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Gandhian Idea of Peace: A Nonviolent Perspective on Human Development

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Gandhian Idea of Peace: A Nonviolent Perspective on Human Development

Niharika Tiwari*

Abstract

This study examines the relevance of Mahatma Gandhi's conception of peace in advancing the objectives of human development. It argues that Gandhi's understanding of peace extends beyond the absence of violence to encompass harmony in thought, word, and action, thereby providing a normative framework for individual and societal well-being. The study analyses Gandhian principles of non-violence and their relationship with contemporary approaches to human development particularly Martha Nussbaum's capabilities perspective which emphasises the expansion of human freedoms and quality of life. It also engages with Johan Galtung's concept of structural violence to explore how Gandhian peace addresses both direct and systemic forms of violence that constrain human flourishing. Through conceptual and analytical examination, the paper evaluates the continuing relevance, practical applicability, and limitations of Gandhian thought in addressing contemporary developmental and social challenges. Drawing on secondary literature, classical texts, and scholarly interpretations, it argues that Gandhian peace remains a valuable ethical and philosophical framework for promoting inclusive, sustainable, and human-centred development.

Keywords: Gandhian Notion of Peace, Human Development, Structural violence, State, Society



1. Introduction

Peace has been a cherished goal of all societies, thinkers, social reformers, and philosophers throughout the world. History has

witnessed numerous wars, conflicts, and arms races, yet the constant across time has been a strong desire for peace. Both within India and globally, many efforts have been made to institutionalise peace; consequently, Gandhian perspec-

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tives on peace, rooted in truth and non-violence, remain relevant today. Mahatma Gandhi not only spoke of peace but also practised it in his personal life, politics, and society. Recently, peace has gained renewed importance due to the rise in conflicts, wars, ethnic clashes, lynching, and structural violence, such as gender discrimination, caste atrocities, lack of access to resources, and unequal resource distribution. Therefore, peace remains the ultimate refuge for humanity. Barriers to peace hinder human development, which cannot thrive in environments of ongoing war or conflict, or where peace exists only as the absence of war without decent living conditions.

To foster human innovation, creativity, art, and culture, people need a good quality of life; this aspiration has shifted the focus of development from mere growth (quantitative achievements) to human development (qualitative dimensions). Overall, development, particularly human development, cannot be achieved without peace, as it is vital for progress. Gandhian peace emphasises more than just the absence of war; it signifies a people-centric environment that liberates people from evil and empowers marginalised groups. Peace involves freedom from both direct and indirect violence. Gandhian methods such as

Truth, Non-violence, Satyagraha, Sarvodaya, the Seven Social Sins, the pursuit of Right Means and Right Ends, the Dignity of Labour, and the concept of Swaraj can be essential for advancing human development.

Human development places people at its core, guiding activities, institutions, programmes, and policies focused on health, education, and a decent standard of living. Gandhi viewed human beings as a divine spark; similarly, human development aims to empower people through inclusive and sustainable progress. Gandhian peace addresses not only the cessation of conflict and violence but also the cultivation of inner peace. Likewise, human development involves mental and physical growth alongside respect for the environment.¹ However, Gandhi's emphasis on spirituality in peace may not always align with contemporary views on human development, which focus more on improving socio-economic, cultural, and political conditions.

This research paper aims to identify the areas where Gandhian philosophy and the notion of human development complement each other, as well as the points of divergence. The central idea is to examine how these two concepts can

be instrumental in addressing the issues of exploitation, oppression, inequality, and structural violence. The paper also seeks to analyse the obstacles to human development and critically examine how the Gandhian perspective can help address them.

The most important point of convergence is that both perspectives seek to establish the importance of human beings and reject violence, especially structural violence (indirect violence), which is often reinforced by direct violence arising from caste, religion, gender discrimination, and similar factors. As defined by Galtung:

Structural violence is exhibited when large portions of the human population are prevented from fulfilling their potential due to economic and social structures based on inequality and exploitation, or cultures of violence which legitimise and reinforce the role of violence as an 'acceptable' means of responding to conflict, have often been only insufficiently addressed.²

Gandhi's philosophy similarly treats violence as extending beyond physical coercion to include exploitation, discrimination, and the denial of human dignity. Non-violence therefore functions not merely as a political strategy but as

the organising principle of his ethical and social philosophy. Contemporary human development adopts a complementary perspective by placing political freedom, human rights, personal dignity, and the expansion of human capabilities at the centre of development.³ These objectives require social conditions free from both direct and structural violence.

The capability approach developed by scholars such as Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum further strengthens this understanding by demonstrating that economic growth alone cannot eliminate deprivation. Contemporary societies frequently experience the coexistence of economic prosperity, technological advancement, persistent inequality, social exclusion, and violations of human rights. Such inequalities constrain individual capabilities and reinforce cycles of deprivation,⁴ echoing Gunnar Myrdal's conception of the "vicious circle of poverty." Consequently, the pursuit of peace must be understood alongside broader efforts to expand human capabilities, reduce structural inequalities, and strengthen social justice.

Despite these areas of convergence, important philosophical differences remain. Gandhian peace assigns

primary importance to moral purification, self-restraint, and the cultivation of inner peace as the basis of social harmony. The human development approach, by contrast, focuses on creating institutional, economic, and political conditions that enable individuals to achieve a dignified standard of living.⁵ These perspectives represent different pathways towards human flourishing rather than mutually exclusive approaches. Inner transformation contributes to ethical social relations, while institutional arrangements provide the material and political conditions necessary for the expansion of human capabilities. Considered together, these complementary dimensions offer a broader framework for understanding peace as both an ethical practice and a developmental objective.

3. Gandhian Idea of Peace

The core principles of the Gandhian notion of peace are non-violence, truth, justice, and the transformation of both the individual and society. Gandhi provided methods to practise these principles of peace in our day-to-day lives. Therefore, he advocated the methods of Satyagraha, non-cooperation, courage, Antyodaya, and the dignity of labour. All these Gandhian

principles and methodologies, with certain limitations, provide a holistic view of peace, which is not merely the absence of war but a positive ambience in which human values can flourish and human dignity is established. For instance, the “Seven Sins” identified by Gandhi in *Young India* (22 October 1925) illustrate that Gandhian thought is pragmatic and applicable to our day-to-day lives. According to Gandhi, the seven sins are: politics without principles, wealth without work, pleasure without conscience, knowledge without character, commerce without morality, science without humanity, and worship without sacrifice.⁶ If one analyses them, most of the problems that cause unrest and conflict in society stem from these sins. These sins need to be understood and avoided. His idea of peace encompasses human beings as well as nature and its living creatures. Hence, the debate on environmental conservation and sustainable development is a crucial part of his idea of peace. In his book *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi wrote:

What is a nonviolent means? It will take long practice to standardise the meaning and content of this term. But the means thereof is self-purification and more self-purification. What Western thinkers often lose sight of is that

the fundamental condition of non-violence is love, and pure unselfish love is impossible without unsullied purity of mind and body.⁷

Gandhi's conviction that peace originates in individual self-discipline and moral purification before finding expression in social and political life. His conception of peace begins with the individual and extends to society and humanity as a whole. Gandhi's autobiography further demonstrates this ethical orientation. In Part V, while recounting his experiences among the Champaran agriculturists, he describes what he termed his "face-to-face with Ahimsa," demonstrating how non-violence functioned as a practical method for engaging with injustice while preserving human dignity.⁸

For Gandhi, peace required active moral participation rather than passive acceptance of injustice, wherein non-violence becomes a way of life rather than merely a tactic to achieve desired goals. There is a symbiotic relationship between truth and non-violence. Thus, Gandhi did not provide a formal theory or concept of peace; rather, his views on various issues offer a perspective for understanding a comprehensive idea of peace through his thought and actions. It is a continuous process that cannot be separated from the means.

As Gandhi argued, peace cannot be sustained through slogans or political programmes alone. It requires recognition of the essential unity of humanity and the cultivation of moral, intellectual, material, and spiritual well-being. Freedom from falsehood, hatred, and injustice within both the individual and society therefore becomes a prerequisite for lasting peace.⁹ Thus, in emphasising inner peace in this formulation, Gandhi provides the ethical foundation for social harmony and international peace.

The core principles of his contemplation of peace are Satya (truth), Ahimsa (non-violence), Satyagraha, Sarvodaya (the welfare of all), the concept of trusteeship, and the dignity of labour. The concept of Sarvodaya is directly linked to the contemporary notion of human development. Dev (n.d.) illustrates that Gandhi's pursuit of peace was not without struggle, as he fought against apartheid in white-ruled South Africa, launched a campaign against untouchability, and advocated Hindu-Muslim unity and peace; his *Ram Dhun* was one such effort.

Truthfulness is more important than peacefulness. In this context, the following words of the Mahatma, as quoted from the 'Young India' newspaper, are quite

relevant. Mahatma Gandhi wrote, "Though we sing – all glory to God on high and on the earth be peace — there seems to be today neither glory to God nor Peace on earth". Mahatma Gandhi wrote these words in December 1931. He died 17 years later in January 1948 to an assassin's bullets. It indeed was tragic that a saint of universal peace and non-violence fell victim to violence and hatred. But even today, Mahatma Gandhi's words of 1931 are true.¹⁰

In contemporary India, we are witnessing conflicts at various levels, such as persistent structural violence in the form of caste atrocities, gender-based violence, and mob lynching. Likewise, there is no dearth of direct violence in the country, as the National Crime Records Bureau's data show that a total of 28,522 cases of murder, 107,588 cases of kidnapping and abduction, 445,256 cases of crimes against women, 162,449 cases of crimes against children, 57,582 cases of crimes/atrocities against Scheduled Castes, and 10,064 cases of crimes against Scheduled Tribes were registered during 2022.¹¹ These figures indicate that violence extends beyond isolated criminal acts to encompass broader structural and social conditions. Gandhi's emphasis on moral transformation therefore remains

relevant because legal and institutional mechanisms alone cannot eliminate deeply embedded patterns of prejudice, discrimination, and violence. His philosophy suggests that durable peace requires ethical transformation alongside institutional reform, as inner peace provides the moral basis for peaceful social relations.

Despite its enduring relevance, Gandhian thought has also attracted important critiques. Rabindranath Tagore questioned Gandhi's strategy of non-cooperation arguing that it risked replacing constructive engagement with negation. Tagore observed:

...The reason for my refusal to advise those students to leave their schools was because the anarchy of a mere emptiness never tempts me, even when it is resorted to as a temporary measure. I am frightened of an abstraction which is ready to ignore living reality. These students were no more phantoms to me; their life was a great fact to them and to the All. I could not lightly take upon myself the tremendous responsibility of a mere negative programme for them, which would uproot their life from its soil, however thin and poor that soil might be.¹²

Tagore's criticism highlights a continuing debate within Indian political thought regarding the relationship between ethical idealism and practical political action. While Gandhi regarded non-cooperation as a morally grounded instrument of resistance against injustice, Tagore expressed concern that withdrawal from existing institutions could weaken constructive social engagement. This dialogue shows the diversity of perspectives within India's intellectual tradition enriching contemporary debates on the philosophical foundations and practical application of peace.

3. Gandhian Underpinnings to Galtung's Idea of Peace

Johan Galtung transformed the study of peace by expanding its scope beyond the absence of armed conflict to include oppression, exploitation and structural inequality. This conceptual shift distinguished 'negative peace' which is understood as the absence of direct violence from 'positive peace' that encompasses social justice, equality and conditions that enable human flourishing.¹³ Galtung's framework shares significant philosophical affinities with the Gandhian conception of peace, particularly in its treatment of violence as a multidimensional

phenomenon extending beyond physical coercion. For instance, Gandhi advocates the avoidance of violence (Himsa) in every form (Man, Vachana, and Karm). This idea encompasses both direct violence and structural violence. Galtung is known for emphasising structural violence and expanding the horizons of peace, in which a decent life is considered an important parameter. As Galtung explains:

Structural violence is unintended structure-generated (rather than actor-generated) harm done to human beings. It is an indirect form of violence built into social, political and economic structures, which gives rise to unequal power and consequently unequal life opportunities. It includes exploitation, alienation, marginalisation, poverty, deprivation, misery, etc. and exists when basic needs for security, freedom, welfare and identity are not being met.¹⁴

This formulation broadens the meaning of peace by recognising that deprivation, inequality and exclusion constrain human potential in much the same way as direct violence. Peace, in this sense, requires institutional arrangements that promote justice and equal life opportunities rather than merely preventing armed conflict.

Galtung subsequently refined this framework through the concept of 'cultural violence', which he defined as "any aspect of a culture that can be used to legitimise violence in its direct or structural form." Cultural beliefs, traditions, ideologies, and social norms may legitimise unequal social relations and thereby reinforce structural violence.¹⁵ The corresponding idea of cultural peace shares considerable common ground with Gandhi's ethical philosophy, particularly his emphasis on the unity of life, moral responsibility, and the inseparability of means and ends. Gandhi's insistence that ethical conduct must accompany political action reflects a broader commitment to transforming both individual consciousness and social institutions.

Gandhi's concern with exploitation further strengthens this intellectual connection. His conception of non-violence embraced all forms of oppression, subordination, discrimination and dehumanisation. Any practice that diminished human dignity constituted violence within the Gandhian framework. Moreover, the emphasis on the dignity of labour is a testament to his all-encompassing understanding of violence. Thus, the interlinkages between Gandhi and Galtung are evident. SIPRI (n.d.) also emphasises that developing and sustaining peace requires an

understanding of the root causes of conflict and insecurity.¹⁶

4. Contemporary Idea of Human Development

The human development approach aims to place people at the centre of all forms of development. Institutions, legislation, policies, and other measures are implemented to enhance people's choices regarding health, education, and a decent standard of living.

Human development is a process of enlarging people's choices. The most critical ones are to lead a long and healthy life, to be educated and to enjoy a decent standard of living. Additional choices include political freedom, guaranteed human rights and self-respect - what Adam Smith called the ability to mix with others without being "ashamed to appear in public".¹⁷

The report further identifies two complementary dimensions of human development:

Human development has two sides: the formation of human capabilities - such as improved health, knowledge and skills - and the use people make of their acquired capabilities - for leisure, productive purposes or being active in cultural, social and

political affairs. The scales of human development do not balance the two sides evenly; considerable human frustration may result.¹⁸

It establishes that development extends beyond economic growth to include the expansion of substantive freedoms and opportunities. Human development therefore adopts a people-centred approach that integrates economic progress with social justice, political participation and individual well-being. The relationship between peace and development has received increasing attention within the Human Development Reports. The Human Development Report (2023–24) argues that inclusive peace processes contribute to more durable outcomes and that the meaningful participation of women strengthens both the legitimacy and sustainability of peace agreements.¹⁹ Peace is therefore understood as a condition that enables individuals and communities to realise their capabilities rather than simply the absence of organised violence.

Amartya Sen's conception of "development as freedom" substantially broadened this perspective by defining development as the expansion of substantive freedoms available to individuals. Sen argues that

capabilities represent the genuine opportunities people possess to achieve valued "beings and doings", including good health, education, meaningful social participation, and political freedom. Development, accordingly, requires expanding the real freedoms that enable individuals to pursue lives they have reason to value.

Martha Nussbaum further develops the capability approach by identifying a set of central human capabilities necessary for a dignified life, including life, bodily health, bodily integrity, imagination and thought, emotions, practical reason, affiliation, relations with other species, play, and control over one's political and material environment.²⁰ The contributions of Sen and Nussbaum together shift development discourse towards a multidimensional understanding of human well-being that extends beyond conventional economic indicators.

A further conceptual advance occurred with the 1994 *Human Development Report* which introduced the concept of 'human security'. It is defined as the "freedom from fear and freedom from want" and "safety from chronic threats such as hunger, disease and repression as well as protection from sudden and harmful disruptions in

the patterns of daily life—whether in homes, in jobs or in communities.”²¹ This concept of human security represented a shift in thinking about peace and conflict prevention.²²

Subsequent Human Development Reports have continued to broaden this perspective. The *Human Development Report* (2019) discussed social norms that perpetuate inequality. “Social and cultural norms often foster behaviours that perpetuate inequalities, while power concentrations create imbalances and lead to capture by powerful groups such as dominant, patriarchal elites.”

²³ Changing socio-cultural norms to foster egalitarianism is a task that cannot be addressed without self-realisation by the perpetrators of exploitation and subordination.

The contemporary era is characterised by the pervasive influence of the virtual world on social, economic, and political life. Digital technologies have enhanced global interconnectedness, fostering greater interaction across the borders of sovereign nation-states. At the same time, they have generated emerging non-traditional security challenges, including digital arrest, online fraud, and other cyber-enabled crimes. Addressing these challenges has become an important dimension of human development.

In this context, the *Human Development Report*, entitled *A Matter of Choice: People and Possibilities in the Age of AI*, observes that:

AI can further enhance the quality of human-to-human interactions by facilitating peaceful, productive dialogues. For example, AI-based interventions in online chats can improve political conversations and do so at scale. When people are discussing issues that divide them, AI can support mediation by generating and refining statements that express common ground.²⁴

The incorporation of artificial intelligence into the human development framework reflects the continued evolution of the concept in response to technological change. Contemporary human development therefore includes both traditional concerns relating to health, education, and livelihoods and emerging challenges associated with digital governance, technological innovation, and human-centred applications of artificial intelligence.

5. Gandhian Idea of Peace and the Notion of Human Development: A Critical Analysis of Philosophical Compatibility

The Gandhian conception of peace and the contemporary notion of

human development converge in their commitment to human dignity, human agency, and the advancement of human well-being. Both perspectives regard the individual as the primary unit of analysis and recognise that peaceful societies depend upon the empowerment of human beings. Their philosophical foundations, however, differ in the pathways proposed for achieving these objectives. Gandhi located the foundation of peace in the moral transformation of individuals through self-discipline, truth, and non-violence. Human dignity, the dignity of labour, and social harmony constituted mutually reinforcing elements of his conception of peace. Consequently, spirituality, ethical conduct, and self-restraint occupy a central place in Gandhian thought, while the state and formal institutions assume a relatively limited role. This position rests on the assumption that moral integrity among individuals will be reflected in the functioning of social, political, economic, and administrative institutions.

The contemporary notion of human development focuses more on the role of institutions, the political system, and society as a whole. Unlike the Gandhian idea of peace, the human development perspective holds that access to quality education, healthcare, and a decent standard of living is instrumental in establishing

peace. It focuses more on non-traditional security threats and calls for a more integrated and people-friendly world. The alleviation of poverty, illiteracy, malnutrition, gender discrimination, and environmental injustice is at the core of human development. The ethical orientation of Gandhian peace is reflected in the following observation:

The remedy for himsa, Gandhi says, is Ahimsa, for untruth truth. This seems to imply that the source of satyagraha is recognition of untruth, injustice or evil and, besides, the discard of it. Thus, apprehension of untruth is the source of the acknowledgement of truth also. Truth is initially the opposite of untruth. That is how we often come to get a primary glance at truth.²⁵

Whereas the human development perspective appears more pragmatic and places responsibility on political establishments, social organisations, and academia. One illustration of this institutional orientation is the Gender Inequality Index (GII) introduced in the 2010 Human Development Report. The GII measures the loss in human development resulting from gender inequality across three dimensions: reproductive health, empowerment, and labour market participation. It comprises three dimensions for understanding

gender inequality: health, empowerment, and the labour market, while the indicators include such as the maternal mortality ratio, adolescent fertility rate, educational attainment, parliamentary representation, and labour force participation. By quantifying disparities, the human development framework provides governments and policymakers with empirical tools to identify inequalities and evaluate policy outcomes. Despite these methodological differences, both perspectives share a common opposition to structural violence. Human development seeks to remove institutional barriers that constrain individual capabilities, while Gandhian philosophy attempts to eliminate the moral and social conditions that sustain exploitation, discrimination, and injustice. Their respective approaches therefore operate at different levels but pursue closely related normative objectives.

This intellectual convergence has also been recognised in the literature on peace studies. Peter Lawler, the biographer of Galtung's intellectual development, identifies Gandhian thought as an important background to Galtung's early writings, describing Gandhi as his philosophical inspiration and a continuing intellectual influence. Nevertheless, Lawler appears to

downplay this connection when he notes that "traces of a Gandhian conception of pacifism" can be detected in Galtung's activist pacifism "with the benefit of hindsight."²⁶

6. Limitations of Gandhian Idealism

According to Bhikhu Parekh, Gandhi's critique of modern civilisation rests on four basic arguments. First, it equates human beings with the body and ignores the demands of the soul. Secondly, it lacks a sense of purpose and limit. Thirdly, it dehumanises human beings. Lastly, it is inherently aggressive and competitive, imbued with a spirit of violence. Thus, the contemporary notion of human development, which focuses more on the material empowerment of human beings, exhibits certain practical inconsistencies with Gandhian principles, particularly regarding economic well-being grounded in technological and economic advancement.

Likewise, Ambedkar pointed out Gandhi's limitations in his defence of the *Varna* system because Gandhi sought to reform the caste system, whereas Ambedkar regarded it as a form of structural violence and advocated its annihilation. Ambedkar also found the term

“Harijan,” coined by Gandhi, patronising and opposed its use.

Parekh further identifies several conditions necessary for the successful practice of non-violence.²⁷ A shared framework of understanding must exist between opposing groups; participants must possess the capacity for self-reflection; and society must provide sufficient openness for persuasion and dialogue. In the absence of these conditions, non-violent methods face significant practical constraints. This observation suggests that the effectiveness of Gandhian methods depends upon favourable political and social environments rather than functioning independently of them.

Tagore was also critical of Gandhi's philosophy of non-cooperation, as he believed in cooperation and the confluence of the East and the West and objected to the spirit of negation and rejection.²⁸ In this context, the notion of human development aligns more closely with Tagore's ideas, as it requires a global perspective and collective action. As far as political participation is concerned, Tagore differed from Gandhi.

Tagore refused to grant primacy to politics even while sometimes participating in politics. Here lay his basic difference with Gandhi, to whom politics was a means of

testing the ethics appropriate to our times and was therefore crucial to one's moral life. Everyone did not have to be an active politician, but everyone, Gandhi felt, had to work within a framework in which politics had a special place. What linked the two, however, was their continuing attempts to reaffirm a moral universe within which one's politics and social ideology could be located.²⁹

Gender equality, which lies at the core of human development, was also one of Mahatma Gandhi's major concerns. However, Gandhi failed to place sufficient emphasis on the economic empowerment of women.³⁰

Nevertheless, points of convergence can be identified in relation to issues such as caste-based violence, gender disparities, religious fundamentalism, sustainable development, and human dignity. However, the Gandhian perspective appears both spiritual and pragmatic, whereas human development seeks to build a society that enhances freedom and respects individuals' choices by measuring equality, justice, and related concepts. It is undeniable that peace is the norm, while war and conflict are deviations. Nevertheless, this idea has not become a way of life because of limited understanding. Today, the world is characterised by

uncertainty and unpredictability, as political instability, economic crises, and cultural conflicts influence states' decisions. Likewise, at the domestic level, countries face corruption, crime, moral and ethical decay, and mental health challenges. In such a scenario, the Gandhian philosophy of peace can provide an alternative framework for remodelling understanding and behaviour, which may be instrumental in accelerating human development worldwide. Similarly, greater human development provides an environment in which the Gandhian way of life can be practised. Thus, a confluence between the two perspectives can be observed. In short, the Gandhian concept of peace, the human

development approach, and Galtung's peace studies each offer distinct methods for achieving a more humanitarian world.

7. Conclusion

This study concludes that Gandhi's concepts of peace and the contemporary human development approach are philosophically compatible in their shared commitment to human dignity, justice and the expansion of human well-being despite differing in their methods of achieving these objectives. It argues that Gandhi's emphasis on ethical self-transformation complements the institutional and capability-centred framework of human development.



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