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Does Gandhism Still Exist in India? An existential and Modern Case Study

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Abstract

This paper looks critically at the political, social, and economic path in modern India by the analytical approach of the Gandhian philosophy. Based on the major Gandhian concepts of ahimsa (non-violence), satya (truth), swaraj (self-rule), decentralization, trusteeship, and communal harmony, the study analyzes how the current governance, communal relations, economic policies, and civil society activities are in and out of the normative framework of Gandhi. The study employs a qualitative interpretive research design and examines secondary data on the topic namely scholarly literature, human-rights reports, inequality databases, and policy documents. The results demonstrate some major deviations of the Gandhian ethics: growing political centralization, enhancing surveillance, diminishing civil space, growing communal polarization, and increasing economic inequality. These tendencies are a contradiction with the visions of Gandhi about the moral government, pluralism, decentralized government, and equal economic life. Meanwhile, the paper also finds some continuity in the areas of the civil society, where the grassroots movements still use the non-violent and participatory approaches which are driven by the Gandhian ideas. These developments are placed in the context of more general issues of democratic backsliding, majoritarian nationalism, and socio-economic change. In general, the study shows that although the Gandhian philosophy continues to be an essential normative and analytical paradigm that can be applied to analyze the democratic health of India, existing structural realities restrict its scope, and thus new ethical and institutional changes are necessary.

Keywords: Gandhism Philosophy, Contemporary India, Civil Society, Ahimsa, Satya, Swaraj, Governance.



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Introduction

The modern politics of India is a complex relationship between the rapid modernization, aggressive nationalism, enlarged state powers and an increasing socio-economic gap. Achieving democratic health in the country is the subject of numerous debates, the major part of which is the legacy of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, whose political philosophy has not only determined the ethical contours of the anti-colonial struggle in India but also the ethos of the postcolonial state. The normative system that was developed by Gandhi (based on ahimsa (non-violence), satya (truth), swaraj (self-rule), decentralization, communal harmony and self-restraint ethics) provided a vision of political life based on moral consistency and not coercive power (Bhikhu,2001; Parel, 2008; Patra,2021). The India of 2020s, however, is characterized by the observable lack of adherence to a lot of these principles. The emergence of majoritarian politics, increasing communal polarization, and the strengthening of centralization of executive authority and expansion of surveillance technologies have brought up the issue of diminishing space of dissent and pluralism (Tudor, 2023; Yilmaz and Saleem, 2022; Hassan, 2023). At the same time, the economic policy of India, with its growing inequality, corporate concentration, and an active model of development of the industrial sector, is in opposition to the ethics of trusteeship offered by Gandhi and small-scale, community-based economics (Hardiman, 2003; Joseph, & Reddy, 2021; Chakrabarty,2015, Tiwari,2020; Vakulabharanamx, 2024). These events have led to academic controversies on whether the philosophy of Gandhi remains relevant or has been moved to mere rhetoric in the political domain, which has no real impact on policy (Chakrabarty, 2006; Nandy, 1988).

This research article challenges these tensions by placing the Indian political, social, and economic situation in a contemporary context by referring to the thought process of Gandhi. Instead of viewing Gandhism as a historical doctrine, it is used as a normative and analytical paradigm through which the modern governance, communal relations, development paradigms, and the role of civil society are evaluated. Through a comparison of the Gandhian values and the current empirical trends, the analysis will assess how well or how badly the current course that India is following, follows the ethical principles that influenced Indian early political imagination. This scholarly paper attempts to critically analyze the Indian context that exists today with the aid of the Gandhian philosophy as an analytical tool to analyze the existing governance, social relations, as well as the current development paradigm in the Indian context.

Research Questions

This research is informed by the following research questions:

1. How harmonious is the present day political, social and economic landscape of India with the main principles of Gandhism, i.e. non-violence, truth, decentralization and communal harmony?
2. What do contemporary trends, especially majoritarian nationalism, centralization of states and economic inequality do not conform or oppose Gandhian thought?
3. How do civil society actors and grass roots movements exercise, reflect or defy Gandhian ethics in twenty first century India?
4. Does Gandhian philosophy offer a practical normative approach to the modern day democratic and social issues in India?

Research Objectives

The following are the objectives that should be attained in the study:

1. The aim of the project is to examine modern political, social, and economic trends in India in the normative approach of Gandhian philosophy.

2. To find areas of intersection and deviation between Gandhian values and those practiced by the modern India states.
3. To determine the civil society, the role of the grassroots activism and non-state actors in perpetuating or renewing the Gandhian ideals.
4. To determine the current topicality and feasibility of the use of the Gandhian philosophy as a tool of democratic revival and social harmony.

Significance of the Study

This study has academic, social and normative importance. To begin with, it helps in the re-invention of Gandhian philosophy as a critical instrument of analysis and not as a historical object. Extant literature tends to view Gandhi as a symbolic figure, yet the research article places his ideas in a new context to question the issue of democratic backsliding, the problem of governance, and socio-economic disparities in a modern India. Second, the study can give the understanding of the changing dynamics of nationalism, pluralism, and civil liberties which is the topic of political issues nowadays. Third, analyzing grassroots activism and non-state actors, the paper also points to other avenues in which Gandhian ethics remain relevant to politics, providing avenues to ethical civic activism. Lastly, explaining the applicability of Gandhism in the present-day offers a better moral and philosophical context to evaluate the democratic future of India, and whether there can be more inclusive and humane governments in the future.

Literature Review

To comprehend contemporary India through the prism of Gandhian philosophy, it is necessary to consult four key areas of work, including (1) classical interpretations of Gandhism, (2) works on the analysis of the political transformation in India, (3) works on socio-economic change and inequality, and (4) works on civil society and grassroots resistance. All these literatures tend to show that Gandhian ideals remain intact or have faded in the twenty-first century with a lot of gap to fill which is the rationale behind the current study.

1. Classical and Contemporary Philosophy of Gandhian thought

The academic study of Gandhism has long focused on trying to understand ethical and political philosophy of Gandhi. According to Parekh (2010) and Parel (2008), the framework proposed by Gandhi is essentially moral basing on non-violence, truth and self-rule. These authors also stress the point that Gandhi saw politics as a moral endeavor and not a power-seeking enterprise and it is supported by Chakrabarty (2006), who considers Gandhism as one of the radical criticisms of modernity, industrialization and materialism. On the same note, Hardiman (2003) places Gandhi in the global perspective in which his thoughts acted beyond the colonial setting and can still be used in contemporary discussions of peace and non-violent resistance (Parel,2016; Rudolph and Rudolph, 2010). Other scholars however approach it more critically. Nandy (1988) find out that the philosophy of Gandhi has been selectively remembered and sanitized politically and, in most cases, stripped of its radical anti-authoritarian cutting edge. Chatterjee (2011) goes on to opine that Gandhism is unlikely to gain any serious ground in a more centralized and technocratic state in which Gandhi laid more stress on moral grounds which find limited institutional echo. Regardless of these controversies, the scholarly community concurs that Gandhian philosophy may be a potent ethical frame that can be used to evaluate the state power, social injustice, and economic exploitation in India. Although the literature about the philosophy of Gandhi is quite comprehensive, the limited number of studies has systematically used Gandhism to analyze the present-day political landscape in India, especially since 2014.

2. Political Revolutions: Nationhood, State Authority and Democratic Recidivism

There is a large amount of literature on the changing political landscape in India, particularly the emergence of Hindu nationalism and the strengthening of the executive. Chatterji et al., (2019) characterize the modern India as a majoritarian state claiming that the political climate is getting more and more marginalizing dissent and degrading pluralism. Their results are congruent with Human rights watch (2024) which reports limiting civil liberties, mass surveillance, and degrading media freedom (Ganguly, (2019). Jaffrelot (2021) points to the ideological change, which is the secular nationalism to majoritarian nationalism, and states that the change has contributed to the tensions between communities and endangered the vision of inclusive citizenship that is inherent in the constitutional design of India. In a similar vein, the authors note that there is increased centralization of political power, and the opposite, decentralization, leading to village self-rule and governance advocated by Gandhi in his arguments (Chhibber and Verma 2018). Other scholars however underline continuities as opposed to discontinuities. Centralization and nationalist rhetoric have profound historical precursors, in which it is argued that the current moment, though extreme, reflects the political trends over an extended period (Singh,2019; Gould,2004; Seal,1968). The possible normative consequences of the future of Indian democracy are not well studied by the existing research, which has not adequately examined the political shifts through a Gandhian prism.

3. Model of Socio-Economic Change, Inequality and Developments

The study of the economic growth of India shows that it is gaining competition with Gandhian economic morals. The idea of trusteeship developed by Gandhi encouraged fair allocation, ethical restraint and small-scale production (Parel, 2008), and the current economic policies have the tendency of promoting market liberalization and corporate growth. According to Oxfam India (2025), the percentage of wealth held by the 1 percent of the world is increasing rapidly indicating the growing inequality. Kohli (2012) posits that the development policy implemented in India is based on major industrialization, instead of the development of villages and neighborhoods, that is directly opposed to Gandhi praising the village economies (Barua, 2021; Singh, (2004). On the same note, Sinha, and Wyatt, (2019) report that corporate influence is so embedded in the policymaking process that they believe it is becoming the form of corporate-driven governance (Halder & Rao,2014). On the contrary, other researchers believe that the change in economy has increased the possibilities of movement and entrepreneurship. According to Panagariya (2020), economic liberalization has pulled millions of people out of poverty, but critics emphasize that these benefits are uneven and unevenly distributed, which is more likely to be urban in contrast, as few scholars consider the developmental model today in relation to the concept of Gandhian economics.

4. Non-Violent Movements, Grassroots Resistance and Civil Society

Studies about civil society draw attention towards the continuity of Gandhian principles in the activism at the grassroot. As Hardiman (2003) and Shah (2004) observe, there are numerous social movements including the environmental movements and others such as tribal rights movement that are inspired by the Gandhian methods of non-violently resisting. Ekta Parishad, the Narmada Bachao Andolan and other anti-displacement movements are one way of exemplifying how Gandhian participatory ethics has endured (Guha,2006; Omvedt,2019; Sen,2004). Later works are concerned with citizen-initiated movements like the anti-CAA demonstrations and the Indian farmer's movement. These movements have been democratic resilience, that address non-violent and decentralized forms of resistance, that resemble Gandhian tactics. Nevertheless, the growing state repression also affects such movements, and the question of the decreasing room that the civil society has emerges (Mahmudabad, 2020; Behl, 2022). Certain academics, such as Dasgupta, (2017) are very keen to note that philosophy of Gandhian approaches has been maintained, but lacks a significant impact on state policies and are usually absorbed or even sidelined in the mainstream

political rhetoric.

Despite the large amount of studies that has been done to date on the political philosophy of Gandhi and its relevance in history, most of the available literature continues to remain confined to either (a) normative descriptions of Gandhism as a moral philosophy (Parekh, 2010; Parel, 2008), or (b) historiographical approaches that place Gandhi in the midst of the anti-colonial movement and early post-colonial politics (Hardiman, 2003). In line with this, modern studies on India are much preoccupied with the emergence of Hindu nationalism, a backsliding of democracies, social-economic inequality, and degradation of civil liberties (Chatterji et al., 2019; Jaffrelot, 2021). However, there is infrequent overlap between these two frontiers of scholarship in such a manner that that analytical instrument of a systematic application of Gandhian principles could be used to analyze the modern political environment.

Although there are recent publications that discuss symbolic appropriation of Gandhi in Indian politics today (Guha, 2018), many of them fail to go any further in evaluating how Gandhian ethics could be used to criticize or explain the current political processes such as centralization of power, communal polarization, economic inequalities, environmental disasters, and the erosion of local self-governance. The contemporary India is hardly investigated empirically or conceptually on a basis that can answer a question like how this country is or is not following the underlying conceptions of ahimsa, swaraj, trusteeship, and decentralization discussed by Gandhi (Chakrabarty, 2006). In addition, contemporary research tends to examine Gandhism as a historical philosophy and not a living evaluative model which has the ability to respond to the political realities of the twenty-first century.

This is a gap which requires an analytical and thorough study which will provide a contextualization of the current political and socio-economic path of India within the context of Gandhian thought that will allow the ethical philosophy to be closely woven within modern governance and social trends. This gap is not only filled by addressing the gap in the study of Gandhian studies but also adds to the larger discussion of democracy, nationalism, and political morals in the contemporary India.

Research Methodology

Research Design

The research design embraced in the study is qualitative and interpretive in nature in order to understand the current India with respect to Gandhian philosophy. A qualitative method is the most appropriate one since the ideologies, values, and political behavior are studied instead of some quantifiable phenomena (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This design enables to introduce a finer judgment of ethical and normative aspects in the Indian political, social, and economic environment because it focuses on meaning, context, and interpretation (Alam and Asmawi, 2024; Denzin, 2011; Bhattacharjee, 2012).

Analytical Approach

The study uses a Gandhian analytical construct, which is based on the key pillars of ahimsa (non-violence), satya (truth), swaraj (self-rule), decentralization, trusteeship, and communal harmony (Parekh, 2010; Parel, 2006, Iyer, 1973; Chatterjee, 1983). These principles act as a normative prism to examine the modern political processes, socio-economic policies, and the civil society processes. The article uses thematic analysis to find out trends of congruency or inconsistency between Gandhian principles and contemporary Indian policy, civil society relations, and developmental paradigms (Braun and Clarke, 2019). This is the method that allows to interpret complex phenomena in politics in a structured manner, without compromising philosophical rigor (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Data Sources

All of the records are based on secondary sources, such as academic books, peer-reviewed and journal articles, organization reports, such as Human Rights Watch and Oxfam, governmental policy reports, and socio-economic datasets that can be accessed by the public. All these sources are a rich source of information of the changing political and socio-economic reality of India, both historical and contemporary, which is required in order to critically evaluate Gandhian history.

Data Analysis

There are three complementary strategies in data analysis. Gandhian texts and a current political report are also analyzed systematically through document analysis, which guarantees the depth in context and precision of the analysis (Bowen, 2009). Comparative normative analysis compares Gandhian ideals with present state policies and is a method that indicates similarities and differences (Parel, 2006; Iyer, 1973). The political speeches, legislation, and policy statements are analyzed through a content analysis of the ideological change behind the scenes and a practical applicability of Gandhian thought in modern India, which is further illuminated by means of interpretive content analysis (Krippendorff, 2018; Neuendorf, 2017).

Ethical Considerations

Since the proposed study will use only publicly available secondary data, there will be no human subjects, and there will be minimal ethical risks (Babbie, 2021). The research is also integrity-assured due to proper source citation, no selective reporting, and basing the interpretations on evidence (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). The evaluation is not partisan and is aimed at being objective as a scholar and critically evaluates the practices of the states and the developments in society (Silverman, 2020).

Limitations

This is the interpretive study and therefore cannot be readily generalized to represent its findings. The differences in the academic perceptions of the Gandhian principles and dynamism and ever-changing nature of Indian politics inherently have their constraints. In spite of these limitations, the methodology offers a stringent guideline towards reviewing the modern India on the normative perspective of the Gandhian philosophy.

Theoretical Framework

Gandhian Philosophy as an Analytical Lens

The paper draws on the philosophy of Gandhi as the main guide to assess the political, social, and economic context of India in the modern times. The principles of Gandhi are ahimsa (non-violence), satya (truth), swaraj (self-rule), decentralization, trusteeship, and communal harmony that provide a normative, as well as analytical framework, to evaluate state and societal practices (Parekh, 2010; Parel, 2006).

Core Principles of Gandhism

Ahimsa focuses on non-violence, justice, and social responsibility whereas satya focuses on transparency and integrity in governance. Swaraj is facilitative of political and local freedom, and trusteeship is a vision of equal sharing of wealth and moral economic conducting (Hardiman, 2003). Pluralism and inclusive nation-building is emphasized through community harmony. These principles combined will present a framework that would evaluate the ethical and democratic aspects in India. (Bondurant, 1965; Gandhi, 1927; Parel, 2006; Iyer, 1973)

Implication to Modern India

The framework serves as a normative standard and an analysis instrument, which allows the research to assess the alignment of political centralization, majoritarian nationalism, economic inequality, and practices of the civil society in India with the Gandhian ideals (Chatterji et al., 2019; Oxfam India, 2023). The framework combines Gandhian ethics and modern observations, thus covering the gap between philosophy and political analysis. (Bondurant, 1965; Dalton, 2012; Hardiman, 2003). A Gandhian approach enables one to critically analyze the ethical and democratic path taken by India, which is mostly hidden in the paradigms of traditional political science (Nandy, 1988; Chakrabarty, 2006). It is indicative of existences between the ideals and reality, which gives insight into the moral, social and political dilemmas (Nanda, 2002; Prabhu and Rao, 2011; Richards, 1991).

Data Analysis

The data analysis is structured according to the four key themes, namely, (1) political-governance and democracy, (2) communal relations and social cohesion, (3) economic development and inequality, and (4) civil society and grassroots resistance, but this time it includes the actual facts and figures of the latest empirical researches, reports on inequality, and socio-economic statistics. The combination of normative framework and factual data intensifies the criticism of modern trends in comparison against the Gandhian concepts.

Centralization of politics, Government and Democratic standards

Though not easily measurable using simple economic terms, the available, publicly available statistics about political centralization, surveillance and media freedom, recent reports however, strongly support the notion of democratic backsliding in India. As an illustration, the expanding clampdown on dissent, escalating cases of press harassment, and general tightening of control over the regulations are reported by the human-rights and media-freedom watchdogs in the 2020s (Freedom House, 2025; Freedom on the Net, 2025; Amnesty International, 2024). All these are reflections of the normative issue that the state is moving towards coercive power and institutional centralization a distinct opposite of Gandhian principles of swaraj (self-rule and decentralized government) and satya (truth/transparency).

Besides, it is claimed by the opponents that the laws and shifts in the policies, such as the strengthening of digital surveillance, the tightening of media and NGO control, the expansion of executive authority, etc. reduced the space of local governance and grassroots self-rule (e.g. civic bodies, village institutions, local self-government) (Bhatia, 2014; Chadha et al., 2022; Akolkar, 2024). This tendency emphasizes the change towards a centralized political system, which is contradictory to the decentralized and ethically based governing system that Gandhi had pictured (Freedom House, 2025; Human Rights Watch, 2024).

Social Cohesion, Communal Harmony and Nationalism

The statistics on communal tension, religious violence and social discrimination in the recent years also depict the trend of an increasing departure of Gandhian principles of ahimsa (non-violence) and communal peace. A number of studies and monitoring initiatives state that hate speech, communal riots and targeted discrimination against religious minorities significantly increase. To take an example, 1,165 confirmed in-person hate-speech incidents (98.5% targeted at Muslims) were documented by India Hate Lab in 2024 (with 98.5% being organized public hate messaging), a significant jump in the number of organized hate messages (India Hate Lab, 2025). According to the Centre for Study of Society and Secularism (CSSS), communal riots went up by 84 percent in 2024, up to 59, compared to 32 in 2023, and a number of fatalities and displacements were recorded (CSSS, 2025). Government statistics of history that have been reported by independent observers

also indicate significant changes in the number of incidents per year and spikes in communal incidents (e.g., 644 incidents in 2014 versus 751 in 2015) which was expressly mentioned by the U.S and other monitoring organizations at the time (USCIRF, 2016; Asia Foundation, 2017). Collectively the above sources suggest that hate speech, mob violence and deliberate communal events have become more pronounced and common in recent years and they as a factor point to a social and political environment that is no longer guided by Gandhian ideals of nonviolence and interfaith solidarity.

The increased popularity of the majoritarian nationalism in political discussion (e.g. as defined by researchers like Chatterji et al.,2019) is an indication of the fact that the previously inclusive and pluralistic citizenship has been replaced by a more exclusive identity-based concept of nationality. The pluralistic social cohesion and respectful interfaith coexistence, on which Gandhian communal ethics are based, is undermined by this movement. The trend is that communal relations are getting more polarized and this excludes the room of tolerance and moral pluralism as taught by Gandhi.

Economic Development, Inequality and Ethics of Trusteeship

The recent large-scale inequality analysis by research by the World Inequality Lab (WIL) and summarized in one of the 2025 G20-commissioned reports indicates that there has been a steep increase of wealth concentration in India over the last 20 years. The report shows that the wealth and income of the 1 percent in India grew by 62 percent between 2000 and 2023 (The Economic Times, 2025). By the year 2023, the top 1 percent of the wealth was estimated to be possessed by about 40.1 percent of the total wealth in the country with their national income amounting to 22.6 percent which is the highest since 1922 (Bharti,2024). The level of inequality is characterized by WIL researchers as the greatest wealth concentration in decades in terms of India (Reuters, 2024). These tendencies are direct contradictions to Gandhian economic ethics of trusteeship, fair distribution and production based on the community (Hardiman, 2003). Moreover, the researchers observe that the level of top-end income and wealth inequality increased drastically within 2014-15 and 2022-23 (Chancel et al., 2022). On the whole, the statistics establish a solid empirical basis that the economic forms today, characterized by corporate-based development and excessive accumulation of wealth, are dramatically in contrast to the Gandhian concepts of economic equity and decentralized livelihood.

Civil Movement, peaceful Action and Grassroots Resistance

Although the political and economic change has altered the structure of politics and economy, empirical studies indicate that civil society, as well as grassroots movements, still resorts to the approach and morals of Gandhian nature. A number of more modern social movements, such as farmer's protests, anti-displacement movements, environmental movements and human-rights movements have come to embrace non-violent resistance, community mobilization, and participatory organizing as their fundamental tactics. The detailed case studies prove that a significant number of such movements actively appeal to the legacy of Gandhi by using such practices as peaceful sit-ins, community meetings, and ethical protests to justify their demands and gather popular support (Narula, 2022; Ram, 2022; PolSci Institute, 2024). This means that Gandhian philosophy has normative salience and practical resonance to modern citizens and activists.

Nonetheless, state repression, lawful restrictions and institutional marginalization are common to these movements. Empirical research indicates that the administrative restrictions, surveillance, and regulatory mechanisms are frequently used by governments to restrict NGOs and civic actors, thus reducing democratic space (Chaudhry, 2022; Chaudhry and Heiss, 2023; Springman et al., 2022). It is also reported that the civil society organizations are restrained in their funding, being harassed with bureaucracy, and being smeared, which undermines their role in decision-making or taking part in the process of democracy (CIVICUS Monitor, 2023; U.S. Department of State, 2023). Human-

rights evaluations with 2022-2024 also report press intimidation, bans on peaceful demonstrations, and directed crackdowns on non-governmental organizations- indicating institutional stagnant opposition to grassroots, Gandhian-style opposition and civil activism on the institutions (Human Rights Watch, 2024). The compilation of the empirical evidence on these themes brings out the same trend, where, although Gandhian philosophy has continued to be a powerful tool of moral and analytical standards, the structural realities of modern India tend to be very different on the same. According to recent reports, the economic justice is based on extreme wealth and income concentration, which is a direct violation of the principles of trusteeship, fair distribution, and community-driven economic life (Oxfam India, 2025; Bharti et al., 2024). Scholarship and human rights documentation indicate, on governance and democracy, the growing centralization of power, the growth of surveillance possibilities, and the growing pressure on the freedom of expression, which do not align with the vision of Gandhi of decentralization of power, morally-based self-rule (Chaudhry, 2022; U.S. Department of State, 2023). On common harmony and pluralism, emerging majoritarianism, and discriminatory practices are in stark opposition to the lifelong dedication of Gandhi to interreligious respect, non-violence, and non-discriminatory citizenship (Jaffrelot, 2021). However, the empowerment of civil society and grassroots activism, including farmers protest and rights-based activism, are still inspired by Gandhian approaches, despite the limitation of their power by institutional opposition and regulations (Chaudhry & Heiss, 2023; Behl, 2022). In general, the idea that Gandhian philosophy is still a useful normative tool to criticize is supported by the empirical data, but the necessity to make certain systemic changes, to ensure that Gandhian ethical ideals could become substantively relevant in the modern political, economic, and social India, is obvious.

Discussion

The results indicate that modern day India is characterized by a high level of dissimilarity with the ideas of Gandhian ethics, as well as a low level of similarities in the form of civil society activism.

Congruence and Inconsistency with the Gandhian Principles.

The initial research question evaluates how far the political, social and economic environment in India is consistent with Gandhian principles like ahimsa, satya, swaraj, trusteeship and communal harmony. The facts suggest that there is a significant deviation of these principles. Violence of communities, such as the ones in 2023-2025 in Manipur and Haryana, indicates violation of non-violence and harmony among communities (Human Rights Watch, 2025; Chaturvedi et al., 2024, Menon, 2024). Such observations confirm previous literature that has recorded the emergence of majoritarian nationalism and the decline of pluralism (Chatterji et al., 2019; Jaffrelot, 2021). Power concentration, surveillance, and restrictive governance are additional aspects of undermining swaraj and participatory politics, which is consistent with the findings of Chhibber and Verma (2018) concerning executive concentration.

To some extent, the results contradict Nilsen, 2021; Kohli, 2022), who views centralization as being historically continuous and moderate. The augmented implementation of legislations, focused arrests, and even the shutdown of the internet reflects an increased departure of Gandhian decentralization and points towards an accelerated authoritarian trait surpassing the historical standards.

Legal and Policy Dimensions

The evaluation of the existing laws and policies in India proves the way in which institutional processes support these divergences. The application of the law, including the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA, 1967, amended 2019-2023) and the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act (FCRA, 2010, amended 2020), are selectively applied against dissenting voices and minority groups

(Human Rights Watch, 2024; Chaturvedi et al., 2024). According to the Gandhian point of view, this coercive imposition is against ahimsa, swaraj and moral governance, and focuses on dialogue, ethical authority and participatory consent (Parekh, 2010; Parel, 2006). On the same note, internet suspensions, as well as the regulation of social media curtail satya, the search of truth by open dialogue, and undermine the ethical and participatory aspects of democracy (Dhar, 2024).

Make in India (2014), corporate tax reforms, and preferential industrialization, which are economic policies, focus on elite accumulation and not on local welfare and community-oriented development. Studies demonstrate that new industrial and tax reforms favor corporate participants more, which supports unequal developmental trends (Kohli, 2020). Although some of the welfare initiatives like PM-Kisan and MNREGA partially support marginalized societies, they are not consistent with the ethical idea of trusteeship, which reveals the enduring lack of consistency between policy-making and the Gandhian economic ethics (Parel, 2006; Singh, 2019). The laws on citizenship, especially the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) of 2019 and the proposed National Register of Citizens (NRC) have also increased communal tension and are incompatible with the principle of inclusive nation-building (sarva dharma samabhava) advocated by Gandhi (Human Rights Watch, 2020; Kapur, 2021; Pathak, 2021; Ranjan and Mittal, 2023).

Civil Society and Grassroot Resistance

The third research question is the evaluation of the practice of civil society in the maintenance of Gandhian ethics. The anti-CAA protests, the mobilizations of farmers, the environmental campaigns all show how the Gandhian non-violent tactics and participatory ethics were persistent (Behl, 2022; Tripathi, 2022). These results are consistent with the studies that indicate that modern citizen movements organized by citizens still use non-violent, decentralized forms of resistance that are similar to the Gandhian approaches (Chatterjee, 2024; Guha, 2024). Simultaneously, scholarship examines how the ability of the civil society to influence the political process is hindered by state repression and targeted legal action and institutional restrictions (Chaudhry and Heiss, 2023; Kaushik, 2022). To some degree, this tension goes against the statement that civil society may have a significant effect in controlling the governance at the national level, which means that although Gandhian ethics are still symbolically very strong, their practical influence is more and more limited in the political context of India.

Trusteeship, Economic Inequality

Gandhi has a vision of ethical management of wealth and distribution through his trusteeship principle (Parekh, 2010; Parel, 2006). The modern economic trends, which are dominated by corporations, industrial consolidation, and increasing inequality, are in total contrast to this principle (Oxfam India, 2025; Kohli, 2020). Although liberalization has enhanced the general measures of poverty (Panagariya, 2020), it does not focus on the structural imbalance, and does not meet moral requirements as envisaged by trusteeship. Therefore, Gandhian critique is still very important to the critique of policy design as well as of social justice.

Normative Relevance and Modern Relevance

Lastly, when it comes to the fourth research question, the results show that the Gandhian philosophy is still normative and analytical. It offers an ethical standard that can be used to measure the centralization of the state, majoritarianism, economic disparity, and social polarization (Chakrabarty, 2006; Nandy, 1988; Parekh, 2010). The non-violent tactics that civil society has also employed prove the validity of the Gandhian ethics even in the context of the state structures that do not adhere to the moral principles (Hardiman, 2003). However, the fact that few of these principles were translated into the national policy indicates the disparity between normative aspiration and the reality of governance, somewhat going against the portrayal of the symbolic Gandhi presented by Guha

(2018) as a force behind the modern state. The juxtaposition of the results with the existing literature would indicate the dual reality of modern India: extensive dissimilarity to Gandhian ethics, and localized similarities with the civil society and non-violent activism. The results support earlier research on the democratic backsliding, centralization, and majoritarianism (Chatterji et al., 2019; Jaffrelot, 2021), but offer more nuanced information about the limited effectiveness of Gandhian-oriented civil society. Although partly in agreement with the goals of welfare, economic and social policies do not conform to the ethical standards of trusteeship, which once again emphasizes the timelessness of Gandhian philosophy as a critical tool in understanding the concept of governance, justice and civil participation.

Conclusion

This paper has shown that although Gandhian philosophy is still a powerful normative and ethical theory, its applicability to modern India is very limited. The proof suggests that the political, legal and economic frameworks of India, characterized by the concentration of power, majoritarian nationalism, selective application of the dissent-related legislation, and economic policy driven by corporations, are inconsistent with the main principles of Gandhian ideology which include: ahimsa (non-violence), swaraj (decentralization), trusteeship, and communal harmony (Human Rights Watch, 2025; Kohli, 2020; Chatterji et al., 2019). Even the welfare-oriented policies and the grassroots movements, as much as they are aligned to the Gandhian ethics, cannot do anything to reverse the situation of structural inequalities, state coercion, and socio-economic concentration of power. When these findings are compared to the old literature, a continuum of the gap between Gandhian ideals and modern practice is highlighted. Although previous research links the normative and symbolic importance of Gandhi into research (Parekh, 2010; Parel, 2006; Hardiman, 2003), this study draws attention to how the ideals have been translated into policy or governance. Civil society activism still reflects the Gandhian approaches of non-violent opposition, and its ability to shape the behavior of the state is limited, as the opposition between ethical norms and political reality is still very sharp. Simply put, the study indicates that in modern-day India, Gandhian thought is used as a moral guide and not a realistic set of guidelines through which the state can govern or reform its socio-economic structure. Its ideals still have analytical and ethical application, and offer a guide through which one can fault policy failure, democratic decay and social injustice. Nevertheless, the political and institutional facts of modern India, including centralized political power, majoritarian politics, economic inequality and the selective application of the law, make Gandhism an ineffective governing philosophy. The implication of this conclusion is sobering, but nonetheless, unless systemic reforms are undertaken that will decentralize power, provide inclusive government and focus on equal economic development, the Gandhian philosophy is more of an aspiration than an effective working body in India in the twenty-first century. This paper therefore proposes a critical re-examination of the ways in which moral systems such as Gandhism can guide modern day policy-making and how it is therefore necessary to close the divide between ethical principles and the reality of the institutions.

Conflict of Interest

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