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Political philosophy of MK Gandhi: Exploring equity and social justice

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Abstract

This article investigates MK Gandhi's philosophical odyssey, delineating the convergence of his ideologies with a focus on equity and social justice. It scrutinizes the transformative trajectory of Gandhi's beliefs, charting their evolution from his formative years in South Africa to his leadership during India's struggle for independence. The analysis encompasses Gandhi's commitment to nonviolent resistance as a means to foster equity and social justice, examining the amalgamation of these principles in his advocacy for societal change. Additionally, this article explores the contemporary relevance of Gandhi's philosophical evolution, illuminating its influence on current discourses surrounding equity and social justice. It examines Gandhi's steadfast commitment to equity and social justice, tracing the development of his principles and their application in his strategies of nonviolent resistance. This paper scrutinizes the pivotal role of Gandhi's philosophical evolution in shaping movements for equality and social justice worldwide, elucidating the enduring relevance and impact of his teachings in contemporary societal frameworks. By dissecting Gandhi's philosophical journey, this article aims to provide insights into the enduring impact of his principles on fostering a more just and equitable society.

Keywords: Gandhi, equity, social justice, trusteeship, constructive programme, nonviolence

1. Introduction

Gandhi's philosophical development was strongly influenced by his extensive exposure to other nations, religions, and experiences. Gandhi's convictions were formed as a mosaic of ethical, spiritual, and political principles, influenced by the teachings of Jainism, Hinduism, Christianity, and Western philosophers such as Thoreau, Tolstoy, and Ruskin. Gandhi's ideology revolved around the fundamental principle of 'Ahimsa', which means non-violence. He felt that non-violence meant not only the absence of physical harm but an active principle of love and compassion towards all living beings. Gandhi viewed Ahimsa as extending beyond personal behaviour and encompassing social frameworks, highlighting the importance of fair systems that uplifted marginalised groups.

Gandhi's commitment to social justice was apparent in his struggle against discrimination, namely the caste system that was widespread in Indian society. He championed the dignity and equality of Dalits, confronting the traditional conventions that marginalised them. The objective of his Harijan movement was to elevate the untouchables, asking those in positions of privilege to acknowledge their shared humanity and adopt a mindset of inclusiveness. Gandhi's pursuit of social justice also motivated him to lead initiatives advocating for economic fairness. He promoted the concept of 'Sarvodaya,' which entails the well-being of all individuals, by calling for the equitable distribution of income and resources to narrow the disparity between the wealthy and the underprivileged. His promotion of spinning and weaving fabric, which represents independence and financial empowerment, highlighted the importance of escaping economic enslavement (Wolpert, 2001) ^[27]. Once Gandhi said:

True economics is the economics of justice. People will be happy in so far as they learn to do justice and be righteous. All else is not only vain but leads straight to destruction. To teach the people to get rich by hook or by crook is to do them an immense injustice (Gandhi, 1958, p. 33) ^[10].

Gandhi's dedication to fairness also encompassed the domain of politics. His strategy for attaining India's independence was not exclusively focused on toppling colonial power, but on creating a society where every person had an equitable voice and chance.

The non-cooperation and civil disobedience movements aimed to challenge British rule while simultaneously proclaiming the rights and dignity of the Indian people.

In addition, Gandhi's promotion of women's rights was ahead of its era. He advocated for gender equality, acknowledging women as equal collaborators in the pursuit of cultural change. His advocacy for women's education and involvement in public affairs defied the dominant patriarchal conventions. Despite facing criticism and scepticism Gandhi's philosophical ideals served as a beacon for various social justice movements worldwide. Notable individuals such as Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela, and Cesar Chavez found inspiration in his principles of non-violent resistance when fighting against racial segregation, apartheid, and exploitation.

Philosophizing MK Gandhi (1869-1948) is complex. Comprehending Gandhi's philosophy requires grappling with a multitude of interconnected ideas, considering historical contexts, and acknowledging the complexities inherent in his principles and their applications. Scholars, historians, and philosophers continue to engage in extensive analysis and interpretation of Gandhi's life and teachings, contributing to ongoing discussions about his significance and relevance in the contemporary world. Nevertheless, Gandhi's legacy is not devoid of dispute. Some of his opinions and actions have faced criticisms, particularly about his approach to caste reforms and his stance on specific social concerns. These intricacies serve as a reminder that although Gandhi's philosophy continues to have an impact, it is crucial to thoroughly examine and modify his views to suit present-day circumstances. In the subsequent sections, the aforementioned statements have been thoroughly elaborated, substantiated by ample citations from scholarly sources by Gandhi and on Gandhi.

2. Methodology

M. K. Gandhi's philosophical journey concerning the intersection of equity and social justice encompasses a multifaceted approach. Firstly, a historical analysis of Gandhi's writings, speeches, and actions is crucial to understand the evolution of his thoughts on equity and social justice throughout different stages of his life. Secondly, a contextual examination within the socio-political landscape of colonial India is essential to grasp how Gandhi's ideologies were shaped by the prevalent societal structures, including the caste system, economic disparities, and the struggle against British rule. Thirdly, an interdisciplinary approach drawing from philosophy, ethics, political science, and social movements can help delineate Gandhi's unique philosophical contributions to concepts of equity and social justice. Moreover, employing comparative studies with other thinkers or movements advocating for social change can provide insightful contrasts and parallels, shedding light on the distinctiveness of Gandhi's ideas. Lastly, utilizing a critical lens to evaluate the strengths, limitations, and controversies surrounding Gandhi's approaches to equity and social justice would be integral to a comprehensive analysis. This methodological framework aims to offer a nuanced understanding of Gandhi's philosophical evolution and his contributions to the discourse on equity and social justice.

3. Satyagraha and Social Justice

Gandhi is best known for his philosophy of nonviolent

resistance, termed '*Satyagraha*.' This concept involved the use of nonviolent civil disobedience as a means of protesting and challenging oppressive systems. Understanding the nuances and applications of *Satyagraha* in various contexts requires a deep dive into Gandhi's writings and actions. *Satyagraha* was Gandhi's guiding principle in his quest for justice, equality, and freedom from oppression (Mohanty, 2021) ^[19]. *Satyagraha* was grounded in the belief that truth and nonviolence are inseparable. Gandhi believed that seeking truth and standing for justice should be accompanied by nonviolent means. He saw nonviolence as a powerful force that could transform oppressors while resisting injustice (Markovits, 2003, p. 146) ^[18].

Satyagraha was a method of resisting injustice without the use of violence. It involved passive resistance, civil disobedience, and noncooperation with unjust laws or systems. Gandhi encouraged individuals to challenge oppression through peaceful means, refusing to comply with unjust authorities or laws, thereby exposing the inherent injustice in those systems (Prasad, 2018) ^[21]. Gandhi's first major *Satyagraha* in India was against the exploitation of farmers in Champaran, Bihar, who were forced to cultivate indigo by British planters. Gandhi organized protests, demanded justice for the farmers, and eventually succeeded in getting their grievances addressed (Gopinath, 2020) ^[13]. Another *Satyagraha* movement was Kheda *Satyagraha* (1918). This movement took place in Kheda district of Gujarat, where farmers were unable to pay taxes due to a widespread famine. Gandhi supported the farmers' struggle by initiating a nonviolent resistance campaign against the British authorities, advocating for tax relief and assistance for the farmers. Another significant *Satyagraha* movement was Non-cooperation Movement (1920-1922) led by Gandhi, it aimed to resist British rule through nonviolent non-cooperation (Bondurant, 1988) ^[7]. Indians boycotted British goods, educational institutions, and government services, causing disruption and highlighting India's ability to self-govern. Salt *Satyagraha* (1930) also known as the Dandi March; this was a protest against the British salt monopoly. Gandhi led a march to the coastal village of Dandi and symbolically broke the salt laws by collecting salt from the sea, defying the British-imposed salt tax. This act sparked widespread civil disobedience across India (Rather, 2022) ^[24]. Quit India Movement (1942) was also regarded as important Gandhi launched this movement demanding an end to British rule in India. He urged Indians to adopt the slogan 'Quit India' and called for nonviolent protests and disobedience. The movement led to widespread arrests of Indian leaders, yet it greatly contributed to India's eventual independence in 1947 (Greenough, 1983) ^[14].

The *Satyagraha* discourse, despite its long-standing significance, is under-theorized in social justice and does not significantly contribute to social science literature on equity (Rai & Tiwary, 2012) ^[23]. Rai and Tiwary contended that comprehending Gandhi is imperative for several reasons: firstly, to revive the indissoluble connection between his philosophy and political action, which operate in conjunction with one another; secondly, to confront and comprehend present-day political upheaval; and thirdly, to challenge the dominance of post-truth politics, as Gandhi's *Satyagraha* establishes moral and ethical boundaries of truth. Concerning the first point, while scholars generally acknowledge the significance of *Satyagraha*, there are

divergent views regarding the concept of truth, the relationship between history and philosophy, and the distinction between normative principles and the practical aspects of satyagraha. The interpretation of Gandhi's *Satyagraha* is highly debated and has both restrictive and confining aspects.

Gandhi's concept of *Satyagraha*, which means 'truth force' or 'soul force,' was not only a method of nonviolent resistance but also a philosophy deeply rooted in social justice. *Satyagraha* was Gandhi's approach to addressing social, political, and economic injustices through nonviolent civil disobedience, passive resistance, and peaceful protest. In the pursuit of social justice, Gandhi applied *Satyagraha* to various issues prevalent in Indian society during his time, such as discrimination based on caste, poverty, colonial rule, and inequality. He advocated for the upliftment of the oppressed, including the lower castes (Dalits), promoting equality among all individuals regardless of their social status or background.

Gandhi envisioned a society where justice, equality, and peace prevailed, and he believed that *Satyagraha* was a potent means to achieve these goals. His principles of nonviolent resistance and social justice continue to inspire movements and activists around the world advocating for equality, human rights, and justice in various forms.

4. *Swadeshi* and *Swaraj* as two pillars of social justice and equity

Gandhi's life exemplified the profound impact of nonviolent resistance and his teachings on self-reliance and self-governance. Social justice and equity continue to serve as fundamental principles that inspire global movements striving for justice, equality, and human dignity. This section delves deep into the principles espoused by Gandhi, exploring their significance in broader spectrum of social justice and equitable governance. His philosophy of *Swadeshi*, *Swaraj*, social justice, and equity wasn't just a political doctrine; it was a moral compass guiding societies towards self-sufficiency, self-governance, equality, and fairness. His teachings remain instrumental in inspiring individuals and movements globally, illustrating the enduring relevance and universal appeal of his principles in shaping a more just and equitable world.

Gandhi popularised the concepts of *Swaraj* (self-rule) and *Swadeshi* (self-reliance) in the discussions of colonial India. Although some scholars and advocates embraced this terminology when discussing the Indian independence movement, reaching a consensus on their meaning proved to be challenging (Bhushan & Garfield, 2015) [4]. The Gandhian method aligns with the initial 'basic needs' concept for global development (Emmerij, 1981) [8]. Gandhi's method aims to achieve greater fairness, sometimes known as "distributive justice," by advocating for the use of technology that is suitable for fulfilling 'basic needs' such as food, clothes, shelter, health, and basic education. The social philosophy of Gandhi has been largely overlooked by the majority of development specialists, with only a small number of exceptions (Erikson, 1968) [9]. This analysis aims to elucidate certain facets of Gandhi's history and his ideology on *Swadeshi* (i.e. the promotion of local self-sufficiency and utilisation of local expertise and capabilities) and *Swaraj* (i.e. autonomous progress that fosters fairness and righteousness). Gandhi's ideas, rooted in an 'Indic' meta-cultural context, prioritise the principle of

equity (Roy, 1985) [26]. Gandhi argued that:

Swadeshi is that spirit in us which promotes the use and service of our immediate surroundings to the exclusion of the more remote. In the domain of politics, I should make use of the indigenous institutions and serve them by curing them of their proved defects. In that of economics, I should use only things that are produced by my immediate neighbours and serve those industries by making them efficient and complete where they might be found wanting (Gandhi, 1964, p. 269) [11].

The Gandhian approach to development emphasises equity, which refers to fairness in the distribution and exchange of resources. Gandhi's concept of *Swaraj* is founded on the idea of 'community' and a moral principle of 'justice for all.' The Gandhian approach significantly influences the first conceptualization of the 'basic needs' approach to development. This study assumes that the basic requirements approach, which can be attributed in part to Gandhi's *Swaraj*, is closely linked to the concept of 'local self-reliance' or *Swadeshi*. This fundamental argument has been stated by numerous authors. However, it has yet to make a significant influence in the developed regions of the world, particularly in the northern industrialised areas. This could be attributed to the fact that Gandhian thinking encompasses a comprehensive worldview that starkly contrasts with a culture that prioritises economic expansion and 'progress' (Bakker, 1990) [2].

Gandhi advocated for a self-help approach to rural development, which he referred to as *Swadeshi*. During the 1960s, one important component of *Swadeshi* was interpreted as Appropriate Technology. The word Appropriate Technology has fallen out of favour and is no longer considered trendy. However, it encapsulates a crucial and important understanding of the functioning of both natural and human ecosystems. This paper aims to highlight certain aspects of the ongoing significance of Appropriate Technology and poses topics that would be beneficial to explore both theoretically and empirically. It is desired a shift in development policy decisions, moving away from dependence on a technocratic and traditional growth model approach, and instead embracing an 'Appropriate Technology.'

5. Constructive programme and *Sarvodaya*

Gandhi formulated an all-encompassing strategy for the revitalization of India, which he referred to as the constructive project. The objective of this programme was to develop a social structure based on veracity and non-aggression. Constructive Programme and *Sarvodaya* are interrelated principles linked to Gandhi's philosophy that contribute to social justice and equity in unique manners. Gandhi's Constructive Programme emphasised the concept of engaging in peaceful resistance while simultaneously undertaking constructive activity. Its objective was to establish a novel socio-economic structure founded upon moral and ethical ideals. The programme prioritised constructive endeavours such as advancing education, developing self-sufficiency through small-scale industries, enhancing sanitation and cleanliness, promoting communal unity, and pushing for the empowerment of marginalised groups in society.

Gandhi formulated a comprehensive programme consisting of 18 principles (subjects), all aimed at fostering the progress and development of the nation. Gandhi understood

constructive programme as the process of constructing a new society within the existing one. It involved achieving complete independence via truthful and nonviolent methods (Gandhi & Rai, 2023) ^[22]. Its objective was to foster self-assurance among individuals and provide equitable organisations to meet human needs. Through active participation in these productive endeavours, communities gained the ability to effectively tackle their own requirements and achieve greater autonomy. This method has positively impacted local economies, facilitated the development of skills, and improved the overall well-being of society. The ultimate goal was to establish a fair and egalitarian society, starting from the bottom and working our way up (Harris, 1987) ^[16].

A fundamental aspect of constructive plan is a strong criticism of modernization. The purpose of the constructive programme was to tackle systemic violence, essentially aiming for structural nonviolence. Nonviolence advocates argue that development, when imposed as a means of modernization, might be considered a manifestation of structural violence. This policy not only puts individuals who do not embrace modernity at a disadvantage, but also promotes a lifestyle that prioritises only a few areas of the human experience. Gandhi perceives modernity as the act of assuming control over the world, whereas he believes that the key to a fulfilling life lies in assuming control over ourselves, thereby granting us the freedom to determine our desired existence in the world.

Both Constructive Programme and *Sarvodaya* contributed to social justice and fairness by promoting self-sufficiency, empowering communities, addressing the needs of marginalised groups, and pushing for a more inclusive and fair society. The objective of these principles was to bring about a societal transformation by prioritising the dignity and welfare of each person, therefore establishing a fairer and more harmonious social structure.

6. Gandhi as a Realist Political Philosopher

Within the realm of political philosophy, there exist numerous thinkers and perspectives. For instance, certain ethicists with a focus on ethics prioritise 'Pragmatism' while others prioritise 'Idealism.' Certain philosophers argue that 'action utility' is a satisfactory criterion, whilst others emphasise 'goal utility.' Attempting to clarify such terms here is generally a really challenging task. So, I have tried to locate Gandhian philosophical pragmatism in other political philosophers of different times. I will start with Socrates.

Socrates, an eminent Greek philosopher, is often recognised as the progenitor of Western philosophy. He is renowned for his utilisation of the Socratic Method, which involves engaging in cooperative and combative discussion to foster critical thinking and shed light on concepts. He emphasised ethical inquiry and the significance of challenging preconceptions and pursuing truth via discourse and introspection. Gandhi and Socrates, despite living in different eras and cultural contexts, shared several similarities in their approaches and beliefs like emphasis on ethical living, commitment to truth, importance of self-examination, believe in nonviolence and challenging the conventional wisdom (Mackey, 2012) ^[17]. Nonetheless, their shared commitment to truth, ethics, and the pursuit of a just society remains a significant aspect of their legacies.

During his time in South Africa, Gandhi authored his interpretation of Plato's *Apology*. In South Africa, Gandhi

began to regard Socrates as a practitioner of *Satyagraha*. While Gandhi was imprisoned in Johannesburg in early 1908, he studied Plato's *Apology* and translated it into Gujarati. His early years in South Africa were crucial for his growth as a political activist and philosopher of *Satyagraha*. It was during this time that he started to shape his ideas on Indian nationalism. Gandhi later admitted that he had discovered his 'vocation in life' (Gandhi, 1928) ^[12].

When examining Gandhi's interpretation of Socrates, it is important to consider the historical backdrop of South Africa and the intellectual development that Gandhi experienced there. Throughout his lifetime, Gandhi seems to have perused Plato's dialogues, a handful of Aristotle's writings, and a few books on Greek philosophy. However, his reading habits were extensive in general, and he did not possess a particular fascination with the ancient Greeks. Socrates held a lasting fascination for him, and it was in South Africa where he initially started to connect with the Athenian philosopher.

Gandhi's philosophy and ethics were primarily grounded in nonviolence, truth, and moral values, in stark contrast to the concepts put out by Niccolo Machiavelli, an Italian Renaissance political philosopher renowned for his treatise *The Prince*. Although there is no explicit evidence to indicate that Gandhi was directly affected by Machiavelli's writings, certain researchers have made connections between their concepts, particularly in terms of conflicting principles and methodologies like approach to power, views on morality and ethics and on use of force and violence (Balasubramanian, 2007) ^[3]. The direct influence of Jean-Jacques Rousseau on Gandhi can be analysed by the scale of enlightenment in his political writings. Rousseau prioritised the social compact theory and the concept of individuals relinquishing certain liberties in exchange for the collective benefit of the community. Promoted a system of administration in which the collective desires and preferences of the population directly influence decision-making. In contrast, Gandhi prioritised the cultivation of an individual's moral growth and self-control as crucial for bringing about transformation in society. Advocated for a governing system that is decentralised, community-oriented, and focused on self-sufficiency (*Swaraj*) (Rothermund, 2011) ^[25]. Rousseau criticised the detrimental effects of contemporary society and the erosion of personal liberty and moral excellence caused by social frameworks. Gandhi, in his criticism of Western civilization and industrialization, argued for a return to traditional and rural values, with a focus on self-reliance and communal living.

Gandhi and Karl Marx, two influential figures in history, had differing perspectives on social justice, albeit with some overlapping concerns. Gandhi prioritised nonviolence, truth, and moral ideals as the fundamental basis for attaining social justice. He believed in resolving societal inequalities through nonviolent resistance and civil disobedience. His methodology centred on moral metamorphosis and the enhancement of persons via self-control and ethical behaviour.

In contrast, Marx's perspective on social justice was predominantly focused on economic egalitarianism. He offered a critical analysis of capitalism and called for a society without social classes, where the ownership of production resources would be collective. His goal was to eradicate the inequalities between the bourgeoisie (capital owners) and the proletariat (working class). Marx's primary

emphasis was on economic structures and the equitable distribution of wealth as means to attain a fairer society (Bilgrami, 2012) ^[5]. A strict distinction can be made between them on the basis of the means of achieving social justice. Gandhi employed nonviolent protests, boycotts, and civil disobedience as methods to attain social justice. He advocated for transforming the beliefs and attitudes of both people and society as a whole through the use of moral influence. Marx's theory entailed a proletarian revolution aimed at toppling capitalist systems and establishing a socialist state, ultimately culminating in a society devoid of social classes.

The discussion of Gandhi's idea of social justice is incomplete without analysing John Rawls idea of social justice. Both individuals were prominent leaders in the field of social justice, approaching the subject from distinct viewpoints and offering original ideas to the discussion. Gandhi's conception of social justice was based on moral tenets, highlighting the need of personal ethical behaviour, nonviolence, and truthfulness (Haksar, 1976) ^[15]. His methodology centred on internal metamorphosis and the imperative to confront societal disparities by self-control, ethical principles, and peaceful opposition. Rawls, a modern political philosopher, presented a theory of justice founded on concepts of impartiality and parity (Allen, 2015) ^[1]. In his seminal publication, *A Theory of Justice*, he developed the notion of the 'original position' and the 'veil of ignorance.' These concepts propose that a fair society is one that individuals would construct while being oblivious of their own social positions and privileges, as if behind a hypothetical veil. Rawls advocated for an equitable allocation of resources and opportunity to enhance the well-being of the most disadvantaged individuals in society.

To summarise, whereas Gandhi and Rawls both had a common desire for social justice, their tactics differed considerably. Gandhi's emphasis on moral ideals, nonviolence, and community empowerment differed from Rawls' emphasis on fairness, equal opportunities, and the creation of just institutions to solve systematic injustices. Both viewpoints contribute to continuing dialogues regarding social justice and equity throughout society.

7. Gandhi, Caste, and Social Justice

M. K. Gandhi held nuanced perspectives on the caste system in India and its correlation with social equity. His viewpoint underwent changes as time passed, and although he condemned the discriminatory elements of the caste system, his approach to tackling caste-related problems was fairly nuanced. Gandhi denounced the societal disparities produced by the caste system, in which specific caste have been marginalised, oppressed, and subjected to discrimination for generations. He championed the elimination of untouchability and the empowerment of the Dalits (previously referred to as 'untouchables'), who endured social exclusion and prejudice (Biswas, 2018) ^[6]. Gandhi stressed the importance of fostering mutual tolerance and comprehension among many castes and communities. He advocated for the innate egalitarianism of all persons, irrespective of their social hierarchy, and endeavoured to foster a more encompassing community. Nevertheless, Gandhi's methodology for tackling caste-related matters was not exempt from scrutiny. Several modern historians and activists have observed that although he supported the empowerment of marginalised castes, he

maintained a conservative stance towards the caste structure itself. He introduced the notion of *varnashrama dharma*, a theoretical representation of the caste system that emphasised the fulfilment of assigned responsibilities by each caste, without any kind of bias or prejudice (Palakkappillil, 2018) ^[20]. Critics contend that this position did not effectively question the hierarchical framework of the caste system.

In general, Gandhi's position on caste and social justice involved both supporting the underprivileged and striving to modify, rather than completely eliminate, the caste structure. He endeavoured to alleviate the more severe elements of discrimination and inequality based on caste, but his approach was criticised for not fully addressing the systemic problems inherent in the caste system.

8. Conclusion

In conclusion, Gandhi's philosophical journey stands as a testament to the inseparable link between equity and social justice. His commitment to non-violence, economic equality, eradication of social hierarchies and inclusive politics continues to inspire movements striving for a fairer and more just world. As we navigate the complexities of our times, Gandhi's teachings serve as a beacon, urging us to pursue justice and equity for all. Gandhi's concept of social justice was primarily shaped by the Indian tradition rather than Western liberal notions. Indeed, classifying him as either a liberal or a socialist thinker seems challenging. However, his notion of social justice encompasses elements of both positive liberalism and democratic socialism. He, for instance, embraced the perspective that each person should own the resources to attain their independence and cultivate their character. Additionally, he held the belief that access to livelihood should not be controlled exclusively by any particular segment of society. However, Gandhi diverged from the advocates of positive liberalism and democratic socialism by not relying on the state to accomplish these objectives.

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