

Mahatma Gandhi's Ideology and Human Rights based Social Transformation

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ABSTRACT

Human rights are the rights that all human beings are entitled to equally, regardless of their ethnic origin, nationality, color, language, gender, religion, or any other status. Human rights are inherent to every person from birth. These rights exist prior to the formation of any nation-state and regardless of whether the state recognizes them or not. Mahatma Gandhi is one of the few people in the world who advocated for human rights at a time when violation of human rights was at their peak and no global institution had been formed till then. He showed the world the way to fight for their rights which became a medium of social transformation. Mahatma Gandhi's ideology of non-violence, equality, Sarvodaya, Swaraj, constructive programs and justice continue to inspire human rights-based social transformations globally. This paper examines Gandhi's philosophical underpinnings and their application in promoting social change, exploring the intersections between Gandhi's ideology and contemporary human rights discourse.

Keywords: Human Rights, Social Transformation, Global Institution, Philosophical Underpinning.

Introduction

Human rights are innate rights granted to every human being, regardless of their nationality, language, sex, race, ethnicity, religion or any other trait. These rights define the relationship between individuals and government agencies, primarily the State. In general, rights are defined as claims made by individuals that are recognized by society and enforced by the state. However, the concept of human rights is a broader concept than that of ordinary rights. These are the rights that a person possesses simply by virtue of being human. These are the rights inherent in human nature and are absolutely essential for leading a dignified human life. Human rights are rights based on the shared needs of human nature, human dignity, human solidarity, human values, and human development. The protection and promotion of all human rights is a common objective of all individuals, communities, groups, organizations, and nations. Beginning with the French and American revolutions of the late eighteenth century, the concept of human rights became a premise that inspired movements for self-empowerment and the holding of regimes, that is, governments, accountable. In the 20th century, with the aim of raising international awareness of human rights and ensuring their protection and development, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted on December 10, 1948.

Even before the establishment of any international human rights organization, Gandhi provided theoretical explanations and launched movements to prevent human rights violations. He showed the world the way to fight for their rights which became a medium of social transformation. Gandhi's

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philosophy emphasized the inherent dignity and worth of every individual. His methods of non-violent resistance and civil disobedience have inspired movements for civil rights, freedom, and human dignity worldwide. The 1893 incident made Gandhi the face of the civil rights movement for human rights around the world because of eviction of Mohandas Gandhi from the train at Pietermaritzburg in South Africa for having dared to travel in a first-class compartment. From here, he vowed to fight for his rights and those of people like him. His fight was not limited to South Africa but continued throughout his life for the rights of the people of India. In his time, Gandhi not only advocated independence from the British but also raised his voice for the rights to equality and freedom of the classes, especially women and Dalits, who had been excluded from the mainstream for centuries in his own country. Although Gandhi was not an academic theorist, he looked at human rights with a moral and philosophical perspective instead of outlining formal characteristics. For him, any action that harms, diminishes, or disrupts a person's inherent dignity is a violation of their rights. From this understanding, he viewed human rights as fundamental entitlements that enable individuals to develop and express their full personality, both as unique individuals and as part of a community. These rights are based on the belief that every human being is born free, equal in value, and has inherent natural rights.

Objective

The basic objective of the study is to understand and analyze how Gandhi fought for the protection of human rights in Africa and India and provided guidelines for future generations to protect global human rights through his principles and means of Satyagraha. This study shows how Gandhi's philosophy of life played an important role in the protection of human rights in India and World.

Methodology

- **Qualitative:** This study will employ a qualitative research design, focusing on in-depth analysis of Gandhi's writings, speeches, and interviews.
- **Case Study Approach:** A case study approach will be used to examine specific human rights-based social transformation movements inspired by Gandhi's ideology.
- **Analytical:** For the study of this research, an analytical study of Gandhi's political philosophy, Human rights based social transformation will have to be done to find Gandhi's human rights-based theories and work. The research will observe the facts on an analytical basis keeping in mind both primary and secondary data.
- **Comparative:** A comparative analysis of human rights-based social transformation movements in different context.

Conceptual Aspects of Human Rights

All human beings anywhere in the world are born free and are equal in dignity and rights, as a result of our common humanity. Without discrimination human beings are all equally entitled to human rights. These rights are all interrelated and indivisible. Human rights are the equal, inherent, and essential rights of all people in every geographical region (without any discrimination). They are the natural and necessary conditions for people around the world to live happy and prosperous lives. The United Nations in 1948 adopted Universal declaration of human rights. Its acceptance by different countries gave the citizens of their country's equality without any bias of ethnicity, language, religion and colour. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights consists of a preamble and 30 articles that describe civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights. According to SINIKO, an Amnesty International Report (1997) Rights are put into three categories:

- **Civil and Political Rights:** These are 'liberty-oriented' and include the rights to life, liberty and security of the individual, Right to vote, Freedom of speech & expression, Right to fair trial, Freedom from torture and slavery, Freedom of religion etc.
- **Economic and Social Rights:** These are 'security-orientated' rights, i.e, the Right to work, Right to food & water, Right to education, Right to social security etc.
- **Environmental, Cultural and Developmental Rights:** These include the right to live in an environment that is clean and protected from destruction, and rights to cultural, political and economic development.

Principles of Gandhian Philosophy for Social Transformation

Gandhian thoughts on Ahimsa, Satyagraha, Swaraj, Sarvodaya relate to human rights and duties. These are the peaceful constructive programs of Gandhi which played an important role in social transformation in South Africa and India. After Gandhi's death, these peaceful weapons gave the world a direction for the protection of human rights.

- **Ahimsa (Non-Violence):** Gandhi believed in the power of non-violence as a means to achieve social and political change. Gandhi's greatest contribution to India's independence movement was eliminating the fear of the British Empire from the hearts of Indians, so that ordinary people could also play an independent role in political and social transformation through non-violent means. He believed that only through freedom from fear would social and political change take place in which all individuals would get the rights they deserve.
- **Satyagraha (Truth-Force):** Gandhi's Satyagraha worked to awaken the society about its rights and for social transformation through truth, non-violence and civil disobedience. In the application of the methods of Satyagraha, it was as essential to eliminate the fear of the Indians and assert their rights as it was to reject the unjust behavior of the British without violating their human rights. Therefore, Gandhi's Satyagraha prohibited both mental and physical violence against the British regime.
- **Swaraj (Self-Rule):** Gandhi's concept for India centered on swaraj, meaning self-governance. His aims surpassed obtaining liberation from British control; he envisioned a more profound liberation. For Gandhi a mere transfer of authority did not suffice for independence. He viewed swaraj as a liberty that encompassed more than just politics reaching into every aspect of life. "The Swaraj I dream of is, for the poor" he declared. You ought to have the same necessities in life as the wealthy and princes. The daily comforts that come with wealth are something you deserve. Gandhi believed that without the concrete realisation of rights and comforts for the general public, swaraj was meaningless. He tenaciously sought this freedom.
- **Sarvodaya (Universal Welfare):** This concept also aligns with Ruskin's "Unto This Last," which served as the foundation for Gandhi's humanistic principles in Sarvodaya. The core tenets emphasize that individual well-being contributes to universal welfare, that all professions, from legal to artisanal, hold equal societal value as they enable livelihoods, and that a life dedicated to diligent labor, particularly in agricultural or craft-based pursuits, represents the most fulfilling existence. Gandhi's goal of Sarvodaya is the upliftment of all, including the weakest person in society, with the spirit of "May all be happy," which ensures the fundamental principles of human rights: dignity, equality, freedom, and justice. This is the most fundamental principle of social transformation.

Human Rights and Gandhi's Ideology

Mahatma Gandhi's ideas had a strong influence on modern human rights, including principles found in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). He believed that every human being deserves dignity, equality, and justice, and he spent over 50 years fighting for these values in South Africa and India. His method of Satyagraha (truth-force or soul-force) showed that moral strength and non-violence can be more powerful than physical force or weapons. Gandhi fought for several categories of rights: political, civil, economic, religious, and educational rights. His views were spread across many writings and actions throughout his life.

- **Political Rights**

Gandhi believed that all people should have the right to vote and have a voice in governance, right to participate in government and public decision-making, right to fight against foreign domination and secure independence (Swaraj). He believed that it is our birthright to oppose, resist, or disobey a bad government through non-violent methods. He supported voting rights but believed that voters should be between 18/21 and 50 years because people above 50 were, in his view, in a life stage focused on spiritual duties. He fought British rule through several Satyagraha movements. According to Gandhi, in a non-violent democracy, although the majority would generally have the right to make decisions, this principle would not always apply. The right to make decisions concerning a religious or cultural community would belong to that community itself.

The law of the majority has no place before the dictates of conscience. Democracy does not mean that people should follow blindly like sheep. In a democracy, the minority is just as important as the majority.

- **Civil Rights**

Gandhi viewed civil rights as essential for a free society. He advocated for right to citizenship. He believed that people born in a country should be recognized as citizens. Indians in South Africa should get equal citizenship status. He supported the right to equality before law and said that everyone regardless of caste, class, race, religion, gender, or wealth should receive equal legal protection. Gandhi strongly defended the right to speak freely, criticize the government, and express opinions. He believed that people should be able to form groups, unions, political parties, and gather peacefully. Gandhi opposed racial laws in South Africa that restricted where Indians could live or travel. He also fought against segregation based on skin color. His non-violent philosophy connects directly to the right to life. He fought for the dignity of oppressed groups, including Dalits ("untouchables") and Black Africans. All of Gandhi's movements in Africa and India were primarily civil rights movements. The civil rights for which Gandhi fought were incorporated by the framers of the constitution into the fundamental rights. Gandhi's ideas of truth and non-violence protected the right to life and liberty, which also found a place in the United Nations Declaration.

- **Social Rights**

Gandhi's unwavering commitment to social equality and his steadfast opposition to the caste system align seamlessly with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights' core tenets of equality and non-discrimination. His advocacy addressed racial injustice in both South Africa and India, and through his philosophical framework, public initiatives, and personal conduct, he consistently championed the rights of marginalized communities, including Dalits and women. Gandhi envisioned an equitable society where all individuals had unrestricted access to shared resources—such as wells, reservoirs, thoroughfares, educational institutions, and public amenities—irrespective of whether these were government-administered or privately designated for public benefit.

Education, in Gandhi's view, served as a pivotal tool for individual development and societal advancement. He actively promoted women's education, deeming it indispensable for comprehensive social progress. Before the 1937 Wardha Conference, he reiterated his dedication to universal primary education, asserting that free and mandatory schooling could be achieved by incorporating productive vocational training into the curriculum to foster children's intellectual, physical, and ethical growth. Gandhi's constructive programs, such as the abolition of untouchability, basic education, women's empowerment, and the upliftment of farmers and laborers, worked to secure social rights for various sections of society.

- **Economic Rights**

Gandhi believed economic justice was essential for human dignity. He supported right to work and said that everyone should have meaningful employment. The state should provide opportunities so that every person can choose their type of work. He also desired to right to fair wages. Workers should not be exploited and must receive just wages. He believed that no one should be forced to work more than 8 hours a day because people need time for rest, family, and service to society. He advocated right to property. Individuals should be allowed to earn, own, and use their property, but with responsibility toward society. He fought for these economic rights in various movements such as in South Africa, Ahmedabad, Bardoli, and Khetra. Gandhi believed in economic freedom. He wanted that India should have its own economic policy. For this, he led the ideas of Swadeshi, Trusteeship and decentralization.

Influence of Gandhi's Ideology on Human Rights Movements

The life of Gandhi has been a major influence for a lot people in the world, including Martin Luther King, Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, Julius Nyerere, Ho Chi Minh, Bishop Desmond Tutu, Petra Kelley, and Nelson Mandela. They used his ideas to free the oppressed, change the society, and get rid of discrimination, which was based on the color and the race. They changed their violent methods into nonviolent ones, which Gandhi saw as the mighty ones. Truth and non-violence establish social values in society. Truth and non-violence are the forces that can mobilize people's power in a democratic and civilized manner. This has been proven by the Indian independence movement under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi in India, the Polish Solidarity movement under the leadership of Lech Wałęsa, the

African National Congress (ANC) movement in South Africa under the leadership of Nelson Mandela, and the anti-apartheid movement in the United States in the 1960s under the leadership of Martin Luther King Jr. Gandhi's ideology continues to inspire human rights movements in India, particularly in the areas of social justice, equality, and environmental rights. These movements laid the foundation for social transformation.

Challenges and Limitations

While Gandhi's ideology has contributed significantly to human rights discourse and social transformation, it also has its challenges and limitations:

- **Cultural and Contextual Limitations:** Gandhi's ideology was shaped by his Indian cultural context, which may not be directly applicable to other cultural contexts.
- **Tensions between Individual Rights and Collective Interests:** Gandhi's emphasis on collective interests and social harmony may sometimes be in tension with individual rights and freedoms.
- **Technological Advancements:** The rise of digital technologies has created new opportunities for non-violent resistance and human rights activism in Asia.
- **Authoritarian Regimes:** Many Asian countries face challenges from authoritarian regimes, which can limit the effectiveness of non-violent resistance.

Conclusion

Gandhi's ideology offers valuable insights into human rights-based social transformation, emphasizing the importance of non-violence, equality, justice and Sarvodaya. He fought for Civil, Political, Social and Cultural rights long before the Universal Declaration of Human rights. As the world faces serious human rights issues, Gandhi's ideas still inspire efforts to promote dignity and freedom. Gandhi believed in certain natural rights, which he called "birth rights", "primary rights", or "inherent rights". These rights are "natural" not in the usual sense, but in the way philosopher T. H. Green used the term—meaning they arise from a person's moral nature and are necessary for them to fully be human. Gandhi therefore supported two ideas about rights, namely, rights that people gain by first performing their duties and natural rights which people deserve simply because of their cultural and moral inheritance. Together, these form what he saw as a person's earned rights. Gandhi believed that if people perform their duties properly, their rights will naturally follow. However, he also recognized that in reality, people often only secure their rights when they actively struggle and are ready to sacrifice for them. When H. G. Wells sent Gandhi a "Charter of Human Rights" to endorse, Gandhi replied: "Begin with a Charter of Duties of Man, and I promise the rights will follow as spring follows winter." This showed his strong belief that duties come first, and rights grow out of fulfilling those duties.

Gandhi emerged as the voice of the downtrodden in the world. He became a social reformer who awakened inner strength across the globe, a visionary who dispelled fear in the face of oppression, a thinker of political renaissance, and a warrior who fought for the spiritual upliftment of society. A hundred years after his assassination in 1994, the city of Pietermaritzburg posthumously awarded Gandhi a gold medal and a certificate of honor, recognizing his struggle for human rights and humanity. Gandhi's grandson, Gopalakrishna Gandhi, accepted the award, which was later presented to the then Indian Prime Minister, I.K. Gujral, at a special ceremony held at the same railway station where Gandhi had been thrown off the train. Such is Gandhi's legacy that, even after his death, the world needs his principles and way of life more than ever before.

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