

Values of Tolerance and Coexistence: Building a Culture of Peace through Gandhian Thought

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ABSTRACT

The values of tolerance and coexistence are central to building a culture of peace, as envisioned by Mahatma Gandhi. Grounded in principles of nonviolence (ahimsa) and truth (satya), Gandhian thought promotes the peaceful resolution of conflicts through understanding, empathy, and mutual respect. Gandhi emphasized the moral and ethical foundations of tolerance as essential for sustaining diverse societies, advocating for harmonious coexistence among individuals, communities, and nations. His belief in the interconnectedness of humanity and the importance of dialogue in resolving differences offers a timeless framework for fostering social cohesion and global peace. This paper explores how Gandhi's philosophy of tolerance and coexistence can serve as a transformative force in addressing contemporary challenges such as ethnic, religious, and cultural conflicts. By integrating these values into educational, social, and political systems, a sustainable culture of peace can be established.

Keywords: *Tolerance, Coexistence, Nonviolence, Peacebuilding, social harmony, conflict resolution*

As the most evolutionarily advanced species, 'Homo Sapiens' possess unique and exceptional characteristics that position them at the forefront of evolutionary progress. A key milestone in human evolution, occurring approximately two million years ago, was a significant mutational event that resulted in a doubling of brain size. This evolutionary development is widely regarded as the origin point of the human species and marked a pivotal transformation in the evolutionary trajectory of mankind. It is this development of the brain that has made it possible the inheritance of acquired characteristics of a certain sort, the inheritance of knowledge of learning, through communication from one human being to another.¹

In addition to their upright posture, humans possess highly developed traits such as reflective consciousness, self-awareness, and advanced reasoning abilities. These attributes have enabled humanity to establish a structured and systematic way of life. Over time, these capabilities were further enhanced by scientific and technological advancements, which have significantly elevated the complexity and prominence of human existence. The progress in science and technology has revolutionized communication, bringing nations closer together, while breakthroughs in agriculture, medicine, and engineering have greatly expanded human potential and contributed to the fulfillment of societal aspirations. The rational and responsible use of these innovations has proven to be powerful tools for enhancing human welfare and improving living conditions. However, alongside these advancements, the rise of fear, competition, and greed has given rise to a multitude of complex human challenges. Science was begun to be viewed as a source of potential instruments of economic exploitation, political dominance and social injustice, essentially by a small minority of economic, political, military and scientific technocratic elites throughout the world.²

Modern society is undergoing rapid transformation, presenting humanity with unprecedented challenges. These challenges have often become counterproductive and increasingly violent. The force of violence has expanded significantly, subtly displacing the law of love as a guiding principle. This shift is largely due to the conscious or unconscious acceptance of violence as a legitimate means in various aspects of life. Furthermore, life-affirming values such as love, cooperation, nonviolence, tolerance, fraternity, and the unity of humanity have been overshadowed by the values of materialism, industrialism, and consumerism. The dominance of these latter values in contemporary society has contributed to the emergence of numerous crises. The human society currently muddles its way towards an uncertain future buffeted by crisis of values, poverty crisis, crisis of politics, crisis of war preparation, environmental and energy crises, and above all ever present shadow of a war with over-kill power of nuclear weapons that mushroom into a nuclear holocaust.³

The severe crises we face today, though largely of human origin, are increasingly spiraling out of control, threatening not only the survival of humanity but also the entire life-supporting ecosystem. These escalating challenges have brought the human race to the brink of potential mass extinction or annihilation. The complexity and scale of these issues have compelled humanity to seek peaceful solutions, recognizing peace as the only viable path for the continuation of life.

In response, peace education has emerged as a significant field of study globally. It serves a dual purpose: first, it raises awareness among children, youth, and adults about the essential nature of peace for human survival; second, it elevates peace as both a fundamental source and a guiding principle for living. Peace is increasingly recognized not only as a necessity but as a way of life that must be embraced for the future of humanity. To be precise, peace education prepares people for life in peace.⁴

In this context, Gandhi was not merely a theoretician but a pragmatic leader. He consistently sought to translate his philosophical ideas into actionable strategies, applying them within realworld social settings. His nonviolent approach proved effective in liberating the oppressed and marginalized individuals in both South Africa and India, who had

been stripped of their basic human rights and deprived of their essential needs under colonial rule. Gandhi's method of nonviolent resistance was instrumental in freeing them from the grips of exploitative colonialism.

Beyond their immediate liberation, Gandhi also introduced the concept of a nonviolent 'Sarvodaya' (welfare for all) social order, aimed at ensuring the well-being of every individual. His efforts to transform individuals and consequently society- from violence to nonviolence, and from conflict to peace, can be regarded as a comprehensive program in peace education. For Gandhi, thought, action, and education were inseparable elements of his mission for nonviolent living, forming the foundation for the success of his vision for a peaceful and just society. Therefore, Gandhi gave equal weightage to all these three components. Similar expression could be seen in the modern peace movement.⁵

Peace is typically understood from both negative and positive perspectives, focusing on the elimination of direct violence and structural violence, respectively. Violence, much like a disease, represents a state of disorder and abnormality, fostering a cycle of reactive violence that disrupts the harmonious existence of human life. It undermines peaceful coexistence and the balance inherent in nature. Peace, therefore, is a condition that encompasses all the positive dimensions of a harmonious life, preserving the natural equilibrium. Contemporary approaches to peace often focus on the macro level- societal and systemic- tending to overlook the individual. In contrast, Gandhi recognized peace at two levels: the individual (micro level) and the societal (macro level). His approach to peace education placed primary emphasis on the individual, believing that moral transformation within each person is essential for the peaceful functioning of society. Gandhi acknowledged that both good and evil reside within human beings, and he proposed that nurturing the former is key to fostering peace both within individuals and among people.

To facilitate this moral transformation, Gandhi introduced 'Eleven Vows' aimed at self-discipline and personal development. Truth and nonviolence are foundational to the cultivation of goodness within individuals. For Gandhi, peace at the personal level is characterized by an undisturbed state of mind, marked by serenity, tranquility, and a deep sense of love for fellow human beings and all forms of life. It is rooted in nonviolence and reverence for all living beings and nature itself. Gandhi envisioned a dynamic form of peace that would reside in the heart of every individual, becoming the foundation for broader societal peace. In his words: "I believe in peace. But I do not want peace that you find in stone, I do not want peace that you find in grave, But I do want that peace which you find embedded in the human breast, which is exposed to the arrows of a whole world, but which is protected from all harm."⁶

It can be argued that Gandhi's concept of "protection from all harm" fundamentally refers to the avoidance of both direct, personal violence and structural violence. Gandhi identified himself as an advocate of peace, emphasizing the importance of maintaining peace not only through actions but also in thought and speech. He asserted that one must strive for peaceful intentions and thoughts, ensuring that their words and actions align with this principle. As Gandhi wrote, while you maintain peace through your actions, your words must also be free from harm. Those who act peaceably must ensure that their speech is pure and respectful. If we want to retain the anger that is in our hearts, then I must tell you that it will be impossible to keep peace.⁷

Truth and nonviolence serve as the cornerstones of peace, with nonviolence acting as the means to achieve it. Truth represents the essence of existence, and the realization of true existence inherently leads to peace. Although nonviolence is often perceived negatively, Gandhi expanded its meaning by emphasizing the concept of 'ahimsa' (non-harm). In Gandhi's view, 'ahimsa' encompasses a broader and more positive interpretation, involving love, action, self-discipline, and personal sacrifice for the well-being of others, as well as a deep respect for nature and a proactive commitment to peace. In its more passive form, nonviolence is the absence of war, exploitation, and active resistance to social injustice. However, as Gandhi demonstrated through his own life, nonviolence is not merely a reaction against overt violence, but also an effective tool for addressing the many subtle forms of structural violence that pervade modern society. Practicing nonviolence requires proper training and the cultivation of self-discipline in every individual who engages in it, making it a transformative force for both personal and societal change. Furthermore, Gandhi placed equal emphasis on nonviolence as the path to achieving peace, both on an individual scale and within the broader societal framework. To attain peace "nonviolence should be the rule of conduct not only at the individual level but for society as such."⁸

Peace at the interpersonal level can be understood as a state of freedom from both direct and structural violence between individuals. This notion of peace extends beyond individuals to encompass group, national, and international levels. The absence of conflict or the peaceful resolution of disputes- whether ethnic, linguistic, racial, religious, national, or international, is recognized as peace.

To grasp the Gandhian concept of peace, it is crucial to understand 'satyagraha', which relies on self-suffering and nonviolent resistance as alternatives to violence. Unlike violence, 'satyagraha' liberates both the oppressor and the oppressed. The core elements of successful 'satyagraha' include self-sacrifice and courage rooted in nonviolence. Gandhi applied this principle both individually and collectively to pursue social justice. In terms of human rights, Gandhi made significant contributions to securing the rights of minorities, untouchables, women, and the legitimate rights of Indians, both in South Africa and India. Nonviolent action played a pivotal role in these achievements. The United Nations' modern concepts of the right to peace and the right to development align well with Gandhi's 'sarvodaya' (welfare for all) framework, though Gandhi insisted that duty must precede the achievement of rights.

Thus, nonviolence is not merely a method but a value of central importance to addressing contemporary global challenges. A critical objective of peace education should be to emphasize the role and significance of nonviolence, both as a moral foundation for humanity and as an active resistance to war, militarization, and structural forms of violence. In Gandhi's view, nonviolence is as old as humanity or the hills.⁹

Peace education draws upon a variety of traditions and aims to instill in learners a new perspective that challenges the blind acceptance of violence as a solution. Through this approach, the deepseated belief in the power of violence can gradually be transformed. Nonviolence, as the foundation of peace education, is inherently life-affirming and life-enhancing, fostering love and mutual cooperation.

In recent years, peace has also been understood in terms of ecological balance and environmental conservation, as humanity's unchecked exploitation of nature has caused significant damage. Despite the advancements of modern

civilization, these progressions have disrupted the delicate balance of nature, leading to inherent conflicts between humans and the environment. Gandhi emphasized the necessity of harmony between humans and nature, advocating a shift away from the material conquest of the natural world toward the establishment of a non-exploitative social order. This vision entails adopting a need-based, sustainable lifestyle that aligns with nature's rhythms.

In Gandhi's revolutionary approach to peace, his strategy for transforming individuals and society was driven by the principle of 'sarvodaya'- the welfare of all. This philosophy was paired with a constructive program designed to support democracy and societal development, making it deeply action-oriented. Gandhi maintained that true peace could only be realized through continuous, thoughtful action. As he noted, "Real peace cannot be described; it can only be experienced."¹⁰ For Gandhi, 'sarvodaya' was not merely a philosophical belief but an integral part of his active efforts to achieve peace and development, particularly for the upliftment of the marginalized and impoverished. Sarvodaya, reinforces the concept of trusteeship and the obligation of service to all as a means to achieve economic equality. This principle is supported by a series of constructive programs aimed at ensuring social justice and the satisfaction of basic needs for all. In this context, the integrated elements of peace education can be effectively illustrated through a comprehensive framework that reflects these interrelated components.

In the discourse surrounding global peace, significant attention is given to issues such as development, human rights, ecological balance, and the fulfillment of basic needs. However, one of the most pressing challenges humanity faces today is the continued preparation for war, coupled with the massive accumulation of nuclear weapons. Despite the substantial efforts of peace-loving nations, global peace movements, and the dedicated work of the United Nations, the threat of nuclear conflict remains a very real possibility.

A fundamental shift in attitude towards peace must be cultivated in the minds of individuals worldwide. As the UNESCO preamble states, 'the defense of peace must be constructed in the human mind,' a sentiment that aligns closely with Gandhi's philosophy. He warned that "the danger of sudden outbursts of violence will persist as long as the violence within the human heart is not eradicated." Gandhi observed that the Western nations, through their reliance on violence, have demonstrated that it does not lead to peace or happiness. He asserted, "the cult of violence has not brought any greater happiness or improvement to these nations or those they have influenced."¹¹

While motivating Indian satyagrahis (nonviolent resisters) toward social change, Gandhi emphasized, if we, as a nation, reach a living faith in non-violence and eradicate violence from our hearts, civil disobedience would no longer be necessary. The latter is needed only when nonviolence is adopted as a mere policy or expedient. Drawing from his life and the relative success of his mass nonviolent campaigns, which garnered widespread participation, Gandhi demonstrated that non-violence can progressively transform society. His example justifies the increasing relevance of non-violence as a powerful force in human development and global peace efforts.

Gandhi explains: "My experience in non-violence daily growing stronger and richer tells me that there is no peace for individuals or for nations without practicing truth and non-violence to the uttermost extent possible for man. The policy of retaliation, has never been succeeded. We must not be confounded by the isolated illustration of retaliation,

including frauds and force, having attained temporary and seeming success. The world lives because there is more love than hate and more truth than untruth in it.”¹²

In the international context, there must be a strong belief in the possibility of fulfilling the basic needs of all people, accompanied by the practice of mutual aid, cooperation, and non-exploitation both within and between nations. This vision necessitates genuine disarmament- not just in words or intent, but through practical actions undertaken by all nations. The military, as the largest sector that consumes significant human and material resources, must be critically reevaluated in this process.

In summary, Gandhi’s approach to peace education goes beyond simply addressing the critical challenges facing humanity and offering nonviolent solutions. It is a dynamic and integrative blend of research (thought), action (practice), and education (conscientization). This educational framework aims at the holistic development of every individual- physically, intellectually, and morally (spiritually)- with the ultimate goal of fostering the comprehensive development of society. When effectively implemented, this approach leads to peace, from the individual level to the global stage.

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