

Rethinking The State: Mahatma Gandhi's Political Vision And Its Relevance In Contemporary Indian Political Thought

Tapasi Dey*

*Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Bankura Sammilani College, Bankura, India, 722102.

*Corresponding Author: Tapasi Dey

*Email: tapasidey02@gmail.com

Citation: Tapasi Dey, (2021). Rethinking The State: Mahatma Gandhi's Political Vision And Its Relevance In Contemporary Indian Political Thought, *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice*, 27(1) 1128-1131
Doi: 10.53555/kuey.v27i1.10523

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

In addition to being a historical figure, Mahatma Gandhi continues to be a symbol of an alternative political imagination in Indian political philosophy. Both the liberal and socialist conceptions of the state diverge from his own. This essay outlines the key elements of his ethically grounded vision of the state, which is based on truth, non-violence, self-rule (swaraj), and moral authority. It emphasizes how his ideas are fundamentally different from both liberal and socialist traditions, offers a radical break from the idea of the modern nation state, which is frequently based on coercive machinery, and is still relevant in Indian politics today.

Keywords: alternative political imagination, ethical principles, coercive machinery

Introduction:

The Father of the Nation, M.K. Gandhi, was a political practitioner rather than an academic political theorist in the area of Indian political thinking. In Harijan Patrika, he stated, "I am not built for academic writings. Action is my domain". He offered a moral and spiritual perspective grounded on traditional Indian philosophical ideals in his critique of the state's and modern civilization's centralizing tendencies, which was most famously expressed on 'Hind Swaraj.' In addition to India, a number of Western philosophers' ideas also shaped his way of thinking.

Hindu texts such as the Gita (which emphasizes righteous action or *Karma Yoga*), the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, Jainism, and Buddhism (which emphasize non-violence, compassion, and self-purification), as well as Christian and Islamic teachings (which emphasize truth and morality as universal values) and Tolstoy, Thoreau, and John Ruskin, all influenced his ethical framework. In a single sense, he used the core ideas of both eastern and western political philosophy to develop a unique idea. His goal was to put his moral principles into practice by controlling and organizing political movements on a national and worldwide scale. Though it seems nearly impossible, he has made repeated attempts to demonstrate that politics or political movements may be carried out in front of the two ideals of 'truth' and 'non-violence.' While he did not want to term it 'Gandhism', his view of the essence of politics and the state was similar to that of a philosopher and included theoretical values. He also wrote in Harijan that, "There is no such thing as 'Gandhism' and I do not want to leave any sect after me. You won't call it 'Gandhism' because there is no 'ism' about it."

Gandhi's critique on traditional concept of state:

A deep critique of modernity, especially its institutional manifestations in the liberal and communist states, can be found in Mahatma Gandhi's political theory. He disagreed with liberalism and the notion that the state should protect individual rights through institutional and legal means as an impartial judge. Even in democracies, the liberal state uses bureaucratic pressure and violence, which he believed to be dehumanizing. In Hind swaraj, he made the case that Western liberal democracy, in spite of its institutional checks, only served to legitimize the tyranny of the majority, commodify interpersonal connections, and enable moral

decay through its reliance on economic exploitation and machines. He had a different view of the state than other western political theorists, especially Aristotle, Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau. In Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan*, the state is viewed as an artificial person who is required to maintain order and avert the anarchic "state of nature." Locke believed that the state upheld life, liberty, and property through a social contract. Rousseau's conception, which portrays the state as the collective will expressing sovereignty, gives moral dimension. On the other hand, Gandhiji's conception of the state is based on ethical interdependence rather than materialistic need. Gandhi felt that true social order arises from the moral self-rule of the person, in contrast to Hobbes and Rousseau, who considered the state as necessary to limit human interest or actualize the desire of the people. While Hobbesian and Lockean models rely on empiricism and the legal system, Gandhiji rejects the centralized and coercive apparatus of the modern state. Gandhiji integrates experimental truth with normative ethics. Gandhiji's ideal state is therefore a moral community that operates with little centralized compulsion rather than a *Leviathan* that upholds rights.

He was even more critical of the socialist state, particularly of the Marxian and Fabian schools that placed a strong emphasis on class domination and economic planning. Though their solutions differ greatly, both theorists share an underlying critique of social injustice and political power. Marx's historical materialism-based theory calls for the downfall of capitalist governments and the installation of a proletariat dictatorship, which he sees as an essential interim measure prior to the state's collapse. Marx claims that the state serves as a tool for class dominance. Gandhi's philosophy, on the other hand, stresses moral self-discipline and is based on non-violence. Gandhi believed that the socialist state replicated the same statist logic as liberalism, which is the concentration of power and the subjection of personal conscience to group objectives. Gandhi thus challenges the liberal and socialist paradigms by arguing that a moral metamorphosis of the individual and society is necessary for real freedom rather than merely institutional or structural change. In conclusion, Gandhi's criticism of the liberal and socialist state challenges the contemporary concept of statehood itself rather than just rejecting certain programs.

Gandhiji's conception of the State: A unique ethical framework

Gandhi's philosophy, particularly his focus on truth (*Satya*), non-violence (*Ahimsa*), and self-rule (*Swaraj*), was tied to his conception of state. Gandhiji believed that the ideal state was a voluntary union of morally independent people and self-sufficient communities rather than a tool of control. He believed that the state, especially in its democratic guise, stood for institutionalized brutality. He promoted a system in which the community served as the fundamental unit of government and the individual as the moral authority. Self-discipline would take the place of legal force in his ideal stateless society, which would be governed by *Dharma* (righteousness).

Truth: The ultimate ideals of life, according to Mahatma Gandhi, was truth (*Satya*), which was both a political and spiritual ethic. Gandhiji considered truth to be experimental, moral, and dynamic, in contrast to abstract or philosophical definitions. For him, truth was a lived reality that needed to be embodied via action, not only factual accuracy or intellectual coherence. In *Harijan Patrika*, he famously declared, "I do not regard God as a person. Truth for me is God". Putting truth at the core of his moral cosmos by inverting the widely accepted religious maxim. He stated in his autobiography, 'My Experiment with Truth,' that "those who say that religion has nothing to do with politics do not know what religion means." His devotion to Truth has led him into the political sphere.

Non-violence: Gandhiji rejected violence as the foundation of political order, in contrast to conventional conceptions that saw the state as the institution of justifiable aggression. He established non-violence as a governing principle and a moral need. It was the fundamental tenet of statecraft rather than just a personal virtue. Gandhiji believed that nonviolence was an active moral commitment rather than just passive opposition. It called for a change in political relationships—from force to conscience, from dominance to conversation. *Ahimsa* does not simply mean non-killing, *ahimsa* is a positive condition of loving and doing good to evil, not just a negative state of innocuousness. *Ahimsa* signifies the greatest charity and the greatest love in its positive form, he asserts.

Swaraj: Gandhiji's idea of *swaraj* encompassed more than just political freedom from British colonial control; it also included moral self-government, self-discipline, and local autonomy. At the individual and collective levels, it represented self-government. According to Gandhi, the village was the fundamental unit of the state. *Panchayati Raj* was the foundation of a participative, decentralized power system known as political *swaraj*. It meant ethical responsibility and a self-sufficient moral society on a spiritual level. Therefore, Gandhiji's *swaraj* was a political philosophy repudiation of both internal disintegration and external rejection.

Trusteeship: Gandhi advocated a moral framework where capital and labor co-operated harmoniously, contributing to the common good, as opposed to advocating violent class conflict or state appropriation of property. His principle of trusteeship aimed to establish an ethical economy in which the wealthy acted as trustees of their wealth for the benefit of society. His opinions on the function of the state—not to forcefully transfer riches, but to promote moral behavior and economic independence—were similarly influenced by this notion.

Gandhi on State as an Organ of Violence

His view of the state as an instrument of violence is fundamental to his critique of contemporary statism, in contrast to traditional political theorists who view the state as an essential tool for upholding law and order. "The State represents violence in a concentrated and organized form," he stated in *Hind Swaraj*. Although each person has a soul, the state, being a "soulless machine," is incapable of being weaned from violence, which is the source of its own existence. His fundamental conviction that the state alienates people from their moral convictions by monopolizing force is emphasized in this statement. Gandhi also strongly opposed revolutionary movements that aimed to seize state power through bloodshed. In his view, means must always be morally consistent with aims, and ends could never justify means. He supports ahimsa ethics, local sovereignty, and moral enlightenment as means of transcending the state rather than reforming it. "The ideally non-violent state will be an ordered anarchy," he stated. The state with the best governance is also the one with the least governance. He viewed the state as a temporary need, its importance diminishing in direct proportion to the moral development of the populace, rather than as an enduring foe. He did not, however, demand that the state be abolished right away. His political philosophy challenges us to picture a society in which respect for one another and self-discipline are fostered and order emerges. In this way, Gandhi's conception of state sovereignty served as both a critique and a creative substitute for the contemporary nation-state.

Gandhi on State Sovereignty

Gandhi believed that sovereignty was a moral and spiritual concept based on the independence of the person and the self-sufficient community, rather than simply being a question of institutional authority or foreign force. He contends that *Swaraj*, a notion more complex than merely political independence, is the source of true sovereignty. Rather, he envisioned a *Ram Rajya*, a perfect political system based on non-violence and honesty. (God's Kingdom on Earth). Every village has its own type of local autonomy since it is an independent entity. Furthermore, without official acknowledgement from colonial or state institutions, his political experiments—such as civil disobedience and non-cooperation—were all intended to establish *de facto* sovereignty from below. Sovereignty is thus transformed from a legal status into a performative, moral act.

Gandhian conception: Individual and State

His theory is based on understanding of the relationship between the state and the individual that is fundamentally distinct from both liberal individualism and collectivist beliefs. Gandhi views the state as a necessary but potentially harmful tool whose authority must always remain submissive to the ethical conscience of individuals, while establishing the morally awakened individual as sovereign. Therefore, his ideal polity is based on the individual rather than the state.

Contemporary relevance of Gandhi's political vision

Mahatma Gandhi's political philosophy, which is based on ethics rather than sovereignty, legalism, or institutionalism, offers a significant alternative to contemporary political imagination. Although Panchayati Raj institutions were promoted, they remained subservient to state and central authorities. The post-colonial Indian state increasingly adopted the landscape of modern Indian politics, which is characterized by increasing centralization, economic globalization development, and industrialization over moral politics that deviated from his village-centric model. and frequently casting doubt on whether his ideas can be successfully applied to today's problems. However, (i) the Indian Constitution adopted Gandhian principles after independence, particularly in the Directive Principles of State Policy, even if it still adhered to liberal democratic systems. (ii) His theories have been renewed by a number of social movements in India's post-independence history. His nonviolent, moral principles served as an influence for Vinoba Bhave's Bhoodan movement and the Chipko movement. These movements oppose state authority by relying on moral legitimacy rather than political force. (iii) Local economies frequently owe their philosophical roots to his principles of simplicity, self-sufficiency, and ecological harmony, and have received new relevance in the era of environmental crisis movements that support sustainable agriculture. (iv) In an age of identity politics and religious polarization, his conception of *Ram Rajya* was not theocratic but rather morally grounded in fairness and tolerance, which are critical to the success of Indian democracy. (v) Gandhi thought that the methods were just as vital as the goals. For a state to flourish successfully, his insistence on moral politics is crucial. (vi) Gandhi's vision is highlighted by models like the Panchayat and Gram Sabha, which can reimagine democracy from the ground up. (vii) By emphasizing rural development and assistance for the poor, many welfare programs and inclusive policies reaffirm Gandhian principles. These programs have had a major influence on inclusive development in addition to symbolic appropriation. (viii) Morality and ethics have always played a significant part in politics. Even though politics is frequently viewed as a field of power,

moral leadership is nevertheless the cornerstone of legitimacy, responsibility, and fairness in all democracies. Long-term stability, societal peace, and significant advancement all depend on it.

Conclusion:

Despite being sometimes written off as utopian, Gandhi's conception of the state is nevertheless among the most radical and persistent political ideas in Indian thought. He opposes both market-driven and statist paradigms with his decentralized democracy, moral self-rule, and rejection of violence. Re-examining his ideas is not a sentimental exercise but rather a crucial re-engagement with an alternative modernity as India struggles with issues of governance, identity, equity, and sustainability. India may become more humanitarian and closer to true democracy and holistic development if Gandhian ideals are revisited and sincerely applied.

References:

1. M.K. Gandhi—Hind Saraj or Indian Home Rule, Navajivan, Ahmedabad, 1938
2. M.K. Gandhi—An Autobiography or The Story of My Experiments with Truth, Navajivan,
3. S. Biswas (ed)—Gandhi: Theory and Practice, Social Impact and Contemporary Relevance.
4. Ramchandra Guha—India After Gandhi: The History of world's Largest Democracy
5. Buddhadev Bhattacharyya—Evolution of the Political Philosophy of Gandhi, Calcutta Book House, Calcutta, 1969
6. V.P Varma —Modern Indian Political Thought. L.K A. Educational Publishers, 1980
7. J. Bandyopadhyay- Social and Political Thought of Gandhi, Allied Publishers, Calcutta, 1969
8. M.K. Singh & A. Kumar —Reading Gandhi, New Delhi, 2007