fundamental elements of nature. In Jain Dharma, environmental ethics were expressed through the principles of Ahimsa (Non-Violence), which emphasised equality, compassion and respect for all living beings. A similar example can also be found in the teachings of many other religions.

After reading these environmental concerns, two clear understandings emerge. First, ancient societies were aware of natural calamities. Second, they also recognised the environmental damage caused by human activities. However, throughout history, environmental degradation remained comparatively limited. The present picture and level of destruction witnessed during the last two centuries have been unprecedented. Such degradation has posed a serious challenge not only to human civilisation but also to the entire ecological system. The development of modern science and the Industrial Revolution contributed significantly to achieving this condition, as they accelerated human greed driven by greater production and consumption.

In this context, notable figures who recognised and reacted to such threats include John Ruskin and Henry David Thoreau. Rabindranath Tagore and Gandhi. In the Western world, Ruskin strongly criticised the destruction of nature

caused by industrialisation; similarly, Thoreau emphasised the intimate relationship between humans and the environment. Rabindranath Tagore, as a naturalist, advocated a spiritual connection between humans and nature. Amidst all these thinkers, Mahatma Gandhi stands out as the one who, after understanding their ideas, applied them in his own life and sought to demonstrate the importance of ecological balance through self-restraints and resistance to modernity.

Gandhi's significance lies in his experimental approach to life, as he practised what he preached, and these ideals later inspired many successful environmental movements, particularly those centred around *Jal, Jungle and Jameen* (water, forest and land). To situate Gandhi within environmental theory, it is important to note that his philosophy shares affinities with major currents in ecological thought. For example, Gandhi's emphasis on the intrinsic value of all life and non-violence towards nature aligns with the key tenets of deep ecology, a movement led by thinkers such as Arne Naess, which advocates for the inherent worth of non-human beings and for an ecocentric rather than anthropocentric worldview. Gandhi's focus on the interdependence of humans and the environment also finds resonance with ecofeminism, which critiques the domination of both women and nature and emphasises care, sustainability, and non-hierarchical relationships. Furthermore, his advocacy for simple living and self-restraint anticipates modern debates around sustainability and resource justice.

Here, before analysing Gandhi as an environmentalist, it is necessary to understand the natural calamities and human-caused hazards that he experienced throughout his life, such as violent ocean storms during his journey to South Africa, the plague outbreak in Gujarat, the floods in Kerala in 1924 and in Odisha in 1933 and 1937, as well as the devastating Bihar earthquake of 1934. These experiences, along with the impact of the Second Boer War and the two world wars, deeply shaped his thoughts, his constructive programme, and his rigorous experiments. In this context, an attempt can be made to understand Gandhi's contribution to the environmental movement, which emerged gradually and gained popularity after 1950. It also helps in understanding Gandhi's environmental perspective through his core ideas, which established him as a staunch environmentalist.

On the subject of the environment, Gandhian thought was profound and dynamic. But the terms commonly used today to analyse environmental challenges, their consequences, and sustainable development were not directly used by Mahatma Gandhi; however, through his ideas and principles, he consistently drew attention to the need for a sustainable and balanced society. With such views, he initially focused on the internal environment of the human being, which is reflected in human behaviour and helps strengthen moral consciousness and

intellectual development. Second, he was equally concerned with the external environment, which makes life healthy, balanced and sustainable for the performance of human duties.

In this regard, Mahatma Gandhi adopted several approaches which can broadly be divided into two categories: first, he criticised the factors that vitiate both the internal and external environment of human beings. Second, he developed and advocated certain principles and practices through which people could build a society and a universe based on coexistence, harmony and mutual respect.

FACTORS THAT VITIATE THE ENVIRONMENT

a) *Criticism of Modern Science*

The foundations of modern science were laid by **Galileo Galilei**, who proved that the Earth revolves around the sun. This discovery brought a massive transformation in human thinking patterns and gradually weakened many beliefs and practices rooted in religion. Initially, Galileo's ideas were strongly opposed by the Roman Catholic Church. However, in later years, the church adapted its ideas and said that progress is the new name for peace. (It is the title at the 'Conclusion' of Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*, 1967) Later, the scientific ideas of Galileo were further developed by Issac Newton. who established the laws governing the relationships among the components of nature. These developments (attitudes towards nature) gradually shifted the perceptions of nature from a sacred entity to a collection of resources.

In response to such development, Gandhi raised a crucial question in his famous work **Hind Swaraj**: Is Western progress truly a form of human development, or is it leading humanity astray spiritually and ethically? One of the important reasons behind Mahatma Gandhi's criticism of modern science was his belief reflected in the idea of the 'Seven Deadly Sins', in which he emphasised that 'Science without humanity is dangerous for society. (Young India, October 22, 1925)

b) *Criticism of Western Civilisation*

In thinking of Mahatma Gandhi, some sketches of his intellectual journey can be drawn simply, first, his childhood and adolescence were nurtured under deep, rational and strict spiritual guidance. Later, he pursued education in England, where he closely observed Western civilisation. Afterwards, he applied and tested his learning in South Africa and India. During the process, he realised that Western civilisation, which presented itself as the holder and bearer of a civilising mission, was deeply flawed and contradictory.

In *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi strongly criticised the British Parliament, which was regarded as the crown of liberal capitalist democracy, as 'barren' and 'prostitute', because it was

not fruitful for the welfare of the world, since its ruling system, patterns of living and thinking, and scientific developments were also fundamentally based on the exploitation of nature. He believed that such a civilisation was distancing human beings from humanity and its core values of compassion, morality and self-restraints

c) *Foundational principles against the West.*

Against the materialistic, mechanistic and violence-driven model of Western development, Mahatma Gandhi presented a profound civilisational critique. In *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi clearly argued that modern Western civilisation was self-destructive and would fail because it ignored humanity's essential spiritual foundations. As an alternative, Gandhi laid down certain foundational natural principles through which both the internal and external environment could become harmonious and beneficial for the entire ecosystem. These principles included Satyagraha as resistance against oppression, nonviolence against any form of violence, and Swadeshi against foreign presence. Through these ideals, Gandhi envisioned a civilisation rooted in moral responsibility, self-restraint, coexistence and ecological balance, with the feeling that service to humanity is service to God.

4. *Gandhi as Postcolonial Thinker*

Since the last quarter of the twentieth century, Mahatma Gandhi has been understood as a Postcolonial thinker. Here, it is essential to understand what postcolonialism is. Postcolonialism describes the political and theoretical struggles of societies that transitioned from political dependence to sovereignty. This entry will use imperialism as a broad term referring to economic, military, and political domination achieved without significant permanent European settlement (Koha, Margaret, and Reddy, Kavita, 2024). Various thinkers, including **Frantz Fanon, Mahatma Gandhi, Edward Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Ashish Nandy**, have contributed to the development of postcolonial theory.

Postcoloniality derives its genealogy from the Gandhian narrative book *Hind Swaraj* (1997), published in 1909. It takes the form of a dialogue between a text and a reader. The text provides an account of British colonialism in India, an analysis of the definition of swaraj (self-rule), a critical discussion of political strategy, and a critique of Western civilisation. Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj* everywhere discerns the structural violence of 'Western modernity'. He opposed "Western civilisation" by showing that the underlying materialism is not normatively justified, and the alleged benefits of colonialism (modern medicine, technology) are actually harmful to human existence.

Gandhi shows that the colonists fail in their own terms, pointing out that the European colonists claimed to bring civilisation as part of “The White Man’s *burden*” (Kipling, 1899, lines X–Y), but cemented their rule through brutal violence. Gandhi’s prickly text laments the Indian *moha*, or desire for the superficial glitter of modern civilisation. (Leela Gandhi 1998. P.19) In Gandhian words, we brought the English, and we keep them. Why do you forget that our adoption of their civilisation makes their presence in India possible at all? Your hatred against them ought to be transferred to their civilisation (Gandhi 1938, p.66).

Thus, the underlying reason Mahatma Gandhi is considered a postcolonial thinker is his critique of imperialism, colonialism, Western modernity, and capitalism. He focuses on indigeneity, decolonisation of the mind and an alternative model of human and economic development. He is remembered for his leadership of the Indian independence movement, his critique of British colonialism, and his theory of political resistance. Among his theoretical innovations is the concept of satyagraha. While the literal meaning is closer to “holding on to truth,” the term is often used to describe non-violent resistance or civil disobedience. According to Gandhi, it is through the practice of non-cooperation with oppression that the force of truth is animated. The central place of non-violence in Gandhi’s theory and practice reflects the influence of the Hindu concept of ahimsa, or the avoidance of harm, but this principle was transformed in the context of the anti-colonial struggle. {Kohn, Margaret and Reddy, Kavita, 2024}

Ashis Nandy frames Mahatma Gandhi as a foundational postcolonial thinker who operated outside the traditional Western paradigms of politics and development. His work focuses on Gandhi’s struggle against the ‘intimate enemy’, the internal psychological subjugation created by colonialism, rather than just the physical removal of the British. (Nandy, 1983)

5. Gandhi as a Postmodern thinker

Modernity, as defined by its 17th and 18th-century lineages, is epitomised by the view that scientific thinking yields objective knowledge and universal truths. Whereas postmodernity is defined as a critique of modernity. There are two perspectives to understand modernity and postmodernity. **Historical** and **epistemological**. Historically, Modernity is located in time, space, and place, and epistemologically, it represents the forms of knowledge and ways of knowing it entails. The section examines Gandhi with respect to both modernity and postmodernity. (Rudolph & Rudolph, 2005)

Gandhi was against the historical belief *in progress*. By the 18th century, the modern view of knowledge helped define what came to be known as the Enlightenment. Condorcet’s *Historical*

Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind epitomised the Enlightenment spirit. August Comte also carried forward the same Enlightenment belief in the 19th century. Western knowledge is based on a single dimension of liberal epistemology. Enlightenment belief claims that worldly reality can be understood through scientific temperaments and human rationality.

Gandhi’s thought foreshadowed postmodernism with its refusal to privilege modernism’s commitment to the epistemology of universal truths, objective knowledge and master narrative (Rudolph & Rudolph, 2005). Gandhi anticipates a good deal of postmodern thinking by holding that, at best, humans can know only partial and contingent truths. As a self-declared karma yogi, Gandhi’s epistemology was rooted in ‘truth in action’, a concept that locates truth in the facts and circumstances of a particular situation (Rudolph & Rudolph, 2005). Taking the case of satyagraha campaigns, he always tried to understand relevant circumstances and the attitudes and motives of the concerned parties. His methodology in South Africa and in India regarding *satyagraha campaigns was contextual*. As a *satyagrahi*, he practised firmness in pursuing contextual or situational truth. And, as an adherent of the Jain doctrine of *anekantavada*, he viewed truth as many-sided and its understanding by the human mind as ‘fleeting and fragmentary’.

However, it is important to note that not all scholars agree on labelling Gandhi as a postmodern thinker. Some argue that while Gandhi’s rejection of universal narratives and his stress on situated truth resonate with postmodern epistemology, his deep spiritual convictions and search for moral absolutes set him apart from more relativistic tendencies in postmodernism. Others emphasise that Gandhi’s unwavering belief in ultimate truths, even if partially accessible, aligns more closely with premodern philosophical traditions than with postmodern scepticism. These debates illustrate the complexity of locating Gandhi within any single intellectual tradition.

Gandhi starts with truth, grounded in his commitment to the view that ‘truth is God’. Absolute Truth is modern sense, understood as objective truth and universal laws. But Gandhi compared absolute truth to a diamond, which could not be seen whole but whose many facets or surfaces revealed partial truths. (Stephen Hay, 1978). If God is the absolute truth. No one has found that. He said that I worship God as truth only.’ But he says that I have not yet found him...as long as I have not realised this Absolute truth, so long as I have not realized this absolute truth, so long as I must hold by the relative truth as I have conceived it; this relative truth must, meanwhile, be my beacon, my shield and buckler (Gandhi, 1927). This view of relative truth anticipates the postmodern turn to the contingent certainty of contextual or situational truth.

Apart from the universal truth vs. relative truth debate, Postmodernism is generally understood as incredulity toward meta-narratives,” (Lyotard, 1984). Mahatma Gandhi rejected the grand narratives of modern civilisation, such as the inevitability of technological progress, the inviolability of the centralised liberal state, and economic success as the metric of human success, by promoting a philosophy rooted in localism, moral self-rule, and peaceful living. He viewed the modern state as a "soulless machine" and instead advocated for self-contained, village-based economies. This view of localism has offered a ray of hope for empowering local institutions through the idea of decentralised power.

This localism can also be understood in colonial rule vs. self-rule. Gandhi always favoured swaraj (self-rule). He was the voice beyond the coloniser's mind. He could recognise the ‘intimate enemy’. That is British rule – how it has colonised Indian’s mind. Gandhi was a moral force, which Nandy termed as ‘who can think Outside the Imperium’ (Nandy, 1983). His moral force compelled him to rule himself. Swaraj was not a political rule; it was essentially a moral rule: to be ruled by your own inner self. This idea of ‘self’ as ‘inner self’ also symbolises localism in this thought. One more ground for considering Gandhi a postmodern thinker is the emergence of his localism as a guiding principle for various movements of civil society since the second half of the twentieth century. Gandhi is postmodern too in his hermeneutics. He takes meaning from each term in its specific context. By taking a case of vegetarianism and the reading of religious texts like the Bhagavad Gita, Gandhi enacts his postmodern hermeneutic.

CONCLUSION

Mahatma Gandhi was an original thinker and activist. He was preeminently a person of civil society. Two of his most important creations, satyagraha, a non-violent but militant pursuit of truth in action, and Sarvodaya, service on behalf of others or for the common good, occurred within the mental and physical framework of civil society. (Gandhi, M.K., 1947). Almost all ideological frameworks adopted Mahatma Gandhi's ideas, making him more visible and relevant on the Indian and world stage. Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy transcends modern ideological boundaries, functioning as an organic "spiritual science" that cannot be confined to a single ism. He was a spiritual scientist whose “ideology” and "praxis" (action) cannot be compartmentalised in contemporary ideological boundaries.

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