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Editorial

INDIA'S DEMOCRACY WAS designed to accommodate disagreement, dissent, and the peaceful transfer of power. It was not designed to normalise the transfer of elected representatives from one party to another in pursuit of immediate political advantage. Yet, from the era of "Aaya Ram, Gaya Ram" to the recent waves of defections involving major regional parties such as the Trinamool Congress, the Shiv Sena, and the Aam Aadmi Party, political realignment through defections has become a recurring feature of Indian politics. Recent developments suggest that defections are no longer exceptional moments of crisis; they have become an accepted instrument of political strategy.

The anti-defection law, inserted into the Constitution through the Tenth Schedule in 1985, sought to curb this practice by disqualifying legislators who switched parties after being elected. Its intention was noble: to protect political stability and preserve voters' mandate. Yet four decades later, the law has produced a paradox. Individual defections are punished, but mass defections are rewarded. The two-thirds merger provision, originally intended to facilitate legitimate political realignments, has evolved into a roadmap for organised rebellion. Instead of preventing defections, the law has encouraged politicians to defect in groups large enough to avoid disqualification.

The problem, however, is deeper than constitutional loopholes. Defections reveal a profound transformation in the character of political parties themselves. Parties increasingly resemble electoral vehicles centred on leaders, access to state resources, and immediate electoral calculations rather than enduring ideological commitments. When ideology weakens, and internal democracy declines, loyalty becomes transactional. Politicians begin to ask not, "What does my party stand for?" but, "Which party offers the best prospects for power and survival?"

There are, of course, legitimate reasons for leaving a political party. A representative may find that the party has abandoned its principles,

become authoritarian, or stopped representing the interests of constituents. In mature democracies, legislators occasionally cross party lines on matters of conscience. However, what India increasingly witnesses is not principled dissent; it is political migration timed with electoral opportunities, changes in government, or the prospect of investigations and ministerial office.

Gandhi believed politics could not be separated from ethics. In his understanding, public office was not a pathway to power but a service opportunity. The Gandhian concept of *swaraj* was rooted in self-discipline, truthfulness, and accountability. Representatives were trustees of the people's mandate, not its owners. An elected representative holds power in trust on behalf of citizens who voted not merely for an individual but also for a party's programme, values, and leadership. From a Gandhian perspective, therefore, the central question is not whether a defection is technically legal. It is whether it is ethically defensible.

A legislator who fundamentally disagrees with the party on whose ticket they were elected has an honourable option available: resign, seek a fresh mandate, and allow voters to decide. To switch allegiance while retaining office may satisfy the letter of the law, but it often violates its spirit. Equally troubling is the role of political parties that actively encourage defections. Democracy is weakened not only by those who defect but also by those who create incentives for defections. If governments are formed and sustained through inducements, strategic investigations, or the engineering of legislative majorities, electoral mandates lose meaning. Democracy becomes a contest not of ideas but of arithmetic.

The answer does not lie merely in strengthening the anti-defection law. Indeed, excessive party control over legislators has already undermined deliberation and reduced elected representatives to numbers bound by the party whip. Reform must therefore pursue two goals simultaneously: preventing opportunistic defections while preserving space for principled dissent. Ultimately, however, no legal reform can substitute for political ethics. Democracy survives not only through institutions, but through norms of restraint, trust, and accountability. India must decide whether elections are a mandate to govern or merely an opening bid in a continuing auction for legislators. The future of democratic politics depends on choosing the former.

This issue of the journal has six articles in the main section, and two book reviews. I am happy to present them to the enthusiastic readers of Gandhi Marg.

JOHN S MOOLAKKATTU
Chief Editor

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From Gram Swaraj to SEWA: Women's Leadrship in Rural Development through a Gandhian Lens

Kalpana Singh

ABSTRACT

The paper challenges the conventional portrayal of rural women as passive beneficiaries of development, highlighting their agency and leadership in transforming communities. Revisiting Mahatma Gandhi's vision of Gram Swaraj, it argues that principles of non-violence, self-reliance, decentralisation, and moral leadership remain relevant today. Through Ela Bhatt and the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), the study presents a cooperative, inclusive, and non-violent model of grassroots transformation rooted in Gandhian ethics. Drawing on secondary sources, it critiques homogenising development approaches and emphasises local knowledge, dignity, cultural identity, and women's agency. SEWA demonstrates how rural women can lead community-driven, ethical, and inclusive development.

Key words: *Women's Leadership, Rural Development, Ela Bhatt, SEWA, Gram Swaraj*

Introduction

WHEN MAHATMA GANDHI asserted that India's national regeneration lay through its villages, he placed rural communities at the moral and political centre of development rather than at the margins of urban expansion (Gandhi, 1942). His vision challenged centralised models, arguing that sustainable transformation should emerge from self-reliant, ethically organised village life. However,

contemporary rural India has become increasingly complex. The conventional image of the village as an agrarian, kinship-bound, and culturally distinct unit no longer adequately reflects realities shaped by transportation, digital communication, migration, consumer markets, and state welfare. Rurality is now better understood as a layered or hybrid social formation shaped by policy, mobility, and economic integration (Gupta, 2020). Yet these transformations remain uneven, with women continuing to perform largely informal, underpaid, and insufficiently recognised labour within rural economies (FAO, 2011).

Policy discourse has similarly tended to portray rural women as beneficiaries of welfare rather than agents of institutional change. Although welfare programmes have expanded access to credit, employment, and social security, empowerment is often assessed through programme outputs rather than sustained changes in agency and decision-making (Kabeer, 1999).

Against this background, Gandhi's conception of Gram Swaraj warrants renewed examination. This paper uses the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), founded by Ela Bhatt, as a contemporary institutional case for assessing the continuing relevance of Gram Swaraj. As one of India's influential women-led grassroots organisations, SEWA demonstrates how Gandhian principles can be reinterpreted within contemporary rural development. Although present-day villages differ substantially from those of Gandhi's time, local self-governance, cooperative organisation, and community-based leadership remain relevant to inclusive development.

Existing scholarship on Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and microfinance has largely emphasised economic outcomes, social capital, and financial inclusion, while studies of Gandhian thought often treat it primarily as a philosophical or historical framework. Less attention has been given to connecting Gandhian ethics with feminist models of grassroots leadership in contemporary rural development. This conceptual gap motivates the study.

The paper contributes in three ways. First, it interprets SEWA as a contemporary institutional expression of Gram Swaraj rather than simply as a successful women's organisation. Second, it connects Gandhian political thought with feminist development theory by showing how ethical decentralisation can become institutional practice. Third, it conceptualises women's leadership not merely through economic participation or welfare outcomes, but as ethical and democratic decentralisation that expands agency, collective decision-making, and local self-governance. SEWA thus represents a contemporary reinterpretation of Gram Swaraj, demonstrating the

continuing relevance of decentralisation, dignity of labour, cooperative organisation, and ethical leadership to inclusive rural development.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, conceptual research design to reinterpret Gandhian principles within contemporary rural development. Rather than generating new empirical data, it examines how concepts such as decentralisation, trusteeship, constructive work, dignity of labour, and moral leadership may be operationalised through an existing grassroots institution.

The analysis draws primarily on Gandhi's writings, supplemented by scholarly literature on Gandhian thought, women's empowerment, Self-Help Groups (SHGs), rural development, and published research on SEWA, including institutional reports and critical analyses. SEWA is selected as the central case because of its explicit grounding in Gandhian ethics, extensive geographical reach across Indian states, and federated structure combining trade unionism, cooperatives, and skill development within a decentralised framework. Its long-standing engagement with informal women workers and emphasis on locally rooted, collectively organised leadership make it particularly suitable for examining the contemporary relevance of Gram Swaraj.

The study employs thematic comparison, examining Gandhian concepts against SEWA's organisational practices to assess whether SEWA represents a contemporary institutional reinterpretation of Gram Swaraj. Its principal limitation is reliance on secondary sources and the absence of interviews or participant observation, making findings interpretive rather than micro-level empirically verified. Future field research could examine implementation variations and members' experiences across states. Nevertheless, the conceptual approach clarifies the relationship between Gandhian ethics and contemporary women-led rural development.

Theoretical Framework: Integrating Gandhian Ethics and Feminist Development Theory

Gandhian Ethical Foundation

Gram Swaraj extends beyond economic self-sufficiency and local administration to an ethical vision of decentralised self-rule grounded in social justice, the dignity of labour, participatory decision-making, and the inclusion of the weakest in political, economic, and social life. Trusteeship situated economic activity within moral responsibility rather than individual accumulation, while constructive work fostered self-reliant communities through collective action. Decentralisation,

thus, functioned not merely as an administrative arrangement but as an ethical principle of shared responsibility and participatory leadership.

Critics have argued that Gandhian thought is overly moralistic, insufficiently institutionalised, and inadequately equipped to address the structural realities of modern political economy (Parekh, 1989). Yet this criticism reflects Gandhi's concern with articulating ethical principles rather than detailed institutional blueprints (Iyer, 1987). Interpreted within contemporary socio-economic conditions, these principles acquire institutional expression. SEWA may thus be understood not as a replication of Gram Swaraj but as its contextual adaptation, translating decentaralised self-rule, trusteeship, and non-violent cooperation into collective organisation, a cooperative enterprise, and democratic engagement with markets and the state.\

Feminist Development Theory

Caroline Moser's distinction between Practical Gender Needs (PGNs) and Strategic Gender Needs (SGNs) (Moser, 2012) offers an important framework for assessing women's empowerment through Self-Help Groups (SHGs). While practical needs relate to immediate concerns such as income, credit, and basic economic security, strategic needs involve transforming unequal gender relations and institutional power structures. SHGs have substantially addressed women's access to financial resources, yet inequalities in decision-making authority, control over assets, and the unequal distribution of unpaid care work remain only partially resolved.

(Batliwala, 2011) extends this analysis by distinguishing feminist leadership from the mere presence of women in positions of authority. Women's participation alone does not necessarily transform unequal power relations. Her framework of "power over" (domination), "power to" (capacity to act), "power with" (collective strength), and "power within" (self-confidence and critical consciousness) highlights empowerment as a multidimensional process. Collective organisations such as SEWA strengthen both "power with," through collective action and "power within" by fostering confidence and critical consciousness, reflecting Gandhi's understanding of Swaraj as a shared ethical practice rather than individual authority.

Cornwall (2016) similarly cautions against equating empowerment with measurable outcomes such as participation rates or income enhancement. Meaningful empowerment requires changes in institutional practices and social power relations. This perspective complements the Gandhian insistence that participation derives its significance from ethical responsibility, collective agency, and local

autonomy rather than numerical inclusion alone.

Limits of Economic Empowerment

Critical perspectives on microfinance further complicate optimistic accounts of women's economic empowerment. Karim (2011) argues that access to credit does not necessarily translate into control over financial resources and may, under certain conditions, intensify women's unpaid labour and repayment burdens. SEWA differs from conventional microfinance models by embedding financial services within unionisation, legal awareness, cooperative organisation, rights-based claims and institutional negotiation. In this sense, Gandhian decentralisation acquires institutional significance only when supported by a collective organisation and democratic participation rather than credit alone.

Empirical evidence also indicates that the outcome of SHGs remains uneven. Swain and Wallentin (2009) find that participation is generally associated with greater empowerment, although the extent of change depends upon broader social and institutional contexts. Material advancement may facilitate challenges to existing hierarchies, but structural transformation remains contingent upon wider political, economic, and cultural conditions.

Towards a Gandhian-Feminist Framework

This study brings Gandhian ethics into dialogue with feminist development theory to conceptualise empowerment as a layered process encompassing material improvement, collective agency, and institutional transformation. Gandhi's principles of Swaraj, Trusteeship, Non-violence, and community cooperation provide the ethical foundation, while feminist scholarship offers analytical tools for examining how power operates within everyday social relations.

Although feminist scholars caution against essentializing women's caregiving roles, development policy must engage with existing patterns of care responsibility. Flexible and localized livelihood opportunities created through SHGs enable many women to combine income generation with caregiving responsibilities, thereby reducing the tension between economic participation and family obligations. Recognising care as socially necessary labour shifts attention from moral idealisation to institutional design while avoiding biological determinism.

Beyond savings and credit, SHGs also function as spaces of dialogue, mutual support, and collective learning. Women share personal experiences, negotiate domestic challenges, and build relationships of trust that reduce social isolation and strengthen both

"power within" and "power with". Such processes do not immediately dismantle entrenched patriarchal structures, but they create the relational and psychological conditions through which authority can gradually be renegotiated within households and communities.

Taken together, this framework moves beyond viewing SHGs as either instruments of economic inclusion or as inadequate vehicles of structural change. By integrating feminist distinctions between practical and strategic gender needs with Gandhian principles of decentralised self-rule, it understands empowerment as a contextual and cumulative process in which material resources, collective organisation, and ethical participation reinforce one another. SEWA illustrates how shifts in "power within" and "power with" may gradually mediate broader structural transformation. Empowerment, therefore, is neither automatic nor illusory; it is contextual, cumulative, and embedded in lived social relations.

Gandhi's Vision of Rural India and the Question of Women's Agency

Gandhi's conception of rural India was not simply an economic programme but an ethical and political vision of decentralised self-rule. Gram Swaraj envisaged the village as the foundational unit of democracy, where economic production, political participation, and social responsibility were integrated through non-violence, self-restraint, and local autonomy (Gandhi, 1946). Self-reliance, cooperative labour, and dignity of manual work were therefore ethical commitments intended to prevent exploitation and concentration of power (Gandhi, 1942).

Trusteeship formed a central pillar of this vision by seeking to moderate economic inequality through moral responsibility rather than coercive redistribution (Gandhi, 1933; Vidakoviæ, 2022). Wealth, Gandhi argued, should be held in trust for society, while bread labour affirmed the social value of productive work irrespective of status (Gandhi 1933; 1942; Iyer 1987). Likewise, the charkha and khadi symbolised decentralised production and community self-reliance in opposition to industrial concentration and unemployment (Brown, 1991).

Women occupied an important place within this vision. Gandhi encouraged their participation in constructive programmes, including education, sanitation, village reconstruction, and the nationalist movement, arguing that they possessed qualities of courage, compassion, and non-violence that were essential to public life (Gandhi 1929; 1942). His mobilisation of women challenged prevailing restrictions on their public participation and contributed to normalising their visibility in collective protest (Kishwar, 1985).

Yet this inclusion was framed within a distinctive moral vocabulary that has attracted sustained feminist critique. Gandhi's representation of women as embodiments of sacrifice and purity risked reinforcing gendered expectations that tied female agency to service rather than autonomy (Kishwar, 1985). By associating women's strength primarily with moral influence rather than institutional authority, his thought left unresolved the question of women's relationship to formal political power (Iyer, 1987). This position simultaneously opened and circumscribed women's possibilities.

Feminist scholars have therefore interpreted Gandhi's approach as ambivalent: emancipatory in practice, yet normatively restrictive in its idealisation of feminine virtue (Kishwar, 1985). On one hand, his mobilisation strategies created space for women's participation in civil disobedience and local governance. On the other hand, the construction of women as inherently self-sacrificing risked naturalising care work and reinforcing expectations of moral self-denial. The tension between empowerment and idealisation remains central to evaluating the contemporary relevance of Gandhian thought for women's leadership.

At the same time, dismissing Gandhi's framework as merely paternalistic would overlook its radical departure from dominant patriarchal norms of his era. His insistence that men treat women as co-workers rather than subordinates, and his critique of customs that perpetuated inequality, marked a significant ethical intervention within early twentieth-century India (Gandhi, 1929; Iyer, 1987). The question, therefore, is not whether Gandhi was wholly liberatory or wholly restrictive, but how his ideas can be reinterpreted within contemporary feminist frameworks.

Such a reinterpretation requires extending Gram Swaraj beyond moral participation to institutional agency. If decentralised self-rule is understood as democratic participation rather than village romanticism, women must exercise decision-making authority, control over resources, and collective bargaining power alongside ethical leadership (Gandhi 1946). SEWA illustrates this transition by translating Gandhian ideals of decentralisation into organisational forms that combine economic participation with democratic representation and collective action. In this sense, Gandhi's vision provides an ethical foundation for inclusive rural development, while feminist perspectives expand it by locating women's empowerment in both moral responsibility and institutional power.

Women's Leadership in Rural Development: Contemporary Landscape

Self-Help Groups (SHGs) emerged as a pilot initiative in 1992 under the bank linkage programme promoted by NABARD (National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development), following which the Reserve Bank of India advised commercial banks to extend credit to SHGs. Typically consisting of 10 to 20 women residing within the same geographical area and sharing similar socio-cultural backgrounds, SHGs are formed as collective credit and savings organisations. The model is based on a "savings-first" approach, wherein members contribute small, regular savings that are pooled and circulated as loans among themselves, enabling women to gradually move out of the vicious cycle of poverty. Although initiated with a primary focus on financial inclusion, SHGs have expanded beyond economic objectives to influence social and political spheres through collective strength. They increasingly function as common interest groups rather than merely credit associations. At the organisational level, SHGs constitute the basic unit, with 15 to 50 groups forming a cluster or Village Organisation (VO), and multiple VOs together constituting apex bodies such as Mandal Samakhyas, which are registered formal institutions (Reddy and Manak, 2005).

While the institutional design of SHGs reflects decentralised organisation, the function remains within state-supported financial and administrative systems. Their autonomy, therefore, depends not only on internal cohesion but also on the relationships with banks, government agencies, and livelihood missions. Decentralisation in the SHG model is consequently operational rather than absolute, combining community participation with institutional support. In this respect, SHGs represent a contemporary adaptation of decentralised governance rather than the fully autonomous village envisaged under Gram Swaraj.

The spread and performance of SHGs have varied considerably across India. Southern states such as Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu record higher enrolment of women in SHGs, while states characterised by higher poverty levels and lower per capita income exhibit greater participation of marginalised rural women. These differences reflect variations in financial infrastructure, the depth of poverty, and inconsistencies in policy implementation rather than the intrinsic effectiveness of the SHG model itself (Mukhopadhyay, 2023). These disparities underline the need for interventions rather than uniform policy prescriptions. Thus, the uneven experience of SHGs must be understood as context-dependent rather than universally

replicable, raising important questions about prescriptions in diverse socio-economic settings.

Empirical studies on SHGs demonstrate that access to microfinance has enabled women to engage in entrepreneurial activities and contribute financially to household expenditure. This participation enhances women's economic independence, confidence, and involvement in household decisions relating to education, healthcare, and consumption. Additionally, SHG participation has strengthened women's communication skills and mobility, as they increasingly interact with formal institutions such as banks and hospitals—spaces that were previously perceived as inaccessible or intimidating (Pandhare et al., 2024). However, sustainable village enterprises require training and skill development. Women join SHGs for credit, financial independence, entrepreneurship, and skill development, all of which support sustainable women-led enterprises (Ajesh Palayi et al., 2023). However, improvements in income and participation do not automatically translate into structural transformation of gender relations. Access to credit may expand women's economic roles while leaving intra-household power dynamics largely intact. The distinction between functional participation and substantive authority, therefore, becomes critical in evaluating the depth of empowerment achieved through SHGs.

Evidence suggests a rise in women's income after joining SHGs, alongside the creation of employment opportunities within villages, enhanced savings capacity, and greater engagement with Panchayati Raj institutions, which play a crucial role in programme implementation. Studies from Uttarakhand highlight the need for flexible rules, increased awareness programmes, and targeted incentives to attract more women into SHGs, particularly in sectors such as dairy and agriculture where women's participation is most pronounced (Bhoj et al., 2013). The integration of SHGs with Panchayati Raj institutions suggests a convergence between participatory governance and women's collective organisation. Yet the effectiveness of this linkage depends on the degree of financial autonomy and decision-making authority granted to local bodies. Without substantive devolution of power, institutional participation risks becoming symbolic rather than transformative. SHGs have strengthened collective capacity, but comprehensive empowerment continues to require sustained institutional support (Saha, 2015).

Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) increasingly support women's micro-enterprises by improving market access and business management through mobile technologies. Despite this potential, effective utilisation of digital tools requires structured

training and improved digital literacy among women entrepreneurs. Realising this potential requires digital literacy, affordable technologies, and targeted capacity-building initiatives (Malanga & Banda, 2021). In parallel, the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992 gave concrete shape to Gandhi's vision of decentralised governance by ensuring representation for women through reservations in Panchayati Raj Institutions. Women representatives in PRIs have contributed significantly to improved outcomes in healthcare, education, and community welfare, thereby strengthening local governance. PRIs also serve as an institutional bridge between the state and rural communities by implementing development programmes and supporting women's participation. However, to effectively promote women's leadership and good governance at the grassroots, PRIs require greater decision-making authority, enhanced financial autonomy, and sustained efforts to challenge patriarchal norms (Yakar, 2024).

Tribal women's experiences further illustrate the diversity of pathways to leadership within rural contexts. In Jharkhand, women from different tribal identities, shaped by distinct socio-cultural practices, have demonstrated how cooperative formations oriented towards economic empowerment can facilitate broader social transformation. Participation in cooperatives has strengthened collective capacity and enabled women to assume leadership roles within their communities. While women do not constitute a homogeneous group, shared economic vulnerabilities often place them in marginal positions, making this a critical moment to recognise both "power within" and "power with." Contemporary shifts in leadership paradigms further reflect a movement away from exclusively masculine traits towards qualities such as care, empathy, collaboration, and consensus-building—traits increasingly associated with effective leadership (Bhaskar & Kaushik, 2022).

Kudumbashree in Kerala represents a well-established example of a decentralised, women-centred poverty alleviation programme built upon SHGs and neighbourhood-level collectives. Micro-level analyses demonstrate that the programme has enhanced women's economic participation in livelihood, while strengthening mobility, public participation, and household decision-making. Its effectiveness lies in close integration with local self-governance institutions, which enables women to emerge as community-level leaders rather than remaining passive recipients of welfare (Husain & Nair, 2006).

Within SHG networks, women's leadership manifests through locally selected group leaders who manage savings, credit, and collective decision-making. Operating within federated structures

linked to formal banks and state livelihood missions, these women acquire organisational and financial authority while negotiating with financial institutions and coordinating collective livelihood activities. This form of leadership enhances economic agency and public visibility, yet remains structurally constrained. Control over credit often remains with financial institutions or male family members, while unpaid care work and market intermediaries continue to restrict women's autonomy and control over production. While collective organisation enhances visibility and bargaining capacity, structural constraints—ranging from market mediation to entrenched patriarchy—continue to shape outcomes. A nuanced evaluation must therefore recognise both the transformative potential and the institutional limits of SHG-led development.

When viewed through a Gandhian lens, the SHG movement reflects both continuity and divergence from the principles of Gram Swaraj. The emphasis on collective savings, local decision-making, and mutual accountability resonates with Gandhi's advocacy of decentralised economic organisation and cooperative labour (Gandhi, 1942; 1946). However, dependence on state-sponsored credit and external markets distinguishes contemporary SHGs from Gandhi's ideal of self-reliant village economies. Nevertheless, their capacity to cultivate leadership among women at the grassroots level represents a significant realisation of participatory ethics, even if shaped by modern institutional constraints. Thus, SHGs may be understood not as direct replicas of Gandhian village autonomy but as adaptive institutional forms whose evolution reaches its most developed expression in SEWA.

Case Study: Ela Bhatt and the SEWA Movement

Ela Bhatt provides the crucial institutional link between Gandhian philosophy and contemporary women's leadership. Through the establishment of the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) in 1972, she transformed the ethical principles of Gram Swaraj into an organisational model centred on informal women workers. Ela Bhatt was an Indian lawyer, Gandhian activist, and the founder of the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), whose work sought to realise Gandhian ideals of Purna Swaraj through the economic organisation of informal women workers. The origins of SEWA can be traced to Bhatt's recognition of wage disparities and exploitation faced by women engaged in unorganised work. Beginning with a single meeting attended by fewer than one hundred women, SEWA emerged as a trade union representing self-employed women workers in the informal economy.

Educated in English literature and law, Bhatt effectively deployed her legal training to organise women workers and later expanded this engagement through the establishment of cooperative institutions, including SEWA Bank, as well as international advocacy networks (Right Livelihood, n.d.). She also served as a member of the Rajya Sabha, chaired national commissions on self-employed women, and received numerous national and international honours, including the Ramon Magsaysay Award, the Padma Shri, and the Padma Bhushan. Despite these formal recognitions, Bhatt's work remained deeply rooted in Gandhian principles of non-violence, self-reliance, and collective action, positioning her as a seminal figure in grassroots women's leadership and rural development (Harvard Mittal South Asia Institute, 2022).

SEWA articulated a distinctive framework for evaluating women's empowerment by developing a set of eleven interrelated indicators. These include employment opportunities, earnings, asset ownership, food security and nutrition, access to healthcare, childcare services, housing, water and sanitation, organisational strength, leadership positions, self-reliance, and women's education and skill development. Together, these indicators function as a practical yardstick for assessing progress and shortcomings in policies aimed at women's employment and empowerment (SEWA, n.d.). By grounding evaluation in lived realities rather than abstract targets, SEWA offers a model through which development outcomes can be meaningfully assessed.

Through SEWA Bharat, the organisation has implemented a wide range of programmes across multiple states, focusing on entrepreneurship, skill development, digital interventions, land rights, and social security. Illustrative initiatives include the livestock-based Goat Project in Jharkhand and Bihar, the Pragati project for training in retail management, the Vahini project promoting women's participation as e-rickshaw drivers in Delhi and Haryana, the Unnati programme providing hospitality training in Mussoorie, Uttarakhand, and the Kushal Yuva skill development initiative in Katihar, Bihar (SEWA Bharat, n.d.). These programmes reflect SEWA's commitment to locally grounded, sector-specific interventions that expand women's economic opportunities while strengthening their collective capacity.

SEWA as a Gandhian Experiment in Rural Women's Leadership

SEWA represents a practical integration of Gandhian ethics and feminist ethics in action, translating moral philosophy into everyday organisational practice. Gandhian principles such as non-violence, self-reliance, trusteeship, and constructive work are embedded within SEWA's institutional structure, enabling women engaged in informal

work to pursue economic security through collective and non-violent means. Simultaneously, feminist ethical perspectives shape SEWA's emphasis on care, relational responsibility, and the recognition of intersecting inequalities of gender and class. In this way, empowerment extends beyond income generation to encompass dignity, voice, and collective agency.

SEWA's participatory and decentralised leadership model functions as an ethical framework for grassroots democracy, allowing women to assume leadership roles within their own communities rather than relying on external intermediaries. This structure reflects the Gandhian vision of Gram Swaraj, where power is exercised at the lowest level, and leadership is rooted in lived experience. By emphasising consensus and collective deliberation, SEWA challenges hierarchical governance while reinforcing shared responsibility.

At the same time, SEWA's organisational philosophy aligns closely with feminist concerns for justice and inclusion. It recognises that economic vulnerability among women is shaped not only by class but also by caste, ethnicity, and social location. Recognising these intersecting inequalities, SEWA promotes context-specific and inclusive forms of leadership rather than treating women as a homogeneous category. As McLaren (2024) argues, SEWA demonstrates how Indian ethical traditions, when combined with feminist commitments to social justice, can generate sustainable and transformative models of development.

SEWA demonstrates that Gram Swaraj is not a historical ideal but an evolving institutional framework capable of responding to contemporary challenges through decentralised organisation, collective leadership, and ethical economic practice. Rather than reproducing Gandhi's ideas unchanged, SEWA adapts them to the realities of informal labour, gender inequality, and democratic governance and shows how ethical decentralisation can become an effective model of women's leadership and collective empowerment.

Policy Reflections and Future Directions

SEWA should not be viewed merely as a non-governmental organisation; rather, it can be understood as a policy lens through which national development strategies may be critically examined. These principles—decentralisation, collective women's leadership, dignity of labour, and ethical economic organisation—closely align with the foundational ideas underlying several major development programmes in India. Initiatives such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), the National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM) and the SHG movement, SEWA Bank,

and Direct Benefit Transfers, reflect these shared commitments. Together, they illustrate how Gandhian decentralisation can strengthen women's leadership at the local level.

Ethical, value-driven development must be prioritised over narrow measures of efficiency or scale. Principles such as dignity, transparency, safety, participation, and accountability, when woven together, create development outcomes that are both inclusive and sustainable.

MGNREGA represents a contemporary expression of Gandhi's vision of rural development. By guaranteeing at least one hundred days of wage employment to rural households engaged in unskilled manual work, the programme affirms the Gandhian principle of dignity of labour and the right to work. Its bottom-up design strengthens Panchayati Raj institutions and prioritises sustainable development through works related to water conservation, land improvement, and ecological regeneration. Women now constitute nearly half of the workforce, reflecting the programme's commitment to gender inclusion. The programme, therefore, addresses rural unemployment, gender inequality, and exclusion from local governance through a demand-driven approach.

The integration of technology through electronic fund management systems and Direct Benefit Transfers has enhanced transparency and reduced corruption by limiting discretionary human intervention. Workplace safety initiatives such as the Government of India's SHe-Box further reinforce Gandhian commitments to dignity and justice (Ministry of Women and Child Development, Government of India, n.d.).

In the context of twenty-first-century governance, technology, welfare provisioning, and women's leadership must be integrated within Gandhian ethical foundations. Only through such integration can development move beyond material indicators to achieve a more holistic and humane transformation of society.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to contribute to scholarship by reinterpreting Gandhian decentralisation through the lens of contemporary women's grassroots leadership. By placing SEWA and the broader SHG movement within a Gandhian ethical framework, the study demonstrates that women's collective economic organisation can be understood not only as a strategy of poverty alleviation but as a reworking of Gram Swaraj in modern institutional contexts. In doing so, the paper bridges Gandhian political philosophy and feminist development practice, showing how decentralisation, trusteeship, and dignity of labour acquire renewed meaning when embodied through

women-led cooperatives and associations.

SEWA demonstrates that economic security, collective organisation, and decision-making authority are mutually reinforcing dimensions of Purna Swaraj. Such autonomy cannot emerge in the absence of secure and dignified employment. Employment must be understood not only as income generation, but as a condition enabling access to food, shelter, clothing, safe drinking water, and social security in the form of healthcare, childcare, and pensions. Without these guarantees, human creativity and productive potential remain constrained.

SEWA and Self-Help Groups illustrate how women across diverse social backgrounds have organised collectively to translate moral participation into economic agency. Their contributions are visible not only in improved livelihoods, collective voice, bargaining power, and confidence within households and communities. At the same time, the analysis recognises that empowerment remains shaped by structural conditions, market linkages, and institutional frameworks. The Gandhian model, therefore, requires reinterpretation rather than romantic replication. Women's leadership must extend beyond symbolic moral authority toward sustained control over resources and decision-making structures.

Theoretically, this study suggests that Gandhian thought retains contemporary relevance when read through a feminist and institutional lens rather than as nostalgic village idealism. It invites scholars to reconsider decentralisation not merely as administrative devolution, but as ethical redistribution of power. From a policy perspective, the findings underline the need to move beyond welfare-based beneficiary frameworks toward sustained investment in skill development, collective enterprise, social security systems, and localised governance structures that enable women's long-term economic autonomy.

Future research may build upon this conceptual framework through empirical investigations across different states and institutional settings. Comparative field studies, interviews with women members, and longitudinal analyses of SHG and cooperative models could deepen understanding of the extent to which Gandhian decentralisation is realised in practice. Such research would help assess variations in empowerment outcomes, identify structural constraints, and refine policy strategies grounded in grassroots realities.

Today, SEWA, with nearly 3.2 million women members across eighteen states of India, stands as a living institutional expression of Gandhian ethics adapted to contemporary conditions. Empowering rural women leaders, therefore, is not merely a development

intervention. It represents Swaraj in practice—anchored in dignity, collective responsibility, and participatory justice. The enduring significance of Gandhian philosophy lies not in its static preservation, but in its capacity to evolve through institutions that expand women's economic and political agency within changing rural realities.

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Responsible Government as Minimal Communism: A Theory of VS Achuthanandan's Life and Mission

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ABSTRACT

This paper offers a political-theoretical biography of V.S. Achuthanandan (1923–2025), a central figure in Indian communism and the democratic transformation of Keralam. It argues that he developed a theoretical practice of 'minimal communism': a distinctive line within Indian Marxism that subordinated party supremacy to democratic governance. Emerging from the anti-feudal struggles of Travancore and the demand for responsible government within the Indian independence struggle, this approach adapted a colonial constitutional ideal into a socialist strategy for a caste-stratified society. Drawing on biographical and archival sources, the paper shows how his experiences as an orphaned Ezhava worker and organiser shaped a politics that rejected both revolutionary maximalism and party supremacism. Through the development of an indigenous variant of populism, his practice combined militant land struggles, legal activism against corruption, ecological campaigns, and strategic use of media. Situating his thought within Marxist state theory, the paper concludes that Achuthanandan reimagined communism as the ethical socialisation of the democratic state rather than its revolutionary overthrow.

Key words: *Indian Marxism; Kerala politics; responsible government; communist theory; political biography*

Introduction

IF TWO ANTHROPOLOGISTS had travelled through Travancore in

the 1920s and been told that this deeply hierarchical, feudal society would evolve into a social-democratic space within a generation, they would have dismissed it as implausible. The transformation appears, even in retrospect, as improbable as imagining Kabul as a feminist city within a few decades. Within this unlikely historical rupture, the political life of V.S. Achuthanandan (1923–2025) acquires its significance and calls for a political-theoretical biography. Existing biographies—such as Jayanath (2021), Balakrishnan (2025), and Murali (2025)—along with newspaper archives and party documents, narrate his life primarily through events and experiences. Yet a political biography may also approach a life through the ideas that these experiences help to shape (Smith 1994; Krcmaric, Nelson & Roberts 2019). The sublation of lived experience into the universality of political practice is central here. This is, in effect, an intellectual biography of a practitioner—an exercise in "actual political thinking" (Freeden 2019, p.197), a result of the ""significant encounter" between the autonomy of the political observer and the autonomy of the politics thus observed" (Sartori 1974, p.136).

Achuthanandan's life lends itself to such an approach. Labelled "Gandhi-esque but not Gandhian" by M.N. Vijayan, he embodied a paradox within Indian parliamentary Marxism: a communist leader deeply invested in democratic institutions. Formed in the anti-feudal struggles of twentieth-century Travancore, where the demand for "responsible government" shaped his political outlook, he developed a distinctive line irreducible to either orthodox Marxism or liberal constitutionalism. The central claim is that Achuthanandan developed "minimal communism": a non-teleological, institutionally grounded line that subordinated party authority to the democratic state and pursued incremental, legally mediated change. Rooted in the Travancore struggles, it made responsible governance the core terrain of politics. His rise from an untouchable, orphaned labourer to Chief Minister reflects the intersection of caste, class, and region, but his importance lies in the coherence of his practice. Across agrarian struggles, lawfare against corruption and communal oligarchies, ecological campaigns, and intra-party dissent, he consistently sought to compel a responsible state. This stance set him apart from both revolutionary maximalism and opportunistic compromise. He also innovated by using television to bypass party hierarchies and engage the public directly, anticipating mediated populism while retaining a democratic ethos. Drawing on biographical and archival sources, the paper situates his line within Marxist state theory and argues that he articulated an alternative path for communist politics: not displacing democracy, but disciplining and socialising the state.

In the Dwindling Twilight of Feudal Travancore

Even in its twilight years, the Travancore Kingdom scarcely resembled anything recognisably modern, save for a few enclaves within Trivandrum city. In this backward Hindu theocracy ruled by a royal family whose pretensions of progress were kindled only so that they would not be ashamed to face the British, Velikkakathu Sankaran Achuthanandan was born into an untouchable Ezhava family in the year 1923, in his mother's second marriage and his father's third (Murali 2025, p.20). Just how distant this epoch is to ours is evidenced by the fact that smallpox — a dreaded killer back then — took his mother when he was four, and an unknown illness took his father when he was eleven. Smallpox gave no hope to its victims; they were simply quarantined away and left for dead. As for his father's illness, Achuthanandan had to rely on vernacular, half-superstitious medicinal practices. The losses feel biblical, but in Achuthanandan, they produced the opposite of faith. They turned him into an atheist, and he would later find salvation in communism.

By his teens, Achuthanandan had become an orphan forced into child labour, already having skirmished lightly with his peers who sought to humiliate him with caste slurs.[1] The Ezhavas were 'pejoratively' associated with toddy-tapping but had more than a hand in the textile industry. Achuthanandan worked in his brother's tailoring shop, where he cultivated an interest in politics. Politics was, by then, the happening thing as far as youngsters were concerned. The independence movement was in full swing, and the Congress was swelling in numbers. Achuthanandan joined them, but he was soon whisked into the more radical communist faction within the Congress.[2] After all, Achuthanandan did belong to the "prisoners of hunger", to whom Eugène Pottier's 'The Internationale' — a song translated and popularly rendered in Malayalam too — called out. Concerned about Achuthanandan's growing radicalisation, his elder half-brother sent him to work in a coir factory under the Aspinwall Company, which was still under the control of British entrepreneurs. This seemingly minor shift proved decisive: it was here that Achuthanandan entered the organised proletariat—the revolutionary subject of Marxism. Moreover, he could see from his experience in the company that British capitalism was no solution to the problem of worker exploitation. Here too, personal freedom was curtailed, just as in the caste-bound, agricultural feudalism outside the factory; men could not sport moustaches and women could not wear a pottu (Jayanath 2021, p. 28). By his twenties, Achuthanandan was already an up-and-coming labour organiser among the coir workers of

Alleppey, his growing recognition fuelled as much by his skill as a worker as by his free, open, and assertive mind (Jayanath 2021, pp. 29–31).

Factories differ from farms in one significant way. They are sites where "workers can't directly work together without being together"; they are the birthplace of modern cooperation (Marx 2024, p. 301). This shift of model social organisation from the farm to the factory is a key aspect of the transition from feudalism to capitalism. Lenin thought of the factory as the model form of organisation for the revolution, as Antonio Negri (2014, p. 36) noted. Achuthanandan's career at the factory was followed by his reassignment by the party to the task of unionising farm workers. He went on to found the Travancore Karshaka Thozhilali Union in Kuttand in 1946, which later became the Kerala State Karshaka Thozhilali Union (KSKTU). Other parts of India did not get their organisations for agricultural workers until much later; the farming sector was represented primarily as a standoff between peasants' and landlords' interests. Achuthanandan, having come from a farming background to factory work and then back among farm workers, was in the thick of a dialectic that would define land struggles in his native region. He would himself be definitive in the dialectic, which would also extend between plantations and paddy fields, and legislature and courts.

A further specificity must be made when tracing Achuthanandan's origins. He was from Kuttanad, which was and is a rather unusual region. It is, quite literally, a socially constructed landscape, with the vast paddy fields having been reclaimed from the Lake Vembanad, making both its people and crops especially vulnerable to floods — it is a region which naturally elicited a demand for a state with a responsible government, an exceptional region that needed exceptional interventions in order to merely survive (Mathew 2019). The effect of a war-induced famine compounded its misery, an ironic consequence for an almost totally agrarian region. Achuthanandan himself would say that the land and class struggles in Kuttanad were never separate from the problem of ecological balance (Murali 2025, pp.138–139). Like Arundhati Roy's characters drawn from her own Kuttanadan upbringing, extreme fragility and extreme resilience emerged side by side here, fed by the same forces of nature; the region was also one of the few places in the world where below-sea-level polders existed, as in the Netherlands (Jayanath 2021, p. 34). Moreover, being from Kuttanad meant Achuthanandan was trapped in an in-betweenness between landed, hill, and coastal elites, each with its own factions in Kerala politics that often cut across party lines. Kuttanad's politics is essentially amphibious; and these exceptionalities profoundly shaped

Achuthanandan himself. (For more details, see Rammohan 2006) This uniqueness of the region formed the basis of the third level of self-determination struggle in which Achuthanandan was involved—apart from the Indian independence movement and the Travancore freedom struggle, he was a leading figure in the movement for the creation of the Alappuzha district (Jayanath 2021, pp. 129–130).

The 1940s were decisive for Achuthanandan's political formation. As he emerged as a young revolutionary, the anti-monarchy struggle in Travancore intensified, driven by demands for "responsible government" against the autocratic rule of the royalty and Dewan C.P. Ramaswamy Iyer. While the Government of India Act (1935) had introduced responsible ministries elsewhere, Travancore saw one of the subcontinent's strongest movements for it. At the same time, communal organisations—Christian, Nair, Muslim, and Ezhava—had lost their earlier momentum against Brahminism, fragmenting into opportunism, narrow particularism, or open alignment with the Kingdom; even the SNDP sided with the Dewan. For those committed to responsible government, this abdication invited as much hostility as princely rule itself. Achuthanandan, deeply involved in the struggle and subjected to repression, absorbed these contradictions firsthand.

In any case, the call for responsible government defined the direction of Achuthanandan's career. He took part in the preparation of the Travancore Trade Union Council's demands towards the Dewan, the chief among which was the need for "responsible government" (Murali 2025, p.54). The demand was rejected, and the communists would be repressed heavily; responsible government was to be realised under the aegis of the Travancore State Congress. The inadequacy of this new government was apparent to Achuthanandan, as the initial democratically elected governments all submitted to jenmi supremacy (Jayanath 2021, pp. 116–117). This marked a recognition that responsible government remained unrealised—a premise that shaped Achuthanandan's politics. While most communist movements pursued proletarian dictatorship, he elevated this colonial ideal into a practical line, wary of how centralism erodes democracy. In its place, he reworked a liberal principle into a postcolonial communist strategy.

The Development of Achuthanandan's Practical Line

With the end of monarchy, Travancore merged into Kerala, where the Communist Party of India, having survived repression, won the first elections. The Indo-China war led to another ban, and Achuthanandan, then rising in the party, was jailed. There, he urged support for the Indian army—a position at odds with many of his comrades. Even as Maoist currents gained appeal, he revealed a defining trait: a deep

faith in the Indian experiment. He was not just a Travancore freedom fighter; he was an Indian freedom fighter. He might even have shared, if he was aware of it, the British-Indian Marxist JBS Haldane's view that India was the "closest approximation to the free world", and that due to the sheer diversity of the population being managed under one state, it was "a better model for a possible world organisation" (Dronamraju 2017, pp.280–285).

In 1964, Achuthanandan joined the split from CPI to form CPI(M). Namboodiripad, choosing strategically, sided with the new party, which soon formed the 1967 government and passed land reforms, though its maximalism led to early collapse. C. Achutha Menon then formed a CPI-led coalition with Congress and others, inaugurating a second line marked by toleration of bourgeois parties. This rested on the CPI's belief that Congress remained a socialist force that could be steered toward deeper transformation. With land reforms seen as the decisive blow to Brahminism, the communist parties now diverged on future strategy. The 1970 elections vindicated the Achutha Menon line, producing Kerala's longest-serving government (1970–77). Achuthanandan rose to prominence during this period, alongside a young Pinarayi Vijayan, and was jailed again. The decade also marked the culmination of his work among the agricultural proletariat.

On January 1, 1970, the KSKTU launched a massive agitation to enforce stalled land reforms, declaring they would be implemented regardless of state inaction. Achuthanandan led the movement, which escalated into near-class war, with workers occupying surplus land. Clashes with landlords and the police resulted in casualties. The Achutha Menon government eventually relented, implementing reforms with concessions—driven by the convergence of coalition stability and intense class mobilisation. The episode is notable for Achuthanandan's exceptional behaviour—he suspended his trust in the state and supported nothing other than vigilante justice. Unwilling to confront feudalism, this elected government was essentially breaking the law of the land and had regressed to the level of the obsolete Travancore kingdom. The government had abdicated its responsibility to the established law; there were no further institutions to appeal to other than the people themselves. Indeed, among the surplus land symbolically occupied under Achuthanandan's leadership were plots of land named reverently after the Travancore royal family, owned by the landlord Joseph Murickan (Murali 2025, pp.410–411). Achuthanandan did not fail to point out this link between landlordism and the kingdom's illegitimacy.

Subsequent elections showed Congress benefited more than the CPI from the toleration strategy, regaining strength across South India

and re-entrenching itself in Kerala, making alliances with its factions unavoidable for communists. A brief CPI-led government under P.K. Vasudevan Nair collapsed over differences, prompting the CPI and CPI(M) to form the Left Democratic Front. After a short-lived non-communist government under C.H. Muhammed Koya, which diluted land reforms, the 1980 elections punished Congress factions. E.K. Nayanar formed a government with breakaway Congress support, but following the Namboodiripad line, it too collapsed within two years as that support was withdrawn. Alongside this new leftist unity that provided a new horizon for communist politics, two important developments had occurred inside CPI(M) — VS Achuthanandan was now state secretary of the party, and the Koya government's actions were construed as a betrayal of CPI(M)'s cause, which had previously allied with the IUML, and had turned much of the party hostile to IUML.

M V Raghavan, a fiery leader from Malabar who argued heatedly for an alliance with the IUML, was ousted by a loose group of leaders, including Achuthanandan: the first major victory for his practical line that was starting to take shape. Achuthanandan had already become the state secretary of the party and a member of the party's politburo. He joined hands with EMS Namboodiripad against Raghavan, but later turned against Namboodiripad, as the stalwart began to advocate a softening towards IUML (AIML had merged back with IUML after leaving the CPI(M) front). Achuthanandan, though, was sensible and patient enough not to confront Namboodiripad, unlike K. R. Gowri Amma, whose impatient attempts to outmanoeuvre him led to an ignominious expulsion. Gowri, like Achuthanandan, was an Ezhava, and a combative one at that. Achuthanandan tried to bring her back, but unsuccessfully.

A rebel faction of the Indian Union Muslim League split to form the All-India Muslim League (AIML) and allied with the Communist Party of India (Marxist) in the 1982 elections, amid the rise of the Hindu right and renewed debate over alliances with religious parties. Cast in a distinctly Stalinist idiom, the issue hinged on nomenclature: whether the AIML was "communal." As in earlier shifts—from "intra-imperialist war" to "People's War" after Soviet entry—the label determined strategy. If deemed communal, alliance was impermissible; if not, it was tactically acceptable, like ties with other "bourgeois" parties.

Caste, Class, and Ideas in Leadership

In 1999, the incendiary magazine *Dalit Voice* reported that the Ezhava leader Achuthanandan was about to break the Savarna hegemony in

communism, and that only the Nair chief minister, EK Nayanar, remained to be taken care of (Dalit Voice 1999). In the first state conference after the death of Namboodiripad, Achuthanandan's faction had won big. But *Dalit Voice* was wrong on two counts — first, they termed the 76-year-old veteran an "up-and-coming leader"; and second, they had missed that, just a year ago, Achuthanandan had backed Nayanar's candidature for chief ministership against Susheela Gopalan, an Ezhava and the wife of the first-generation organiser AK Gopalan. Caste alone cannot explain the intraparty conflicts of the 1980s and 1990s, nor can broader structures like class or patriarchy. These illuminate long-term patterns—such as K.R. Gowri's marginalisation or the absence of non-Ezhava untouchables, shaped by caste-bound concentrations of habitus and political capital—but not leadership struggles themselves. At that level, conflicts operate simultaneously at more particular and more universal registers: contests of personalities and ideas. Nor are personalities reducible to social location; E.M.S. Namboodiripad exemplifies this—a Brahmin jenmi who became an advocate of Shudra rule.

Susheela Gopalan was the candidate of the party's strong trade union faction, and Achuthanandan opposed reducing communist politics to trade unionism. The trade unionists had always had a strong presence inside the party but became a chief competitor to the party leadership alongside the Namboodiripad and Achuthanandan factions in the late 80s. The Achuthanandan line of anti-communalism had won the upper hand after the expulsion of Raghavan. The CPI(M) decided to stay away from the IUML—a time when Namboodiripad even campaigned for a Uniform Civil Code—and still managed to win big in 1987. EK Nayanar became chief minister for a second time, this time leading a more cohesive left bloc. As the Soviet Union was dissolving, the CPI(M) was at its combative peak. In 1991, Namboodiripad and Achuthanandan once again went head-to-head on the question of IUML's entry into the left front — the former now in favour and the latter still opposed. The trade union faction too lent its support to Namboodiripad's line.

Achuthanandan did not win this confrontation, but it proved futile. The left front had called for early elections in 1991, a year before its term expired, and unexpectedly lost. The decision was attributed at least in part to the chief ministerial ambitions of Achuthanandan, whose fortunes swung wildly over a few months in this period. He was ousted as state secretary and replaced by Nayanar by a razor-thin margin — but, in another Stalinist quirk, the result was declared a unanimous decision (Lawrence 2023, p. 225) — but he won the legislative assembly seat he contested and ended up as the leader of

the opposition.

This partial defeat seems to have stirred something in him. He began a push to establish his credentials as a leader with an independent standing, unlike the apparatchik who functioned primarily within party committees. He already had the tools for this rebranding: he was an attractive and lucid public speaker, skilled in grassroots organising, and had cultivated a familiarity with judicial mechanisms. All three were elevated to a new purpose: the banal component was personal ambition, and the profound component was the development of a communism of responsible governance. The maximalist personality of Achuthanandan, a hardliner and a tough dealer, was offset by the minimalism of his communist politics.

Achuthanandan's legal activism targeted corruption in various forms: financial, bureaucratic and sexual. A theory of *lawfare* can be inferred from it—for Achuthanandan, fidelity to minimalist communism meant defending civic virtues uncompromisingly, and this dialectic made him maximalist as a politician. Achuthanandan, the ardent republican, envisioned a decent society as a counter to *madambi* (feudal lord) impunity, and turned decency into an object of caste struggle. One of the breakthrough moments in Achuthanandan's early organising efforts among farm workers was his questioning of the unnatural death of a servant girl, in which the employer *jenmi* was suspected to have a hand (Jayanath, 2021, p.48). This connection between impunity for gender violence and class domination was an early insight which he never let go off. He raised the bar for social responsibility, aiming to free Kerala's caste society from what George Bush termed "the soft bigotry of low expectations" of the provincial, communal-minded leaders. This meant punishing abuse of official power, as well as hunting down unofficial but socially condoned patriarchs who sexually abused women or ravaged protected common lands.

One of the deeper truths of his political framework, slowly unveiled over his long legal activism, was that those who deployed communal power in service of their political interests often turned out to be the most corrupt. His high-profile targets included Vellapally Natesan, the leader of SNDP; R Balakrishna Pillai, a Congress dissenter with deep ties to the Nair Service Society; KM Mani, another Congress breakaway leader for whom Christian communal interest was key; and the prominent IUML leader PK Kunhalikutty.[3] Achuthanandan put before the public the lesson he learnt from the 1940s — the so-called communal interests are not always matters of the community, and more often a shield for oligarchic control. Each of his communally backed opponents faced his verbal wrath more than once in public,

but he once spoke benevolently about Mata Amritanandamayi when she faced allegations, commending her as an important spiritual leader from the lower castes. The difference, for Achuthanandan, was that Amritanandamayi did not meddle in politics with her religious-economic clout. Even the Indian National League, a breakaway group of the IUML formed in the context of the Babri Masjid demolition, was opposed by Achuthanandan, just as stoutly as he opposed the Bharatiya Janata Party and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. The trade unionists, on the other hand, were favourable to non-majoritarian, moderate communal parties as long as they could come to an understanding with them.

Achuthanandan's ambition did not escape his rivals, and factional conspiracy flourished. The fight of ideas devolved temporarily into a fight of personalities. Achuthanandan surprisingly lost his seat in the 1996 election, with a conspiracy by the trade unionists widely blamed for this. Positions of power were hotly contested — Chadayan Govindan, respected across the board, had been brought in as state secretary to moderate between the fighting factions. His ill-health left the post open to contest again, and Achuthanandan backed Pinarayi Vijayan, preferring an outsider against the interests of the other factions. It was clear that Namboodiripad's time was almost over, and Achuthanandan turned his full attention to demoting the trade unionists' influence. Having lost his own chief ministerial credentials, he backed Nayanar against Susheela Gopalan, and his supporters won big in the state conference. The trade unionists alleged that his faction went as far as to doctor votes to win posts within the party.

This was the *vettirinathal* era in Achuthanandan's life (Jose 2025). The name is a pun on his dual struggles: he led what was termed as the "barbaric *vettinirathal samaram*" (literally "the chopping down protests", a name given to the Save Ricefield Action (Chandy 2016)) against the conversion of wetland-paddy fields into dryland cash crops areas — one of the first struggles in the world which sought to introduce a notion of limited capitalist ownership rights over lands vis-a-vis ecological balance (Narayanan 2003; Mathew 2019) — and he simultaneously enacted an internal coup against the trade unionists in the party leadership, thereby "chopping them down." The irony was doubled by the fact that it was a trade union front which organised the struggle on the ground. One of the victims of his scorched-earth tactics was TJ Anjelose, then a young, firebrand, working-class leader who contested and lost the election alongside Achuthanandan. Achuthanandan is supposed to have engineered his ouster from the party, but not before ridiculing him as just a boy "who picks fish off the coast" (Mathrubhumi 2024). Caste and class solidarity did not

stand in the way of politics; stigma could even be turned opportunistically into a weapon. By the time Achuthanandan was done, the trade unionists had been permanently relegated to the second row.

The Role of the Party

MM Lawrence, one of the leading figures in the trade union faction, repeatedly made light of Achuthanandan's connections to the Punnapra-Vayalar uprising of 1946, in which lower-caste proletarians revolted against the Kingdom and attempted to establish self-governing communes in Kuttanad. Achuthanandan, a regional leader, had long been associated with the movement's memory. Lawrence (2023) and others, though, made a different point: Achuthanandan was not actually involved in the uprising and thus did not merit any respect for it. This was somewhat true. Achuthanandan was away from the scene as the fighting broke out, and he went into hiding following the disastrous outcome of the uprising — the CPI claims around seven hundred workers died — but was caught and subjected to near-fatal torture. Although he never publicly criticised the party for its decisions leading to the massacre, he drew a strong lesson from the debacle he witnessed firsthand, both during the Punnapra-Vayalar uprising and the misgu — that the party is not always right (Jayanath 2021, p. 442). The lesson would come in handy for him in his long communist life.

By the end of Nayanar's term in 2001, Achuthanandan once again had hopes of becoming Chief Minister. His spat with Nayanar had gone public, and he had cleared himself of several allegations. Nayanar, on the other hand, had built no faction around himself and was isolated after Namboodiripad's passing. The Left Front lost the election, though, due to a confluence of mundane factors. By now, the electorate had settled into a pattern of simply changing the ruling alliance in every election. He was once again appointed the leader of the opposition parties. Nayanar's health began to fade, and just when Achuthanandan thought his path was finally clear, he faced his toughest factional challenge yet.

The personal ambitions of Pinarayi Vijayan had also quietly bloomed over the years, and he saw a chance to overtake Achuthanandan in the queue. Their clash of personal ambition was, as always, accompanied by a clash of ideas. Vijayan had already served as a minister in the Nayanar cabinet. A deal he signed with the Canadian company SNC-Lavalin came under scrutiny after the government changed, and various bodies, including the Comptroller and Auditor General of India, found irregularities. A case was mounted

against Vijayan; the CPI(M) was quick to dismiss it as a politically motivated sham. Achuthanandan took a different line: he was adamant that the CAG report was more trustworthy than the party's stand on the issue. He faced disciplinary action inside the party. When the court ruled the case baseless, Achuthanandan apologised for his stance—the judiciary stood above the CAG (Jayaraj 2021, p. 454).

Among the many differences between Achuthanandan and Vijayan, this was perhaps the most exemplary, as it distilled the essence of their two practical lines. For Achuthanandan, the party's existence was essentially *beneath* the democratic state, whereas for Vijayan and much of the party, it existed above the state, and compliance with bourgeois democracy was merely a tactical position; in case of conflict, the party's judgment was to be preferred. As a result of his fundamental distrust towards "bourgeois democracy", Vijayan was soft towards a few Islamist parties, treating them more as fellow revolutionaries with ideological disagreements than as threats. Achuthanandan showed time and again that his preference was the other way around, viewing the party as the most progressive force, fully compliant with the democratic form. He put this idea into practice during the Indo-China war; he did so in the Lavalin saga; and he did so again when he agitated against the Koodankulam project, which the party supported. Naturally, he opposed any deals or sympathies with Islamists.

The Achuthanandan-Vijayan problem can be understood in analogy with the Miliband-Poulantzas debate, which played out in the *New Left Review*. Essentially, Ralph Miliband argued that the state can be changed from within, whereas Poulantzas held that the state has a structural tendency to privilege the capitalist social formation (Barrow 2002). Achuthanandan and Vijayan can be seen as on the former and latter sides of this debate, respectively, but they are not neat fits. The difference is that Miliband and Poulantzas do not discuss the role of the communist party—even a theoretical centrality of "the party" was already seen as a dangerous trend towards Soviet excesses—whereas this was an inescapable question in the context of Kerala.

Achuthanandan's innovation in this question can be explained by a different metaphor for thinking about the state. The urban terms in which Miliband and Poulantzas conducted their debate limited them; it became a matter of "structure" and "agency," akin to debating what kinds of social uses a building can be put to by its occupants. In the Miliband-Poulantzas conception, the state was 'occupied' by different individuals; the Orthodox Marxist metaphor of the state as a tool of the ruling class was even worse. Mark Poster (1995) remarked on the internet that "its effects are more like those of Germany than those of

hammers", thus allowing entirely new ways of thinking about it; the same could be said about the state. The metaphor matters.

Achuthanandan's idea of the state can be understood through a different, slightly Heideggerian metaphor: the state can be grown, shaped, and nurtured in multiple ways, just as it can "wither away." The state was not a thing, but a social relation—Poulantzas (2014) later theorised it as such, but without escaping his metaphoric trap—that was the product of various people coming together. Just as individual persons could be guided and brought up, so could the state be nurtured; and the party had the task of seeing through this bringing-forth of the state.[4] The party was not a parent who could chide and berate the state, but more like planters who were themselves sheltered by the trees they raised and fostered. This peasant-like approach perhaps came more easily to Achuthanandan than to the city-dwelling theorists.

For Vijayan, on the other hand, the party was simply the more important institution in society. Factional divisions were revised along the axis of this new practical question. It also took on a regional flavour, as Achuthanandan was from Travancore and Vijayan from Malabar. Considering the party to be of a lower status than the state was not a popular idea among communists, which meant that Achuthanandan was no longer the favourite in the committees, and the party's central leadership, especially, resented his recalcitrance. Once again on the defensive, a combination of opportunity and inventiveness gave him a new ally: television media.

The Televised Revolutionary

A new media ecology emerged as television spread widely by the early 2000s, and 24/7 channels like Asianet News and Indiavision turned information into soft political power, amplifying key leaders across camps. Both Achuthanandan and TV media saw an opportunity in each other; he wanted a platform to air his views and build a broader following, and the channels wanted engagement. Already, in 1996, when Achuthanandan was expected to become chief minister before his shock election loss, television channels—only Asianet and Doordarshan existed then—had begun covering Achuthanandan sympathetically. Later, Indiavision was founded by an IUML politician and saw benefits in engaging with Achuthanandan.

Achuthanandan was always a charismatic personality, the kind that Max Weber (1964, p. 390) thought could take charismatic authority in an anti-authoritarian direction, due to his subordination to electoral and democratic processes. With a penchant for mockery that he used even in his early days to ridicule jenmis (landlords), Achuthanandan

was a seasoned entertainer before he became popular outside the party. His slow, comically exaggerated style of speech, which he developed to communicate with illiterate proletarians, became a happy asset in the television era. All these helped Achuthanandan build what Ernesto Laclau (2005, p.116) calls an "affective investment" of the people in the populist leader; his strategy of setting the discourse through new media also foreshadowed the "La Tuerka hypothesis" that fuelled Podemos in Spain, which was an idea to make use of online and television programs to reach its voters, named after the talk show La Tuerka (Iglesias 2015). Achuthanandan's charismatic authority had already attracted a die-hard faction of cadres inside the party; now television spread a semi-mythical image of the leader as a wizened but upright figure, an outsider to the party elite, and an uncompromising stalwart with moral clarity. A messianic mist emerged around the televised image of Achuthanandan.

As the 2006 elections drew close, the CPI(M) announced its list of candidates, without Achuthanandan. It is unclear how the murmur of discontent turned into a protest by cadres, but the party was forced to take note of the grassroots message. Back on the election fray, Achuthanandan could barely hide his smugness as he gave the first interview after being reinstated as a candidate to *Manorama*, a channel run by a historically Congress-aligned family. Such was the love affair between Achuthanandan and TV media of all political colours that Vijayan began to speak of a conspiracy by the "media syndicate" against him and the party.

Television was not his only ally, however. Achuthanandan retained some loyalists inside the party, but also surprisingly found an intellectual alongside him — the literary critic M.N. Vijayan, importantly an intellectual from the erstwhile Kingdom of Cochin, a popular figure by his own right, especially in the party circles in Malabar due to his cult status as a professor at the Brennen College, Thalassery, where his students included Pinarayi Vijayan too. M.N. Vijayan, followed by a coterie of party-affiliated but increasingly disgruntled low-rung intellectuals, would be known as the intellectual interpreter of Achuthanandan's line, but he failed to be as inventive as Achuthanandan in his endeavour. In search of conceptual rigour, he retreated to Soviet vocabulary and could only muster up the charge of "rightist deviation" against Pinarayi Vijayan. Although the label has stuck in some corners of popular imagination, it did not especially help Achuthanandan's cause except to show that he also had some supporters willing to put themselves on the line for him. M.N. Vijayan would later be sidelined from the mainstream intellectual spaces, most of which were party-affiliated, as he distanced himself from the party.

A party intellectual is not an irony per se, but such an intellectual surely cannot survive without the party.

The pendulum swung back in the Left Democratic Front's favour in 2006, and Achuthanandan got his chief ministership at long last. He ascended the chair at the age of 82 and remains the oldest person to have occupied it. His diminished status within the party nonetheless haunted his tenure; he was denied the customary Home Minister's portfolio, which Chief Ministers usually held. Instead, it went to Kodiyeri Balakrishnan, a Vijayan ally from Malabar. The tenure saw a continued tussle between Vijayan, who was still the state secretary, and Achuthanandan. Both were removed from the Politburo as a result, and only Vijayan returned.

Achuthanandan made the best of the conditions given to him. His tenure is perhaps best remembered for his eviction drive against illegal encroachment, a combination of his environmentalist sensibilities and fight against corruption. Achuthanandan's ecological policies sometimes slipped into unscientific rusticity — he never seemed to have come to terms with the environmental costs of paddy cultivation, for instance, or with the benefits of nuclear power; but he also kept with the times in other domains and initiated a push towards IT development in the state, which paid off handsomely over the years, and also brought in the free software movement, which was less successful. But the tussle between Vijayan and Achuthanandan, between a party-supremacist and a state-supremacist, bogged down both the party and the government. Achuthanandan was even referred to as an opposition leader, both with disparaging and complimentary connotations, even when he was the sitting Chief Minister. This is a mistaken view—he was a lifelong partisan for the agitation for responsible government. His tenure as the head of the government was no exception to his struggles (Achuthanandan 2025b, pp. 39–41).

Outside of intra-party struggles, his ideals reached a deadlock during the Chengara land struggle. Achuthanandan had campaigned on the promise of redistributing surplus land illegally held by plantations to the landless; and, seeing little progress under his government, Laha Gopalan, a firebrand Dalit leader, had led a land struggle and occupied some of the plantation lands that were supposed to be redistributed. The legalist that he was, Achuthanandan disparaged the protestors as thieves, a technically correct but, by all means, insensitive categorisation, especially when plantation lands are seen, including by Achuthanandan, to be "illegal and fraudulent" (Achuthanandan's words, as quoted in Murali 2025, p. 400). In an article written as the struggle was going on, Achuthanandan attempted to justify legalist measures of land redistribution. The article

conspicuously makes no mention of Chengara (Achuthanandan 2025a, pp. 76–79). After months of negotiation and stalling, a final meeting between Gopalan and Achuthanandan took place. Faced with his own poll promise and his broader ideal of responsibility in governance, Achuthanandan announced that no land was available to distribute as it stood. Forcible expropriation was a step too far for him. Gopalan called off the protest and walked away, recognising the futility of further agitation.

The tenure underperformed in general, and despite Achuthanandan's personal popularity across the state, the alliance narrowly lost the 2011 elections. The party denied him a seat this time too and had to change its decision once more. Achuthanandan won his seat, but following the loss, Vijayan quickly took the opportunity to sideline him further, and his close aides were ousted from their positions. In 2012, two incidents practically ended all hopes for another period of Achuthanandan's dominance in the party.

In Kerala's relatively restrained context of political violence, the murder of T.P. Chandrasekharan—an Achuthanandan loyalist turned party rebel—proved nearly fatal for the CPI(M). Linked to party figures and met with a muted response from Vijayan, it revived the question of the party's extralegal authority to eliminate dissenters. Achuthanandan visited Chandrasekharan's widow, condemned the murder, and criticised the party, insisting it had no right to overstep legal limits—sparking a near split (The Economic Times 2012). Achuthanandan denied the rumour of a split: he was part of the group of leaders who walked out of the CPI to form it, and he preferred that his opponents leave it rather than him. He must have calculated that the politburo wouldn't dare to expel him either. The standoff ended in Achuthanandan facing disciplinary action once again, but the issue has haunted the party since, and Achuthanandan's empathetic gesture is fondly remembered.

The same year saw protests in Koodankulam, Tamil Nadu, against the construction of a Russian-aided nuclear power plant. Achuthanandan was enthusiastic about the movement and planned to lend support in person. The CPI(M) took the position that, while it opposed nuclear power, this particular project could not be aborted because it had already progressed too far. Achuthanandan publicly criticised the party. The central committee (CC Resolution 2012) passed a resolution clarifying its stance. Nuclear power stoked anxieties among the public, who are aware of its dangers from the Fukushima episode—the resolution made no mention of Chornobyl—but this project could be pursued subject to a security review. Achuthanandan was specifically condemned. Unable to muster up enough support, he

too eventually admitted defeat.

Even as the party and Achuthanandan stood on opposite sides of the issue, they agreed that nuclear power was bad. They disagreed on the Indian state's role. Achuthanandan once again prioritised the government's responsibility towards its people over contractual obligations and financial considerations. The party thought it had to honour the Soviet-era contract. Confusion around nuclear power, particularly the nuclear deal between India and the USA, led to the CPI(M)'s exit from its national alliance with the Congress and eventually to its collapse in the Lok Sabha elections.

By the 2016 elections, Achuthanandan, in his nineties, seemed resigned to being sidelined. Yet his exclusion from the candidate list sparked strong grassroots backlash. Despite aides urging a shift to the Aam Aadmi Party, he refused outright. The party was flawed, but it was still the best—the only—option available, as far as he was concerned. Achuthanandan led the election campaign, won big for the LDF, and quietly accepted the party's foregone decision to make Vijayan the chief minister. Perhaps fittingly, Vijayan offered Achuthanandan an honorary position as chairman of an Administrative Reforms Commission. Till the end, Achuthanandan was the one to turn to make the government run correctly.

Achuthanandan's Legacy in Indian Marxism

Politicians can live with multiple contradictions, unlike activists, who tend to be die-hard on one or two selected contradictions. A sad thing about Achuthanandan's legacy is that he attracted many more activists than politicians in his later career. Most of them were stunned by his decision not to exit the party and then to contest the 2016 election, even though Vijayan was sure to become chief minister upon victory. That Achuthanandan could handle contradictions within the party, along with those outside it, was a unique skill; his supporters would unravel even as he retired into a peaceful life. They would try to mimic him in the ways they understood him — as an idealist, environmentalist, party rebel, lone wolf — and use the television for their campaigns, just as he did. But unlike him, this would often turn into a suicidal campaign against the CPI(M) and nothing more.

The innumerable struggles of Achuthanandan — including the violent peasant uprising against monarchical reign, protesting against the use of Endosulfan, being involved in the Plachimada agitation against Coca Cola plant's depletion of water resources, and the environmentalist campaigns in Mathikettan and Koodankulam, and so on — over his eight-decade-long political life may look scattered or fragmentary. But an overarching logic propelled his life and mission:

he enlivened responsible government as a communist form suitable for socialising democracy in a socially and economically underdeveloped country. He rejected all competing paramountcies—be they capitalist ownership, royal families, Hindu deities, religious law, communist parties, or cults of personalities—in service of this singular ideal of the state as a responsible, benevolent Good Shepherd of pastoral power.

Here, Achuthanandan was repeating the original gesture of liberal thinkers, who were driven by the dual recognition that individual freedom required a state, yet that state could end up harming freedom. The 'Leviathan' had to be tamed, and liberals set forth an array of ideas, theories, and strategies that could achieve this fine balance. Twentieth-century communism overstepped by opposing liberalism in toto rather than pursuing a more rational, limited critique. This move created the conditions for its totalitarian excesses. Achuthanandan stood against this communist rejection of liberal questions without hopping over the fence to the other side, refusing to reduce the difference between democracy and communism to a tribal war of our side against theirs. Nor did he believe in the now-increasingly popular project of decolonising-by-any-means-necessary.

The battle for a decent society requires, first and foremost, suspension of the disbelief that things cannot be improved in parochial societies. This inscription has to take place in the minds of the people so that they do not resign to the cynicism of low expectations, so that they expect and demand conditions of a good life from the rulers. A decent society is made of demanding people. This dialectic drove Achuthandan's interventions between a decent society and demanding people. The consolidation of Malayali nationality and the victory of the Indian independence struggle did not, by themselves, realise this demand for responsible government; they only created the conditions for its realisation. This lack of closure turned Achuthanandan into a lifelong agitator for accountability in governance, and he was driven by the abandonment of emancipatory ideals within the Congress. He, like other communists, had already gotten a sense that this would happen, which was the reason they broke away in the first place. Franz Fanon (2015) understood this as well, but in a quite different context: the betrayal of the native bourgeoisie, and in Travancore, this Fanonian suspicion was intrinsic to communism.

Most importantly, what mattered to Achuthanandan was not the presence of a subjective opposition to structures of domination, but rather the materiality of an alternative: in this case, a responsible governmental structure that could produce a society with decency (Margalit 1998) and gradually replace the barbarism of caste society.

The subjectivity of the proletariat was important only insofar as it was capable of producing this objective reality; it did not make history as such, nor did history make it into its subject. It played an important role, alongside other subjects, in subtly shaping history. In this sense, Achuthanandan was an anti-humanist— he believed that History was indeed a process without a Subject. Responsible government, then, is an impersonal force that affirms the view of a subject-less production of history, a great transformation of this philosophical principle into an actionable political project that can be pursued in Kerala and beyond.

Notes

1. A note on sources related to Achuthanandan's life: much of the facts about the episodes in Achuthanandan's life are widely recognised and recited. For the sake of simplicity, such undisputed facts are not referenced. These are based on readings of Achuthanandan's biographies, as well as newspaper reports on him. Throughout the text, references are provided in places where there might be a chance of conflicting accounts or where the reference provides extra context and clarity. Generally, the biographies by P Jayanath (2021) and by Pirappancode Murali (2025) are taken as authoritative accounts, both writers having enjoyed closeness to Achuthanandan during his lifetime.
2. Incidentally, tailors and similar skilled labourers were more likely to produce organic intellectuals for the working class (Hall 2019).
3. Details about these lawfaring episodes are abundantly available. The presence of "pramanis" and "VIPs" as perpetrators are a constant in these cases, including prominent cases against sexual exploitation that Achuthanandan fought (see accounts of these in cases in Jayanath (2021) and Murali (2025)). These are not explored in detail in this paper for the want of space.
4. Martin Heidegger's (1977) distinction on bringing-forth and challenging-forth applies to Achuthanandan in a more direct way, as Achuthanandan's approach towards technology and nature leans close to Heidegger. He preferred a coaxing rather than imposing attitude when bringing technology in contact with nature.

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Gandhi and the Phoenix Settlement: Towards a Foothold in the Theory and Practice of Alternative Living

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ABSTRACT

Mahatma Gandhi's ashram in India was the training ground of the satyagrahis and also the laboratory where he experimented with an alternative way of living. However, the Phoenix Settlement in South Africa may be regarded as the first step towards such experiments in the public sphere. Gandhi's involvement in the anti-colonial movement of the Indian community in South Africa led him to publish Indian Opinion to uphold Indian thoughts. Later, the economic crisis of this weekly compelled Gandhi to propose a community living to reduce the operating expenses of Indian Opinion. Thus, the Phoenix Settlement was founded following Ruskin's teachings of simple living, manual labour, and self-help. In this article, we first examine the socio-political background of South Africa at the time, then focus on the ideals behind the settlement and its practices in countering the modern capitalist economy.

Key words: *Gandhi, Phoenix Settlement, Indian Opinion, Ruskin, community living*

Introduction

IT CAN BE ARGUED that the long years in South Africa provided the formative ground for Mahatma Gandhi's political and philosophical ideas and were equally seminal in shaping his unique concept of satyagraha, which made its debut through the anti-British struggle of Indians residing in South Africa. Later on, this technique was also deployed in the Indian national movement against British colonial rule. The concept of the ashram, in this context, became especially

pertinent, as it served as a nursery for satyagrahis and as a laboratory for Gandhi, where he burnt his hands in myriad experiments to embrace an alternative way of living. Interestingly, although the bank of Sabarmati stands tall in its recollection of laying the first foundation of Gandhi's ashram, the root of the concept of ashram- as a community for making self-sufficient and moral human beings- can be traced back to the Phoenix settlement of South Africa. Here, our endeavour is to focus on the Phoenix Settlement, which constituted Gandhi's earliest public experiment in alternative living, laying the conceptual groundwork for his later ashram communities in India, preceded by a brief understanding of the socio-political atmosphere of then South Africa. To explore the subject, the researcher must undertake a textual analysis of primary accounts and the limited secondary sources on the settlement's evolution.

The then South Africa

A large number of Indians lived in South Africa towards the end of the nineteenth century. They were split into different groups: the Muslim merchants, Hindu clerks and indentured and freed labourers. The last group was the largest and came to South Africa through labour agreements, as English settlers in Natal needed them in large numbers for the well-known sugarcane, tea, and coffee plantations. The English used to call these Indians 'Coolies' irrespective of their trade, class, and occupation, as Indians in South Africa mainly belonged to the labouring classes (Gandhi, 1950, pp. 19-23; Gandhi, 1956, pp. 88-91).

The condition of the Indians, and particularly of the indentured and freed labourers, there in South Africa was wretched owing to the racial outlook of the European masters. This became a serious impediment to their natural lifestyle, and their social and human rights were put into question. Gandhi also witnessed the same racial humiliations during his year-long stay at Pretoria for professional purposes. These unpleasant experiences led him to study and contemplate the socio-economic and political conditions of the Indians living there. Consequently, he became actively involved in the Indian political struggle against their European masters. Thus, he could not put down the request when some Indians there, at his farewell party before returning to India after one successful year, asked him to stay back to help and direct them in their movement against the Anti-Indian Franchise Bill. He then decided to postpone his journey by one month and to him, "Thus, God laid the foundations of my life in South Africa and sowed the seed of the fight for national self-respect" (Gandhi, 1956, p. 117).

Amid such despondency of the Indian community there, Gandhi's entry into South African politics was a true silver lining behind the grey horizon of gloom and despair. It was truly assuring for the Indian community there, who were largely uneducated, had language problems and lacked political consciousness. Gandhi finally decided to settle in Natal and laid the foundation for the Natal Indian Congress in 1894 to provide much-needed impetus for the movement. Under Gandhi's leadership, the Natal Indian Congress continued its endeavour to ameliorate the wretched conditions of Indians there. In this context, the Boer War in 1899 became significant as it provided a significant scope for the Indians to improve their lot. Although Gandhi sympathised with the Boers, he had to take the British side on moral grounds. He held that since they fought for their rights as British citizens, it was equally their duty to defend the British Empire. In that endeavour, he formed the Indian Ambulance Corps with the help of nearly eleven hundred Indians to serve the British on the front. This incident can be regarded as the birth of a new political ethics, where ethics and its logic get precedence over politics and expediency in the face of acute criticism.

In this context, the observation of the renowned social scientist Ashis Nandy becomes important. He observes that Gandhi refused to separate politics from religion or ethics because he felt that only if one accepted Machiavellism and realpolitik as the crux of politics and opted for unbridled instrumentalism, leading to an artificial distinction between ends and means, could one separate the two. And this approach of Gandhi towards politics was itself a form of criticism of modernity. Realpolitik, actually, was not born in the modern period; rather, the modern world gave it new legitimacy as part of an applied science of politics (Nandy, 1992, p. 133). Gandhi believed that, following the footsteps of Buddha, neither *artha* (politics) nor *moksha* (salvation) could be separated from *dharma* (social and personal morality). He did not merely contend that *artha* must be subordinated to dharma in the case of conflict but went further and, as in the *Dharmasutra* literature, regarded politics as a branch of ethics. Gandhi was more concerned with the dharma of the citizen than that of the ruler and therefore did not take his stand on the concept of *rajadharma* (royal duty) in ancient Indian religious literature. He shared the view of the Jain writer, Jinasena, that *rajdharma* could not provide real happiness. But unlike Jinasena, and like the Jain writer Hemchandra and Somadeva, he regarded politics as a necessary feature of daily life which must be justly conducted and properly controlled (Iyer, 2000, pp. 49-50). This moral effort of Gandhi was well received by the British and played a conducive role in elevating the system of Indians

a notch higher. Besides morality, such loyalty to the empire was also a vivid display of Gandhi's faith in British democracy. A pleasant relationship between the two communities started blooming henceforth. Taking into account the positive atmosphere, Gandhi returned to India.

However, Gandhi's stay in India did not last long as he had to rush to South Africa on the urgent call of his co-workers. The exigency concerned the expected visit of Chamberlain, the Empire's Secretary of State for the Colonies, to Natal, where resident Indians apprised Gandhi of their precarious living conditions and their ordeal, and wanted their deputation to be under his leadership. Hence, he arrived at Durban by the end of 1902 accompanied by a few others from his clan. He met Chamberlain in Durban but failed in the same pursuit in Transvaal. This helpless situation proved to be a turning point in his political career, as it made Gandhi determined to stand by his Indian brothers there and decided not to return to India. His second innings in South African politics began from there.

Indian Opinion: The Gateway to Phoenix Settlement

Gandhi indeed gave a momentous kick-start to his second innings in South African politics with the publication of a weekly journal called Indian Opinion, meant to uphold Indian thoughts, as the name suggests. This publication is of immense significance, as it is believed to have provided a gateway for the Phoenix Settlement, which was seminal and the first step towards the development of the concept of the ashram.

In Transvaal, Gandhi settled in Johannesburg and started his practice at the Transvaal Supreme Court. In his next endeavour to strengthen political support for Indians in that land, he quickly formed the Transvaal British Indian Association to prepare for the movement. At this juncture, Gandhi was approached by his old acquaintance, Madanjit Vyavaharik, a former Bombay School teacher, to start an Indian newspaper to be published in his own Press, the International Printing Press, which he set up in 1898 with Gandhi's help. Gandhi showed his readiness to support the paper with his pen, and if needed, with money. But he was not ready to take up the editorial charge as he had reservations on ethical grounds. He said that, as a practising lawyer, it would be self-advertisement if his name appeared as an editor of that paper. He approached Mansukhlal H. Nazar, a co-worker of Durban from 1897, to take up the charge as the editor. Nazar a trained journalist, accepted to serve as an unpaid editor. Later, he continued as the editor of the weekly till his sudden death in January 1906. Eventually, the first issue of the *Indian Opinion* came out on June

04, 1903, as part of the political programme to uphold the thought of the Indian community in South Africa (Pyarelal, 1986, pp. 68-69).

As a firm believer in British democratic ethics, Gandhi also tried to bridge the gap between the British imperialists and Indian subjects through the *Indian Opinion*. He believed that the root cause of the problem lay in ignorance and the primary mission of the weekly was to combat the misunderstanding by a double process of education – the education of the colonists in their duty towards their fellow British subjects of the Empire, and the Indian community in its obligation towards the Empire and their motherland as inheritors of its rich culture and glorious past(Pyarelal, 1986, pp. 77-78). Thus, from the very commencement, the paper *Indian Opinion* made its impact felt in the world of South African journalism. The officers of the Asiatic Department were diligent readers of it. The authorities took serious note of what appeared in its columns, investigated reports appearing in the journal, and gave due weight to opinions expressed in it (Gandhi, 1950, p. 145).

In running that publication, Gandhi's biggest challenge was financial distress, as it was charitable in its purpose toward community service and welfare. Every week the mandate was at least 500 copies, which had to be mailed for circulation. Adding to the woes was putting a curb on advertising in the publications to avoid unnecessary rivalries and bickering, which, in turn, withered the revenue stream as well. And he realised that it could not go on without his financial help. "So", he recalled, "I kept on pouring out my money, until ultimately, I was practically sinking all my savings in it. I remember a time when I had to remit 75 pounds each month" (Gandhi, 1956, p. 238). Gandhi had to lend this money to Madanjit to run the weekly, since the latter had originally started the publication and was the face of the business. However, in April 1904, while rendering community service to the plague-ridden in Johannesburg, Madanjit expressed his desire to sell the paper to Gandhi, as he was enormously burdened by the loan he had received from him. Both Indians and Europeans knew that, though Gandhi was not avowedly the editor of the paper, he was virtually responsible for its conduct. It would not have mattered if the journal had never been started, but to disown it helplessly after its successful launch would have been both a loss and a disgrace—financial loss to Gandhi and disgrace to the Indian community (Gandhi, 1956, p. 230). Hence, without shillyshallying about his intent, he bought it.

Phoenix Settlement: The First Footfall towards Alternative Living

Gandhi asked his friend Albert West, a friend dating back to his

vegetarian restaurant days in London, to take up the charge of the Press at Durban; West was also a partner in a small printing concern. He was offered a salary of ten pounds per month along with a share in profit, though profit was never the main motive behind this undertaking. Gandhi was shown a colourful picture of the Press to the West by Madanjit, but the first report he received from the West about it was quite alarming. On receipt of the report, Gandhi left for Durban.

Henry Polak, the sub-editor of *The Critic,* with whom Gandhi had his first acquaintance in the vegetarian restaurant along with West, came to see him off at the station and presented the book *Unto This Last,* written by John Ruskin, for his reading during his journey. This was a polemic against the then very influential science of political economy. Ruskin deplored the tendency of Ricardo, Mill and others to make money the unit of all exchange and value. A science that regarded air, light and cleanliness, or ethical values as worthless, was in conflict with the teachings of the great religions, and antithetical to the deeper interests of humanity itself. Whereas Ricardo and company rigorously separated economics from morality, Ruskin thought that affection and trust must govern relations between master and servant, capitalist and worker. A moral economics would be one 'which nourishes the greatest number of noble and happy human beings', not one which promoted the greatest monetary wealth or produced the greatest number of rich people(Guha, 2013, pp. 174-175). In Gandhi's impression, "The book was impossible to lay aside, once I had begun it. It gripped me… I could not get any sleep that night. I determined to change my life in accordance with the ideals of the book" (Gandhi, 1956, p. 249.) The teachings of the book as he understood them were:

1. The good of the individual is contained in the good of all.
2. That a lawyer's work has the same value as the barber's in as much as all have the same right of earning their livelihood from their work.
3. That a life of labour, i.e., the life of the tiller of the soil and the handicraft's man, is the life worth living(Gandhi, 1956, p. 250).

It was Ruskin's ideas on political economy, especially the functional view of property, that Gandhi assimilated into his own thinking. Tools in the hands of those who can use them, and wealth restricted within fixed limits, are principles Ruskin and Gandhi held in common. Ruskin's attack on the assumptions of political economy founded on an "ossifiant theory of progress" and on the industrial system is

systematically set forth in his *Unto This Last*.(Bhattacharyya, 1969, pp. 203-204). The inspiration for this book led Gandhi to found the Phoenix Settlement on the principles of bread labour and the responsibility of the community organisation to provide for the physical welfare of its members. Later, he translated *Unto This Last* into Gujarati, entitling *Sarvodaya* (the welfare of all).

Louis Fischer, one of the famous biographers of Mahatma Gandhi, however, had given a slightly different interpretation of Gandhi's understanding of Ruskin. According to him, the first teaching, i.e., only that economy is good which conduces to the good of all, was already known to Gandhi. The second lesson he derived from one sentence in Ruskin's book: "A labourer serves his country with his spade, just as a man in the middle rank of life serves it with the sword, the pen, or the lancet." But Ruskin did not say, as Fischer reads, that the work of all has the same value, as Gandhi did. On the contrary, Ruskin stressed the impossibility of equality between men. He merely contended that the underprivileged must find protection in the morality of the fortunate. Ruskin hoped to alleviate the hardships of inequality by an appeal to the conscience of the devout. The third lesson, though not alien to Ruskin, was scarcely to be found in the book. Ruskin merely suggested, in a footnote, that the rich would be healthier with lighter dinner and more work while the poor could do with more dinner and lighter work (Fischer, 1951, pp. 83-84).

Gandhi outlined the viability of the proposal for the *Indian Opinion* to West, Chhaganlal Gandhi (Gandhi's nephew, sharing the work with West in the Press at Durban) and the other co-workers. To improve the weekly's economic condition, he proposed shifting the Press from the city to a farm far away to reduce costs. The farm would consist of the Press workers, who would turn into manual labourers on the farm, draw the same living wage, and attend the Press in their spare time. Mr. West and Chhaganlal approved the proposal, though "this scheme was idealistic if not very practical" to West. (West, 1965) But such a utopian proposal did not appeal to most of the workers. Madanjit, already prepared to return to India, thought the plan would ruin *Indian Opinion*. Nazar, the then editor of the weekly, decided to continue his service from Durban only. However, despite their disapproval of the project plan, they agreed to go wherever the Press would shift.

Nevertheless, the proposal materialised in a hundred acres of land situated fourteen miles from Durban and two–and–a–half miles from Phoenix station. The land lay on a low hill in the valley of the Umhlanga, or Ottowa, River. The land was wild and infested with snakes. Except for a few old mango, guava, and mulberry trees and

the orange grove, the vegetation was essentially grass. The trees were mainly around a spring. The location was not far from a centre started by a Zulu leader, J. L. Dube, later a founder of the African National Congress. Gandhi bought this estate for a thousand pounds. The area was formerly a sugar farm, and had been destroyed by fire. The new farm, replanted in the ashes of the old, was renamed by Gandhi as Phoenix, the fire-born bird of Greek mythology. In reply to a suggestion that the name of the settlement be changed to mirror its Indian orientation and Gandhi's involvement in the work, he indicated his firm belief in the universality of the community experiment at Phoenix: "I wish that my name is forgotten and only my work endures. The work will endure only if the name is forgotten… The word *math* or ashram has a particularly Hindu connotation and therefore may not be used. 'Phoenix' is a very good word which has come to us without any effort on our part. Being an English word, it serves to pay homage to the land in which we live. Moreover, it is natural. Its significance, as the legend goes, is that the bird Phoenix comes back to life again and again from its own ashes, i.e., it never dies" (Gandhi, 1958-, Vol. 10, p. 69).

This is how the Phoenix Settlement emerged in the latter part of 1904, under the influence of Ruskin. However, Ruskin, as it was believed, was not the sole inspiration behind it. Gandhi's trials and tribulations, and his varied experience in South Africa, had already chiselled him into a new man by then, with a very different outlook on life and the tools to confront the world with his alternative technique. He had been discussing those ideas with his friend and colleagues, and therefore Polak gave him the book, thinking it would appeal to his friend's 'romantic ruralism.' And it did. Gandhi's reading of this book enabled him to crystallise and give expression to his own ideas. It is interesting to note here that Henry Polak and his wife Millie did not spend much time at Phoenix. They were anti-racist egalitarians without being anti-industrial polemicists. Millie, in particular, found the facilities at Phoenix primitive and the company confining. The Polaks were all city people and quite happy and proud to be so(Guha, 2013, p. 394).

Whatever the case, he no longer wanted to live a life of personal gain. He wanted to live as part of a community that strove together for a better, moral life for all, and hence he thought of setting up the Phoenix Settlement. In this context, Margaret Chatterjee's observation is valuable:

> The Phoenix Settlement was certainly more 'successful' than the Company of St George which Ruskin founded in 1871 and of which Fors

> Clavigera was the organ. Like Gandhi, Ruskin financed the project himself. Each companion was to give the Company (or guild) a tenth of his income and this was to be used to carry out his economic ideas, the project, however, scarcely got off the ground apart from the establishing of a museum of art. Phoenix, however, grew from year to year and its involvement with the satyagraha campaign, which was stepped up from 1906 onwards, was something which cannot be attributed to Polak's gift of *Unto This Last* to Gandhi in 1904" (Chatterjee, 1992, p. 76) .

Partha Chatterjee's observation, in this context, requires mention. Gandhi accepted Ruskin's criticism of that political economy founded on self-interest and which had made 'mammon service' the new religion of society. However, Ruskin was also, according to Chatterjee, a modernist insofar as the fundamental elements of his thought were concerned. For instance, he cared intensely for science and progress, political reform, the advancement of knowledge, and new movements in art and letters. His critique of political economy was meant to show the contradictions between the dictates of a supposedly rational science and those of altruistic morality, and to suggest that there was something fundamentally wrong with that so-called science. It was never meant to be a call for the abandonment of Reason. He was aware of the limits of the intellect but never supposed that conscience or faith may guide us where intellect breaks down. All these concerns of Ruskin were quite distant from Gandhi's theoretical world. Gandhi, actually, unlike the European romantics, was not torn between the conflicting demands of Reason and Morality, Progress and Happiness, Historical Necessity and Human Will. Rather, he stood firm in his moral beliefs in the face of such post-Enlightenment thought (Chatterjee, 1996, pp. 99-100).

The Phoenix settlement was essentially a community of workers of the *Indian Opinion*. Although the sense of community living found in Gandhi's ashram concept was not present in Phoenix, the trial of community living started here. In this novel project, Gandhi asked for community living to reduce the operating expenses of the *Indian Opinion*. After the Press was established, each worker received three acres of land to live on and grow their food. Moreover, each worker was entitled to a monthly allowance of three pounds, and profits were divided only at the end of the year. The workers gave their labour to the Press only in their spare time. The workers also had the option to buy their plots at cost price. They could then choose their own manner of living – either live a simple and natural life, or they could choose to reproduce the artificiality of town life. Moreover, the scheme calls for greater ties, exchanges, interactions, and learning between English and Indian workers. "The English workers could

belie the taunt that the Englishman in South Africa would not cultivate the soil and work with his own hands. The Indian worker could copy his European brother, and learn the dignity and utility of healthy recreation as distinguished from constant, slaving toil for miserable gains" (Gandhi, 1958-, Vol. 4, p. 319). But Gandhi was in doubt whether all the workers in the Press would agree to go and settle at Phoenix. He, therefore, proposed that those who could not fit in with the scheme should continue to draw their salaries and gradually try to reach the ideal of becoming members of the settlement. Eventually, the four Englishmen—West, Kitchin, Bean, and Polak—and the four Indians—Chhaganlal, Maganlal, Anandlal Gandhi, and Sam Govindaswamy — became the first settlers of Phoenix. The others were to continue to receive salaries in the usual manner. Despite Phoenix being his own brainchild, Gandhi could not stay there for long, as he had to return to Johannesburg to earn resources for the sustenance of the *Indian Opinion.*(Pyarelal, 1986, p. 440).

In this context, it is important to note that, despite the Phoenix settlement providing the first exposure to community living in the public sphere, it possibly owes its tradition to Gandhi's joint-family culture, which was common among Indians. Now, when he settled in Natal and started practice in the mid-1890s, he had already had community experience, though in a different form. He lived there with a servant, a friend as companion and help, a cook and office clerks. All were members of the same family. Everyone ate at the same table and cared for each other at times of illness. At the table were Gandhi and his cook, who were Hindus, besides a Muslim associate and his Christian clerks. He thought that, despite some bitter experiences, he had a fair amount of success in this experiment (Gandhi, 1956, p. 135). Even in his Johannesburg household, he maintained a joint family structure. A few clansmen, Mr and Mrs Polak, his family members, and a servant used to reside under the same roof. However, during these years the notion of *Brahmacharya* did not sink in, and he strongly believed in the foundation of marriage and its settling influence. He encouraged his bachelor friends to marry and to settle at Phoenix with their families. "Phoenix thus developed into a little village, half a dozen families having come and settled and begun to increase there" (Gandhi, 1956, p. 259). However, Gandhi was not devoid of the apprehension that modernisation projects could threaten the idea of community living. He found that modernity introduced new meanings of the self and new patterns of social relations which, in turn, made people depend less on their community and more on themselves to meet their necessities. As a result, a fractured and disconnected world had emerged. Individuals here

were enmeshed in a series of interlocking dependencies as consumers and producers who, as strangers, did not care much for one another. This was not the kind of interdependence that Gandhi wanted. He envisioned a society of mutuality among people who know and care about each other and who recognise the many debts they owe one another (Terchek, 2002, pp. 109-110).

During his early years in South Africa, Gandhi began to envisage the type of community best suited to the value system in which he believed. But it was an Order of Trappist monks living at Mariam Hill near Pinetown, sixteen kilometres from Durban, that provided him with a functioning example of a micro-community living on the basis of voluntary poverty, self-renunciation and constructive work. After about ten months of settling down in Durban, Gandhi made a pilgrimage to this monastery on foot. Most of the missionaries he had contact with were Protestants. But the Trappists were a Catholic order of monks. This experience proved to be a lesson in community life (Desai, 2009, pp. 246-247).

Phoenix settlement advocated Ruskin's teachings of simple living, manual labour and self-help. With the aid of a Parsi businessman, Rustamji and with the help of some Indian carpenters and masons, who had worked with him in the Boer War, the shed for the Press was erected. Although Gandhi wanted mud huts with thatched roofs or the small brick houses, as the peasants generally have, the settlers' houses were built with corrugated iron to curb expenditure. To enable the settlers to live by manual labour, each was given a three-acre plot of land for farming. Gandhi saw this idea of farming for livelihood at his cousin's place in Tongaat, South Africa. The shopkeeper maintained a fruit orchard behind his store to live with nature and cut the cost of daily expenses. Gandhi borrowed the idea for Phoenix to improve the economic condition of the Press(Pyarelal, 1986, p. 434). Gandhi's idea of living in harmony with nature resonates with broader traditions that viewed nature as sacred, including certain strands of neo-Platonic Christianity discussed by Bilgrami. He argued that the new science of early modern Europe was keen to undermine this sacred concept of nature in order to remove all obstacles in the path of commercial extraction from nature and the scientists, aligning themselves with commercial interests and with High Christianity (mainly the Protestants in England), were responsible for the success of this project. Later, scientific dissenters in late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century Europe, influenced by popular Christianity, resisted such a 'desacralization' of nature. They fought against the emerging outlook of new science that was transforming the local, egalitarian, collective agrarian life, i.e., transformation of merely living

in nature to its mastery and control for profit motive (Bilgrami, 2014, pp. 133-134).

Millie Polak, Mr Polak's wife and a resident of Phoenix, however, brought to light practical problems embedded in that ethos of ideal living. Since the settlers did not own the land plots, there was no fencing to demarcate one from the other, and these vulnerable farming grounds appeared to be a paradise of feasting for intruding pet animals from neighbouring Zulus, along with other stray animals that often frequented the area uninhibited. Settlers suffered serious losses in their livelihood, as farming was their only means of survival in that remote land. Another problem that looked all-pervasive in their secluded living was the scarcity of drinking water. Essentially, settlers had to hoard rainwater on their rooftops for drinking year-round, keeping in mind the dry season that used to last several months. Even local Zulus had a fondness for this pure water, despite their ability to drink impure water, and they often asked for it while passing by the settlers' land; more often than not, settlers had to succumb to the request, as refusal would seem inhuman. This led to the scarcity of drinking water in Phoenix. Gandhi, realising the difficulty, immediately planned to dig wells, but the effort was nipped in the bud owing to the paucity of funds (Polak, 1949, pp. 41-43).

In the Press, Gandhi also applied the technique of simple mechanisms and the discipline of self-help. The idea of a machine-driven Press did not appeal to Gandhi. He relied more on hand power, which would be more befitting for agricultural work, which was largely done by hand. But in reality, his idea did not seem feasible, and eventually an oil engine was installed. He had, however, suggested to West to have something handy to fall back upon, in case the engine would fail. As a result, a wheel was arranged which used to function by hand power. Moreover, Gandhi wanted that every member of the Phoenix should learn the type-setting function of the printing press, though the Press had paid compositors. Accordingly, all the members learnt the work of the Press. And Maganlal Gandhi became an expert compositor and quickly mastered all the other branches of press work (Gandhi, 1956, pp. 254-255). This approach of Gandhi, certainly, countered the industrial process of the modern/capitalist economy. The Press was a machine no doubt. But everything else in Phoenix was a deliberate rejection of industrialisation and indeed of professionalism. Each and every kind of work must be shared. Life must be simplified even if new complications would arise. *Hind Swaraj* was yet to be written. But much of it was surely in Gandhi's mind during those early years at Phoenix. The settlement was made into a trust in 1911, and a statement appeared in the *Indian Opinion* on

September 14, 1912, setting out the settlement's aims and objectives. The members were to earn their living through handicraft or agriculture and without the aid of machinery if possible; better relations were to be promoted between Europeans and British Indians; the ideas of Tolstoy and Ruskin should be practiced and promoted; purity of individual life must be maintained; Indian children should be educated through the vernaculars; nature cure methods should be adopted in case of illness; the ideal of service of humanity was to be borne in mind; and finally, *Indian Opinion* was to be brought out. As a critique of modern civilisation, Gandhi naturally did not pay sufficient attention to the economics of the project, as he was serious about its idealistic part. As a result, the Phoenix settlement continued to remain a drain on Gandhi's own personal resources (Chatterjee, 1992, pp. 77-78).

Ruskin's teachings, however, were not new to Gandhi. As a member of *'bania'* community he had the training in simple living. During his student life in London, he explored movements in search of alternatives to a materialist, self-centred industrial society. Consequently, he became involved in one such movement, vegetarianism. It taught him self-control through control of the palate. Moreover, readings by Thoreau, Carpenter, Tolstoy, and others drew him to the notion of simple values. He came to know that their ideas were given expression in a number of rural communities established in different parts of the world, organised around the principle of integrating intellectual work and manual toil through simple living.

Thus, Gandhi's attempt to orient his private life towards simplicity and self-sufficiency began in Durban, though such experiments in the public space only started at Phoenix. To reduce expenditure, he washed his own clothes and cut his own hair. To save fare he used to walk mile after mile. In the Johannesburg household he applied the guiding principles of Phoenix – simple living, manual labour, self-help. A hand mill was introduced to grind flour for unleavened wholemeal bread, which Gandhi thought would ensure more simplicity, health, and economy. Every morning Gandhi, the Polaks and the children joined the task of grinding the flour. The children were required to assist the employed servant with his work, and everyone attended to cleaning the bathroom to avoid any aversion to scavenger's work. The boys were also given the responsibility of nursing anyone who became ill (Gandhi, 1956, pp. 259-260).

The Hindu scripture *Bhagavad Gita* played a guiding role in shaping Gandhi's outlook on the world. Gandhi first read the *Gita* in Sir Edwin Arnold's translation in English, entitled *The Song Celestial*, while he was a student in London. But he became more acquainted with the

scripture when he joined a group of Christian and Theosophists called the Seekers' Club in 1903. They frequently read *Gita* together. However, Gandhi expressed a faith in the *Gita's* ideal of non-possession or *aparigraha* quite early in his career as a public worker. For instance, in 1901 he decided not to accept a large number of expensive gifts given to him in gratitude for service rendered to clients and the community in South Africa. Though he faced staunch opposition from Kasturba, he argued that accepting them would compromise the ideal of selfless service (Gandhi, 1956, pp. 183-185). During a period of spiritual introspection in 1903, an extensive examination of the *Gita* led him to realize that non-possession meant that those seeking salvation should become like trustees of the community. Though they may control great wealth and possessions, they must completely renounce ownership. Accordingly, he decided to cancel his insurance policy on the ground that if he were to die, God would look after his family members or they themselves would. He should not rob them of their self-reliance. Consequently, he wrote a letter to his elder brother, Lakshmidas, saying that the latter should not expect any money from him, since a part of his earnings went to his family at Rajkot. Henceforth, any savings would go to the Indian community in South Africa. Lakshmidas, in reply, accused Gandhi of neglecting his family. But Gandhi answered that he now had a new and larger family (Gandhi, 1956, pp. 221-222).

Thus, he never hesitated to give his financial support to the *Indian Opinion* whenever required. Actually, the *Indian Opinion* and the Phoenix Settlement were Gandhi's personal property, having been established entirely out of his own income. But Gandhi never treated these institutions as his property/possessions. Before he left South Africa, Gandhi formed a trust in 1911, and all the property of the Phoenix was entrusted to it. His second son, Manilal Gandhi, returned to South Africa and to Phoenix in 1915 and spent his life in the service of the community and the *Indian Opinion*. After his death in 1956, his wife, Sushilaben Gandhi, took over as the manager of the Phoenix Settlement. In 1985 the Phoenix became a victim of political rivalry between the Incatha Party and the United Democratic Front. Consequently, about eight thousand local people took control of the land belonging to the Settlement. After Nelson Mandela became the president, the situation improved considerably. Many of the settlement's old buildings have been rebuilt. The people there not only lead a community life; the trust has taken up activities like health care, public education, and small-scale industries to benefit the local people living around the settlement. The struggle for democracy and equality in South Africa owes much to the ideals of satyagraha. The

present government of South Africa is aware of this and is keen to protect Gandhi's memories. There is a renewed interest in Gandhian scholarship and in preserving his memory (Desai, 2009, p. 438).

Conclusion

Gandhi's odyssey toward the moral reconstruction of the world, as a formal movement, began at Phoenix and lingered with him like a shadow until he breathed his last. His experiments throughout this journey were never unilinear and underwent several trials and tribulations, with the ashram acting as a laboratory for such experiments. Against the egoistic individual and the primacy of technology, which turned man into a mechanical consumer of utilities, Gandhi stood for a self-sufficient, humane, moral and non-technocratic individual. The Phoenix Settlement showed the path for the creation of such a 'new' individual through shared, communitarian moral practices. Although he had already introduced a number of community-oriented practices within his family in South Africa, the Phoenix Settlement was the stepping stone towards his experiment with alternative living in the public sphere. The context that spurred Gandhi's search for an alternative way of life remains deeply relevant. For people searching for a humane world in such a milieu, the practice of alternative living remains, perhaps, the only solution, however hard that path may be.

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Successful application of Gandhi's economic and social philosophy in Indian craft organisations

Edward Millard

ABSTRACT

Gandhi advocated for India's economy to be built from the villages, using men's and women's skills crafting natural materials. He blamed machine-made goods introduced by Britain for destroying traditional livelihoods. His constructive programme aimed to demonstrate that villages could become self-reliant and that women contribute to the household economy by producing what consumers needed. India's economic policies after independence prioritised industrialisation, which did not lift the majority rural population out of poverty or improve women's economic and social situation. The paper traces the work of two organisations that started in the 1970s, revived Gandhi's commitments to rural livelihoods and women's rights, and achieved success at scale by developing organised craft production, financing, and marketing. It shows how new international movements for women's advancement and equitable trade created a supportive environment for their work and argues that their business-like approach realised Gandhi's vision more completely than his constructive programme.

Key words: *women, craftwork, swadeshi, organisation, alternative trade*

1. Introduction

Gandhi's idea to base India's economy on revitalising village production of traditional crafts was criticised on independence as utopian and contrary to India's need to modernise. Most contemporary economists and nationalists adhered to the thinking of M.G. Ranade, a founding Congress member, that India had to move away from an economy based on agriculture and crafts towards industry and trade

(Dasgupta, 1996, p.66). Nehru (1947, pp. 346-48) shared Gandhi's desire to 'relieve the poverty of the masses and produce a spirit of self-reliance among them' but believed that 'the rapid industrialisation of India is essential […] an attempt to build up a country's economy largely on the basis of cottage and small-scale industries is doomed to failure'.

Most Indians lived in villages. Gandhi believed that India could end poverty and achieve economic self-reliance (*swadeshi*) by enabling the rural areas to produce what people needed. His ashrams and constructive programme led by example, weaving *khadi* (cotton spun and woven by hand), undertaking paddy husking, flour grinding, oil pressing, bee keeping, and pottery, and making palm gur, paper, soap, paints and inks (Gandhi, 1946).

As well as providing employment to spinners and weavers, *khadi* had important symbolic value that Gandhi elevated to represent the nationalist cause. It portrayed the opposite economic model to capital-intensive, industrial colonialism, under which many villagers were pulled into low-paid work in agricultural plantations, or forced to seek casual work, as traditional cotton clothing, leather shoes and pottery homewares were confronted with competition from machine-made fabric, rubber sandals and plastic containers (Bhatt, 1989, p.57). The production of *khadi* and other crafts also formed part of Gandhi's thinking for improving the situation of women, who were worse affected than men by industrialisation. The Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) estimated (1975, p.61) that their number fell from 34 to 17 per cent of the total labour force between 1911 and 1971 and that they received lower wages than men, as the perception that they were illiterate, less mobile, and with fewer skills consigned them to more menial work. With less women formally employed, more took up low-paid informal work.

The organisations that started in Gandhi's time to campaign for women's rights % the Women's Indian Association (founded in 1917), National Council of Women (1925), and All India Women's Conference (1926) % were less concerned with women's socio-economic position than with their legal protection. As a contemporary follower of Gandhi (Menon, 1944, pp.31-32) noted:

> The large majority, which live in the villages, work in the fields and drudge in the factories, live beyond the influence of these organisations. For them the problem is not one of legal rights and civil liberties or even of political freedom, but the more insistent and inexorable one of eking out an existence.

Gandhi asserted that women's economic role should be secondary

to their primary responsibility to 'keep and manage the homes. They supplement the meagre resources of the family, but man remains the main breadwinner' (1940, cited in Joshi, 1988, p.315). As Forbes noted (1996, p.7), while mobilising large numbers of women from all classes to participate in the nationalist movement, he assured their husbands and fathers that political activism did not imply challenging women's domestic subordination.

After independence, the government created an institutional framework to develop the crafts sector. It resulted in growth of domestic and international sales, but jobs created for women were less than half the number lost to industrialisation (Jain, 1986, p.881). Internationally, though, a refocused women's movement in the 1970s, together with the call at the United Nations for a New International Economic Order, and civil society innovations in equitable trade created an enabling environment for crafts to deliver economic benefits to rural areas and agency to women. Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) and *Sarba Shanti Ayog* (SASHA) revived Gandhi's thinking on economic organisation, women's mobilisation, and traditional crafts, harnessed these new international forces, and introduced business-like practices to build crafts enterprises that are still flourishing today.

While SEWA has been extensively studied, there are few references to SASHA in academic literature. Unlike SEWA's founder, Elaben (Ela) Bhatt, who wrote extensively and spoke at numerous international events, SASHA's founder, Subhashini (Shabbi) Kohli, left no published work. SASHA's approach to crafts promotion differed to SEWA's in its export-orientation, rural focus and inclusion of male artisans as well as women, but similarly instilled a business mentality in craft groups. By considering the two organisations together, the paper positions Gandhi's constructive programme as a formative influence not just on Indian crafts but also future developments in fair trade, social enterprise and the solidarity economy.

2. Gandhi's vision and legacy

Gandhi's concept of women's role

Nineteenth century social reformers campaigned to improve women's access to education and ban practices such as *sati*, child marriage, and prohibition of widows remarrying. They did not challenge constraints imposed on women by male-dominated households and political structures (Norvell, 1997, p.21). Women's issues were not on the Indian National Congress' agenda when it was founded in 1885. Both G.K. Gokhale, a noted social reformer who led its moderate wing, and B.G. Tilak, leader of the more radical wing, shared the view prevalent

among those with a voice in Indian society that a woman devoted herself completely to the service of her husband (Kosambi, 2000, pp.435-39).

Gandhi supported women's education but shared a patriarchal perspective of their role. However, while reiterating the social reformers' campaigns against extreme abuses of women, he went much further in arguing that women had the right to determine their own path, rather than passively accepting the decisions of their husbands. He gave women active roles in his ashrams and spoke out against the custom of *purdah*. He visited villages to speak to women. He 'fascinated the masses of India and attracted them like a magnet' (Nehru, 1947, p.308). In doing so, he enabled women 'to find a new dignity in public life, a new place in the national mainstream, a new confidence, a new self-view and a consciousness that they could themselves act against oppression' (Kishwar, 1985, p.1694). Through his campaigns, women from all classes, towns and villages, married and unmarried, left their houses, expressed their views and joined a movement, actions that most of them had not undertaken before.

Village economic revival

Gandhi attributed much of India's poverty to Britain's destruction of India's handloom textile industry by importing mill-made cloth with favourable tariff arrangements. He wrote (1909, p.88) that 'It is machinery that has impoverished India [...] It is due to Manchester that Indian handicraft has all but disappeared'. By contrast, India, he argued, required a labour-intensive economy, given its large population. It needed to 'return to the primitive method of grinding and husking […] because there is no other way of giving employment to the millions of villagers'(1934, cited in Dasgupta, 1996, p.71). Enabling people to produce food and crafts without machines reinforced the campaigns by showing that India did not need Britain.

Gandhi believed that economics should incorporate moral considerations: 'I do not draw a sharp or any distinction between economics and ethics' (1921, cited in Dasgupta, 1996, p.6). He asked consumers to make the ethical choice of hand spun and handwoven cloth rather than cheaper and more diverse machine-made textiles: 'The incentive to use *khaddar* must be national for the middle-class people, and they are expected to put themselves to inconvenience in order to popularize it' (1926, cited in Thomson, 1993, p.146). Gandhi advocated working in cooperatives, in which individuals would not exploit one another. He anticipated that as village economies improved, improved sanitation, diet, healthcare and education would follow.

The constructive programme's achievements fell short of Gandhi's

ambition. Although encouraging every village to take up spinning and weaving, and leading by example in his ashrams, his challenge to consumers was not widely taken up. Congress united behind *khadi* cloth and the *charkha* (spinning wheel) as visual symbols of the independence movement, recognising that Gandhi's own adoption of *khadi* clothing had immense communications value. In 1931 he wore it in London to attend the Round Table Conference and King George and Queen Mary at Buckingham Palace. 'Nothing could match the communicative power of a photograph of Gandhi in loincloth and *chadar* sitting among the formally attired Englishmen' (Bean, 1989, pp.367-68). However, Nehru differentiated the symbol from the economic strategy. He wrote to Gandhi that 'Our *khadi* work is almost wholly divorced from politics […] industrial civilisation is bound to conquer India' (Nehru, 1928, cited in Thomson, 1993, p.151). With Congress' priority being independence, the village economics programme lacked support from the top. Gandhi himself insisted that political aims demanded an accompanying economic offering to the mass of people. On his withdrawal from Congress in 1934 to concentrate on the constructive programme, he told members that if they did not support it, 'they will soon find that I have taken with me the kernel of politics and they have kept for themselves only the outermost husk, without even the vitamins' (The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi (CWMG), 59, p.264, cited in Thomson, p.179).

Further constraints on the constructive programme's impact included the limited capacities of *swadeshi* workers who went out to the villages to facilitate its take up and the unrealistic ambition of spreading it far and wide simultaneously. Gandhi hoped that Sevagram, in Maharashtra State, where he moved in 1936, would be an example of a village overcoming poverty, disease and prejudice, but in 1939, Mahadev Desai, Gandhi's personal secretary, wrote that 'there is a hiatus between the villagers and us; there is no living link between us' (Nanda, 1986, p.A1).

Gandhi's ethical vision for economic behaviour was evident also in his trusteeship concept. He asked industrial mill owners (1909) to 'gradually contract their business. They can establish in thousands of households the ancient and sacred handlooms and they can buy out the cloth that may be thus woven'. Despite Gandhi's friendship with the pioneer business philanthropist, G.D. Birla, the concept received more serious attention only after independence when Vinoba Bhave led the *Bhoodan* and *Gramdan* movements, which attempted, with some success, to transfer land from individual landowners to village communities. A major part of Gandhi's economic legacy was not what he achieved in his time, but his inspiration of others who took up his

vision and brought new thinking about how to put it into practice.

Whilst Gandhi's economic ideas had limited impact in reducing women's dependence and lack of control over household resources and creating self-reliant villages, he was the first reformer to enable the mass of Indian women to become visible and have a voice, the first to consider the village as the foundation of economic and social regeneration and the first to promote cooperative organisation, because he believed that social and political development required an economic foundation. There was a powerful economic logic in a country with many people but little capital in his proposal for reviving village economies through craftwork. Even Nehru acknowledged as much during the last year of his life in a speech to parliament (1963, cited by Singh, C., 1978, pp. 86-87):

> I begin to think more and more of Mahatma Gandhi's approach […] however rapidly we advance in the modern age, the fact remains that a large number of our people will not be touched by it for a considerable time. Some other method has to be evolved so that they become partners in production even though the production apparatus may not be as efficient as compared to modern technique.

The craft sector represented one such opportunity.

Developing the Crafts Sector

Successive five-year national plans under Nehru's leadership made limited budgetary allocations to India's farmers or craftworkers. Moreover, the Green Revolution increased agricultural production but at the expense of small-scale farmers, who lacked irrigation systems and could not afford the fertiliser produced in large factories funded by the government. India's economy in the 1950s and 1960s resembled more the capital-intensive colonial model than Gandhi's vision of productive villages achieving self-reliance through food production and traditional craftwork.

Nevertheless, the government recognised, especially following large-scale migration after independence, that 'cottage and small-scale industries have a very important role in the national economy, offering as they do scope for individual, village or co-operative enterprise and means for the rehabilitation of displaced persons' (Government of India (GoI), 1950, cited in Datta, A, 2019, p.1944). Gandhi's All India Spinners Association, founded in 1925 to promote *khadi*, and All India Village Industries Association, established in 1934, were revived in 1953 as the All India Khadi and Village Industries Board. The government established new institutions to develop craftwork: the

All India Handicrafts Board, All India Handloom Board, and Central Cottage Industries Emporium in 1952, the Handicraft and Handloom Export Corporation in 1958, the National Institute of Design in 1961, and the Crafts Council of India in 1964. Two women led those initiatives. Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, who had been a leader in Gandhi's salt march in 1930, was committed to his idea of village cooperatives and established the Indian Cooperative Union to enable people displaced during independence to develop livelihoods. Pupul Jayakar organised craft exhibitions in the major cities. Together, they directed craftwork away from a Gandhian focus on *khadi*, the symbol of the independence struggle, and towards national identity and cultural representation of the future nation (McGowan, 2021, pp.286-87).

Craft activity increased. Between 1955 to 1985, crafts employment rose from 10 lakh to 35 lakh and exports from Rs 10 crore to Rs 1,670 crore. Crafts contributed 16 per cent of India's export revenues in 1982-83 (Jain, 1986, p.873). However, few of the revenues generated from this growth reached the craftworkers. The government acknowledged that private traders controlled 97 per cent of crafts sales and have 'not shown any concern for the workers nor any foresight and sense of responsibility for the future of the handicrafts […] pay unfair prices, make illegal deductions and delay payments' (GoI, 1955, pp.1-4). Jayakar's exhibitions did little to change craftworkers' lives, as there was no accompanying organisation of production (Srishti Institute of Art, Design and Technology, 2018, p.20). Government crafts organisations were managed by 'gazetted officers drawn from whichever ministry held the crafts portfolio' (Fisher, 1972, cited in McGowan, 2021, p. 294). They lacked the knowledge and vision for craftwork to stimulate social and economic development in the villages.

Chattopadhyay collaborated closely with Lakshmi Jain. He also espoused Gandhi's vision of village development, worked in the Indian Cooperative Union to rehabilitate displaced people, and called for programmes that provided craftworkers access to credit, storage facilities and health services (Jain, 1986, pp. 877-83). Like Chattopadhyay, he lacked governmental support to realise his ideas. SEWA identified Chattopadhyay and Jain as two key formative influences on its approach (Bali, 2025).

Feminist historians criticised the government's depiction of women producing crafts in their spare time from fulfilling domestic and family duties, thereby sustaining 'gendered notions of labour, family, service, and work' (Datta A, 2019, p.1930), whereas in fact craftswomen lived at the economic margins, without security of pensions or health

services (Wilkinson-Weber, 2004, p.294, p.301). Gandhi's experience taught him that women's advancement can only come by and through their own efforts (Norvell, 1997, p 12). It required another leader, working outside the government, to embed women's craft enterprise in a structure of cooperatives, as Gandhi had proposed, and to harness government investment in craftwork to a process of women's empowerment.

3. SEWA and Cooperative Development

A refocused women's movement

Bhatt recognised Gandhi as SEWA's guiding spirit for motivating women to fight against their exploitation and improve their livelihoods: 'Gandhiji showed the way. On the one side he said, "you fight, you struggle, you demand your rights", and on the other side that "you create, you construct"' (Skoch TV, 2012). Craftswomen were one of the main categories of informal women workers in India, which included street and market vendors, homeworkers under factory sub-contracts, and service providers, such as merchandise carters or waste sorters. Such occupations comprised 94 per cent of women's work; only six per cent of women worked in the organised sector (ICSSR, 1975, p.63). Women working informally had no access to employment benefits or to organisations to raise grievances, because according to the law, they were not employed, although they were vital participants in India's economy.

When SEWA registered in Gujarat State in 1972 under the Indian Trade Union Act to secure recognition and legal protection of informal women workers, the women's movement was undergoing change. A contemporary social activist noted that 'a mass-based and militant women's movement is developing, involving working-class and poor peasant women as well as students from middle-class and peasant families' (Omvedt, 1978, pp.373-74). The 1974 report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India, *Towards Equality,* provided a comprehensive analysis of the legal, political, economic, educational and cultural 'subjugation and dependence of women, which leads to exploitation and is a denial of social justice and human rights' (Mallik, p.522). The report's powerful evidence reinforced growing disillusionment that government policies had not alleviated women's mass poverty and belief that initiatives were needed outside of government. Chattopadhyay was a strong voice, publishing *Indian Women's Battle for Freedom* in 1982. Internationally, the women's movement was strengthening. The publication of Ester Boserup's *Woman's Role in Economic Development* in 1970 influenced the United

Nations designating 1975 as the International Year of Women and 1976- 85 as the Decade for Women, directing international development debate and aid programmes towards improving women's situation (Datta R., 2003, p.352).

New life was injected into the concepts of *satyagraha* (non-violence) and *swadeshi* in the Himalayas by Mira and Sarala Behn 'enriching and expanding the Gandhian constructive programme through their integrative thinking on community development and education, their new knowledge on sustainability, and their painstaking mentoring of social activists.' (Mallik, 2022, p.522). They mobilised women to successfully challenge the government's forest policy through the *Chipko* movement. Sarala Behn supported Bhave's *Bhoodan* movement through her Lakshmi ashram's outreach programme. Neera Desai from SNDT university founded the Research Centre for Women's Studies in 1974 and the Centre for Women's Development Studies in 1982. The Centre was a forum for action, 'not merely concerned with the study of social phenomenon, we want to change the structure, the laws, and whatever comes in the way of women's liberation' (Desai, 2005, cited in Azaad, 2021, para. 11). SEWA had a close relationship with SNDT in its early years (Bali, 2025).

SEWA turned *satyagraha* and *swadeshi* into a women's movement for social and economic advancement across towns and villages in Gujarat and later throughout India. In the 1960s, Bhatt led the women's programme of the Textile Labour Association, which Gandhi co-founded in 1920. Her experience of unionism, commitment to Gandhi's vision, and unique skills as an organiser of and spokesperson for women informal workers propelled SEWA to the forefront of the new national and international concern to improve women's economic and social situation. Her participation in a United Nations conference on women in 1975 established SEWA's standing as a spokesperson for women's economic rights (Bhatt, 2017).

SEWA's integrated approach

Bhatt observed that women producers were universally exploited. Direct exploitation came from traders paying low prices, moneylenders charging high interest, and contractors setting low piece rates. Without capital or knowledge of markets, craftswomen were at their mercy to produce and sell. Government exploitation included attitudes of officials, with police frequently harassing women vendors. Banks would not take seriously an application for a loan from an illiterate woman.

SEWA worked initially in urban areas. It challenged through the trade union all levels of exploitation by negotiating with employers,

contractors, and the police, holding rallies, calling strikes, and filing court cases. Bhatt insisted (2005, pp. 74-75) that 'fundamental to all these struggles is organising itself. All actions, whether direct, legal, or at policy level, are useful only if the women themselves stand united'. Like Gandhi, Bhatt considered it essential to build the self-confidence and skills of women to resolve problems themselves, echoing Lakshmi Menon in saying that 'self-assurance is the key to our emancipation, not any law' (Singh, G., 1998). The name she chose for her organisation changed the negative connotations of informal work % unorganised and marginal % to the positive concept of self-employed (Rose, 1992, p.45). Droughts in Gujarat in the early 1980s impacted agriculture and livestock and left families more dependent on crafts. SEWA responded by extending its work to villages (Bali, 2025).

SEWA brought women together not just to protest and negotiate but also to produce and secure improved terms in the marketplace through forming cooperatives. Like Gandhi, SEWA believed that work foments dignity and confidence to fight for other rights, as opposed to philanthropy or foreign aid, which generate dependency and self-deprecation. 'Poor women must also be equipped to shed the sense of inferiority because of gender, caste, illiteracy and poverty, by building their organised strength through self-managed, self-owned viable economic organisations' (Bhatt, 2002). An early example of SEWA's effectiveness was with women who stitched *chindi* (waste fabric scraps from textile factories) into quilt covers. When they asked for higher payment, the traders refused and stopped buying from them. SEWA helped the women rally support, demonstrate, and negotiate an increase. They then formed their own cooperative, which opened a shop to sell to consumers. One of the group members, Zaidaben, highlighted a difficulty that many women faced joining SEWA, that their husbands did not approve of them going out. 'As soon as our husbands went to work, we would lock the house and run to attend meetings' (Bhatt, 2005, p.64).

SEWA guided craftswomen to establish cooperatives making handloomed blankets, block-printed cloth, embroidery, bamboo homewares, and bedcovers. It persuaded the All-India Handicrafts Board and National Institute of Design to train women in design, quality, and production processes, enabling them to make new products and access urban markets. The *Bansari* cooperative of Cane and Bamboo Workers sold brooms and baskets to government institutions for their offices (Bhatt, 1988, pp.157-60). Cooperatives were also formed to provide cleaning, cooking and childcare services that could alleviate the double burden on women of their domestic and livelihood work

and, in common with the product cooperatives, secure better terms and conditions for the many domestic workers (Hensman, 2000, p.254).

In response to poor women's needs to finance their self-employment, SEWA formed the Mahila SEWA Cooperative Bank in 1974. Just as its women members paid a subscription to join the union, so they deposited Rs 10 to become members of the bank, which, like the other cooperatives, they owned and managed. The bank made loans with which women could repay high- interest debts to moneylenders, buy raw materials to develop their small businesses and begin to break free from the vicious circle of debt and poverty. To overcome limitations in women's literacy, the bank developed a system of symbols and colour codes. Account holders were identified with a photograph rather than signature. The Gujarati alphabet and numerals were printed in the passbook to help women read, if they wanted (Bhatt, 2005, p.103). The cooperative established a mobile bank for women who could not travel far (Rose, 1992, p.178).

As demand from women grew, SEWA expanded market opportunities. It partnered with *Dastkar,* an organisation founded by a social worker, Leila Tyabji, to bring craftspeople to towns to interact directly with urban consumers, learn about market preferences, and communicate their socio-economic situation. SEWA's support to the cooperatives was not just more complete than the constructive programme, incorporating urban women and supporting organisation, production, finance and marketing, but also more business-like. In his publication, *Harijan, Gandhi called* for people to replace industrial goods by village crafts even though 'in the initial stages, we might have to pay a little more than the ordinary price and get an inferior article in the bargain' (Gandhi, 1934, p.324). By contrast, SEWA recognised that cooperatives could sell only what consumers wanted to buy, rather than what the women traditionally made.

Bhatt was appointed in 1987 to head the National Commission on Self Employed Women and in 1989 became the first woman member of the National Planning Commission. By then, it was clear that SEWA had put the struggles of poor, working women on the national policy agenda (Rose, 1992, p.31). Internationally, Bhatt's involvement in women's issues helped secure the 1996 ILO Home Work Convention (C177), which recognised and safeguarded homeworkers' rights (Hensman, 2000, p.255).

SEWA empowered poor women, a term which one feminist historian defined as 'removing exploitation by others and overcoming the devaluation of oneself that comes from internalising oppression' (McLaren, 2019, p.14). The effectiveness of its integrated programme of union organisation, cooperative development and financial services

resulted in substantial growth. By 1995, it had 143,000 members and was expanding to other States (SEWA, 1995). Today, it has 3.7 million members in 20 States, who work in 125 different trades, and has started a pension scheme, health cooperative and insurance programme to provide women with more security at times they cannot work (SEWA, no date). Collaboration in the 1980s on national programmes, for example, 'Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas', illustrated the government's recognition of SEWA as a vehicle to reach poor women (Nanavaty, p.9).

Whereas Gandhi struggled to create the 'living link' with the villagers, SEWA won women's trust. Puriben, an embroiderer from Vauva, a drought-affected Gujarati village, explained her first meeting with SEWA (Woolston, 1998, pp.9-10):

> We thought these urban women are coming to exploit us. But we agreed to do some embroidery as a test, and they paid us well. Since then, I've never had to work the fields again. The men have returned and are beginning to respect us because we bring money into the home.

A World Bank study group 'were repeatedly impressed, and deeply moved, at hearing their women hosts speak proudly, in individual conversations and in larger group meetings, of becoming leaders in their communities, developing dignity and self-respect' (Blaxall, 2004, p.11). Women could make decisions about household expenditure. Jamuben Ahir of Dokawada Village, Patan, gave one example of how women used their earnings: 'The first thing I did was put my daughter in school. She finally graduated and married into a well-to-do family. This encouraged me to persuade about 80 other girls in my village to join school' (Skoch TV, 2012).

Like Gandhi, Bhatt questioned why 'we mindlessly imitate so-called modern systems and totally ignore the reality of Indian life' (Bhatt, 2005, p.52). She built SEWA in line with his vision and achieved a greater scale of success than the constructive programme by understanding the women's needs and the constraints they faced, building their organisations, campaigning for their recognition and rights and providing a set of business tools % finance, markets, design and quality % to develop their cooperatives.

4. SASHA and Ethical Economics

Appropriate technology and Alternative trade

An unprecedented surge of activity in the 1970s, led by the United Nations, sought to change the global paradigm of economic

development. Five UN conferences held between 1972 and 1976 on the Environment, Population, Food, Employment, and Human Settlement concluded that mass poverty and hunger resulted from inequalities among nations and peoples and that industrialisation had created a 'dual society' of rich and poor (Adamson, 1975). Decolonisation historians described how international trading arrangements tied former colonies into unfavourable agreements (Thomas and Thompson, 2014, p.159). The 1974 UN General Assembly responded, calling for a new economic order based on 'equity, sovereign equality, interdependence, common interest and cooperation among all States […] economic and social justice and peace and justice for present and future generations' (United Nations, 1974). A UN report the following year demanded 'a new development pathway, based on respect, equality and self-reliance, diversity and ecologically prudent technologies' (United Nations, 1975). Civil society organisations funded community development initiatives based on local people defining their needs and participating in projects to respond to them.

Gandhi's vision of economies managed by local people based on technologies suitable for rural areas and that respected the natural environment was moved forward by further innovators. Ernst Bader, a British industrialist, founded the Society for Training in Rural Industries and Village Enterprises to train students in establishing rural industries that would respond to local needs. Together with George Goyder, who wrote *The Responsible Company* in 1961, Bader developed the industrial common ownership movement, which argued that the workers, the consumers, and the community where the company operated should actively participate in a company's management and governance (Sasson, 2024, p.147). Fritz Schumacher founded the Intermediate Technology Development Group in England in 1966. He published the widely influential *Small is Beautiful,* proposing (1974, p.128) 'appropriate technology' that deployed 'the best of modern knowledge' and is 'gentle in its use of scarce resources, and designed to serve the human person instead of making him the servant of machines'. Amulya Reddy started Application of Science and Technology for Rural Areas (ASTRA) in the Indian Institute of Science in 1974, recognising that, as Gandhi had predicted, 'poverty was primarily due to inadequate income-generating employment in the rural countryside and that such employment would not come from capital-intensive industrialisation' (*Sreekumar* and *Sant*, 2006, p.2194). When Reddy's team developed a biogas system that brought gas lighting to villages 'we felt that we were implementing Gandhiji's vision of the role of science and technology' (Reddy, 1993). His work

on energy was acknowledged in *Our Common Future*, the 1987 report of the World Commission on Environment and Development, which was established to propose solutions to the world's critical environment and development problems. The Commission's seminal report brought the term 'sustainable development' into global usage to challenge the earlier mantra of industrial growth. It still holds considerable sway today.

In this context of making poor people and the environment central to the development debate, crafts attracted renewed interest. Their production used low technology, did not interfere with families growing food, and added value to natural materials available to craftworkers, such as cotton, wool, coconut fibre, jute, straw, bamboo and others. Several church and charitable organisations in Europe and North America saw an opportunity to achieve their mission of alleviating poverty through new programmes, which became known as 'alternative trade'. The term implied undertaking international trade to provide craftworkers with more benefits than they could obtain from conventional trade. Trade was with women's and men's groups and suited international concern for women's social and economic advancement, because there were many craftswomen.

Alternative trade organisations (ATOs) provided cash advances on orders, so that craftworkers had working capital. They shared information about market trends, quality standards, safety regulations, packaging, and other practical issues. They created new designs that used the craftworkers' skills and available materials to make products attractive to international markets. They informed their European and North American consumers about the craftworkers, their living conditions and how they used income from trade, in a pioneering example of what today is termed 'supply chain transparency' (Barratt Brown, 1993, pp.162-63). The crafts were sold through shops, church bazars, and mail order catalogues.

Alternative trade put into action Gandhi's assertion that 'the law of non-violence in the domain of economics means nothing less than introduction of moral values as a factor to be considered in regulating international commerce' (Gandhi, 1924, cited in Dasgupta, p.25). An example was Oxfam, which developed its 'Bridge' programme to symbolise 'a partnership between producers and customers: its purpose is to serve the interests of both […] "Bridge" exists as an alternative system to conventional profit-making trade' (*New Internationalist*, 1975, p.33). Oxfam's craft sales grew to £1 million by 1980 and £8 million by 1990, when it was buying from 295 producer groups, with whom it shared the profits (Black, 1992, p.169). The movement spread widely and quickly. In 1989, thirty-six organisations

in Europe and North America formed the International Federation of Alternative Trade (Oxfam, 1989). To reach crafts groups, which did not have the capacity to export their products directly, ATOs needed a new type of intermediary organisation, not one that exploited groups' weakness but that worked as a like-minded partner to strengthen them. That was the role of SASHA.

SASHA's development of crafts

Unlike SEWA, SASHA worked with women's, men's and mixed groups of craftworkers. Founded in 1978, it targeted primarily the international ATO clients. Kohli's idea for SASHA was developed through discussions with Vikasbhai Pandharipande, a Gandhian thinker who was striving to establish a self-reliant community at Sewapuri in Uttar Pradesh State. SASHA's designer, Irani Sen, described him as 'a sort of guru to us all' (Srishti Institute for Art; Design and Technology, p.37). He not only helped Kohli imagine the concept but also secured start-up funding. As the partner organisation working directly with the craftworkers, SASHA completed the alternative trade supply chain, enabling the ATOs to supply the international market. This realised Kohli's purpose in establishing SASHA in Calcutta 'not as a craft exporter for profit but as an organisation that would trade with other equitable partners with shared similar values and goals' (Srishti Institute for Art, Design and Technology, p.24). Like SEWA, SASHA also acknowledged Chattopadhyay's influence in its formation (Mehta, 2025).

Three practices differentiated SASHA from a conventional profit-seeking exporter. First, it aimed to manage the export process with business-like efficiency but also with transparency. The ATOs knew how much SASHA was paying to the producers, because it added a standard mark-up just to cover its costs (Pirie and O'Connor, 1987). SASHA undertook international shipping and payment arrangements. Most of the craft groups had not sold to an international market before and needed close support in organising their production, maintaining a consistent quality, and completing orders on time. The ATOs understood the difficulties of ordering from vulnerable craftworkers and dealing with export offices They were as tolerant as possible of shortfall in performance and supportive in their communications, which SASHA appreciated: 'Every annoyance and every bureaucratic hurdle brought home to me the urgency of the need for alternative trading' (Oxfam, 1990). Nevertheless, they also had to meet their consumers' needs. It was not a question of asking them, as Gandhi had thought possible, to accept an inferior product, or tolerate delays, but rather of guiding their exporting partners to meet the standards

of quality and timeliness that the international market required. SASHA's growth and continued existence today is testimony to the success of its response. By contrast, a conventional crafts exporter would never tell its clients how much the craftspeople earned or reveal its profit margin. Nor would it inform them about the producers, because it might find another group with which it could bargain a cheaper price, just as the traders had tried to replace SEWA's *chindi* embroiderers.

A second differentiating and defining characteristic of SASHA was its process to identify, select, and develop the craft groups from which it bought. It sought out those with most needs and travelled extensively to remote villages to make contact and identify leaders with whom it could develop a group (*Times of India*, 1991). The centre at Amar Kutir provided one such opportunity. Sushen Mukherjee, a follower of Rabindranath Tagore, who had established the Shantiniketan ashram and cultural centre nearby, made Amar Kutir a refuge for people fighting for Indian independence in the 1940s. Mukherjee met Gandhi at Shantiniketan in 1940. After independence, he transformed Amar Kutir into a cooperative committed to rejuvenating and developing rural crafts (Shantiniketan, no date).

SASHA also cooperated with development agencies that were working with craft groups in West Bengal. For example, the Canadian Mennonite Central Committee supported Self Help Handicrafts Society, a group of displaced and marginalised women from the outskirts of Calcutta, to maintain their traditional embroidery and garment-making skills while adapting their designs to modern market needs. Missionaries of Charity, founded by Mother Teresa in Calcutta in 1950, helped women refugees establish the *Panchannagram Mahila Samiti* to produce fine traditional Bengali *kantha* embroidery on hand-blocked silk. The Ramakrishna mission established a group to make crafts from natural cane. These and other groups needed markets for their production, and that was the vital role that SASHA played and the reason that the development agencies, ATOs and government bodies valued cooperating with it.

The third way in which SASHA distinguished itself from conventional exporters and aligned itself with Gandhian thinking was in building the capacities of groups to analyse and resolve their problems and work collaboratively to learn from one another. More experienced groups supported newer groups in developing their organisation and building their skills. Kohli described how, once the groups felt confident in their production processes and their relations with one another, they also began health and sanitation programmes for the community (Kohli, 1987). Craft groups shared in profits that

SASHA made, so that they could fund such initiatives. Like SEWA, education and childcare was incorporated into SASHA's work with women's groups.

While the ATOs were vital market partners, they could not buy from groups whose production was too small for or whose designs did not suit the taste of international markets. In 1981, SASHA opened a shop in Calcutta, which enabled it to work with additional craft groups, as well as place further orders on groups whose products were being exported. The initiative was led by Roopa Mehta, who in 1985 joined Kohli and Sen in the management team. Later, with the same purpose, SASHA began supplying other craft retailers in India. Today, those three sales channels enable SASHA to buy from 100 craft groups (Mehta, 2025).

Gandhi was opposed to the Hindu tradition of giving alms for the poor, writing in 1928 that 'he has no right to eat who does not bend his body and work' 1928 (cited in Dasgupta, p.36). SASHA followed this principle and, like SEWA, validated Gandhi's belief that women can take responsibility to improve their own situation if given appropriate support:

> Families begin to see their daughters, sisters, wives and mothers in a new light as their skills are recognised and valued by the outside world. Slowly but surely this shift in perception also pervades the community. But the greatest shift takes place within, as women grow in confidence, articulating their views and taking decisions for themselves, their families and the community at large (Srishti Institute for Art, Design and Technology, p.189).

5. Conclusion: Towards the Solidarity Economy

The initiatives by international institutions and civil society organisations and the growing intellectual movement in the 1970s and 1980s to stimulate social and economic development in deprived communities and less developed countries through business and trade encountered, like Gandhi in his time, strong headwinds. Globalisation and neoliberalism became dominant economic philosophies at the end of the century 'reducing every aspect of our lives to commodities and reducing our identities […] as members of communities, our role as custodians of our natural and cultural heritage' (Shiva, 2003, p.115).

Nevertheless, four countervailing trends provided further impetus for alternative policies and strategies to make economic activity better serve people and the natural environment. The first was voluntary certification, which took the concept of positive social and

environmental practices in production and trade into the mainstream marketplace. It offered companies a carrot % leadership in good corporate citizenship % and a stick % the threat that their competitors would adopt it and gain market advantage. Numerous certification systems based on standards set through participatory process grew strongly from the early 1990s. Second, civil society amplified its international voice against the negative impacts of globalisation through for a such as the World Social Forum, which started in 2001. Third, the United Nations continued advocating for the conclusions of 'Our Common Future'. In 1995, it founded the World Business Council for Sustainable Development and in 2000, it established the Global Compact, under which companies committed to adopting principles relating to human rights, labour, environment and anti-corruption. Forward-thinking companies began to take on board the risk to their businesses of not looking properly after the people and materials on which they depended to make their products. Certification and new international guidelines provided opportunities to learn and practice aligning their businesses with the concept of sustainable development. In India, corporate social responsibility became a mandatory obligation for large corporations under the 2013 Companies Act. A fourth trend was the rise of new types of social enterprise, more entrepreneurial than their civil society alternative trade predecessors, taking different forms, including cooperative and mutual enterprises, and much more diverse in types of products and services they offered (Bull and Ridley-Duff, 2013).

Such developments form part of a growing solidarity economy. The scale of its impact has been questioned, as has its legitimacy. For example, Brittan (1996, p.43) asserted that 'it is not for corporations to take on a pseudo-governmental role'. Sasson (2024, p.218) considered it 'a fiction that continues to reproduce economic disparities'. Yet, SEWA, SASHA and other followers of Gandhi showed that corporate activity can stimulate local development, reduce inequalities in deprived communities, create new opportunities for marginalised people, and mobilise consumers to make ethical choices in their purchases. For sure, the headwinds remain strong. Inequality in trading relationships, exploitation of producers and workers, and unsustainable extraction of natural resources, contributing to climate change, continue. Nevertheless, Gandhi's vision of aligning ethics and economics now has a track record of practice, an institutional foundation, and an intellectual credibility that ensures its ongoing relevance in the search for a less violent world.

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Gandhi and Transhumanism: An Ethical Interrogation

John S. Moolakkattu

ABSTRACT

Transhumanism promotes biotechnology, artificial intelligence, and human enhancement to overcome biological limitations, raising profound ethical and political questions. This paper examines transhumanism through the moral philosophies of Mahatma Gandhi and J.C. Kumarappa, offering a Gandhian alternative to techno-optimist narratives. It contrasts transhumanist aspirations for enhancement and control with Gandhian principles of ahimsa, Swaraj, swadeshi, self-restraint, and antyodaya. The analysis also revisits Gandhi's debates with Rabindranath Tagore on science and machinery and considers artificial intelligence alongside biomedical enhancement. The paper argues that Gandhi would neither reject nor embrace transhumanism outright, but would assess technologies based on their contribution to human dignity, distributive justice, ecological sustainability, and moral autonomy. It concludes by proposing a Gandhian ethical framework for governing enhancement and AI through precaution, equity, ecological responsibility, and community-centred innovation.

Key words: *Gandhi, transhumanism, bioethics, enhancement, artificial intelligence, Kumarappa, Tagore, nonviolence, ethics, policy*

1. Introduction

TRANSHUMANISM PROPOSES THAT human beings should use science and technology to overcome biological constraints such as improving cognition, eradicating disease, extending lifespan, and even achieving posthuman forms of existence (Bostrom, 2005). Rapid advances in genomics, neurotechnology, artificial intelligence, and synthetic biology increasingly make aspects of this vision practically conceivable. What was, as recently as the early 2000s, largely a

speculative philosophical movement confined to a handful of academic centres and online communities has since become a commercially funded and politically consequential field. Gene-editing tools such as CRISPR/Cas9 are now used in clinical trials; large technology companies fund longevity research explicitly aimed at radical life extension; and brain–computer interface companies have begun human trials of implantable neural devices (Gyngell et al., 2016). The promise of enhancement also raises potent moral concerns: inequality, deprivation of autonomy, the commodification of the body, ecological strain, and the redefinition of what it means to be human (Fukuyama, 2002; Sandel, 2007).

Most ethical engagement with transhumanism to date has proceeded from within Western liberal bioethics, drawing on Kantian, utilitarian, or capability-based frameworks (Buchanan, 2011; Savulescu and Persson, 2012). This is not a deficiency so much as a limitation of scope: these frameworks illuminate important dimensions of the enhancement debate such as autonomy, welfare, justice as fairness, but they do not exhaust the available moral vocabulary, and they often bracket questions of ecological limit, decentralised political economy, and the disciplinary cultivation of the self that other traditions place at the centre of ethical life. Mahatma Gandhi did not address transhumanism directly. The term itself postdates him by decades, But his philosophical corpus, defined by principles of nonviolence (ahimsa), truth (satya), self-restraint (aparigraha), swadeshi, and swaraj, offers a robust and underexplored ethical framework for interrogating the aims and outcomes of human enhancement. J.C. Kumarappa's economy of permanence similarly foregrounds ecological limits and community-based production (Kumarappa, 1945), supplying an economic complement to Gandhi's more directly moral vocabulary. Together, they offer a normative standpoint distinct from prevailing techno-optimist narratives, and one that speaks with particular force to a country such as India, where rapid technological adoption coexists with profound inequality and ecological stress.

This paper considers the following questions: how might Gandhi assess transhumanist projects, and what ethical constraints would emerge from a Gandhian perspective? In what ways does Gandhi's own historical engagement with science, machinery and modernity, most visibly in his long and respectful disagreement with Rabindranath Tagore, anticipate or complicate such an assessment? Furthermore, how might a Gandhian ethic extend beyond biomedical enhancement to address the algorithmic and artificial intelligence systems that constitute the other principal axis of contemporary transhumanist ambition? The analysis proceeds by: (1) outlining

transhumanist claims and central debates; (2) summarising Gandhi's ethical commitments and Kumarappa's economic critique, situating both within Gandhi's debate with Tagore; (3) applying these principles to core transhumanist themes, including enhancement, inequality, autonomy and control, ecological costs, algorithmic governance, and the meaning of suffering and mortality; (4) examining points of convergence as well as divergence between Gandhian and transhumanist ethics; and (5) proposing policy and normative recommendations that translate Gandhian concerns into administrative frameworks for enhancement and algorithmic technologies.

2. Transhumanism: Claims, Variants, and Debates

Transhumanism is heterogeneous. At its core is the conviction that humans can and should direct their own biological evolution through technology (Bostrom, 2005). Typical transhumanist projects include cognitive enhancement (nootropics, brain-computer interfaces), genetic editing (CRISPR/Cas systems to eliminate disease or increase traits), life-extension therapies, and integration with machines (cyborgisation). Philosophers and advocates emphasise autonomy, human flourishing, and the alleviation of suffering (Bostrom, 2005; More, 2013). A parallel and increasingly intertwined strand of the movement concerns artificial intelligence: some transhumanists regard the eventual development of superintelligent machines, and the merger of human cognition with such systems, as the most consequential of all enhancement pathways, since it promises to multiply human cognitive and creative capacity by orders of magnitude beyond what biomedical enhancement alone could achieve (Bostrom, 2014).

Critics note several risks. First, there are distributional risks. Upgrades may create an "enhanced elite," worsening social inequality (Fukuyama, 2002; Sandel, 2007). Second, there are concerns about autonomy and genuineness: enhancement may alter self-understanding and the conditions of free choice (Habermas, 2003). Third, ecological and physical costs need to be considered: sophisticated technologies require energy, minerals, and waste management, undermining sustainability (Crawford, 2021). Fourth, there is also political risk: concentration of enhancement technologies in state or corporate hands could enable coercion or surveillance (Zuboff, 2019). A fifth risk, increasingly salient since the rapid diffusion of large-scale machine learning systems, concerns the opacity and unaccountability of algorithmic decision-making itself: as automated systems are delegated growing authority over credit, employment, welfare eligibility and even criminal sentencing, the question of who controls these systems, and on what normative basis, becomes

inseparable from the older bioethical question of who controls the enhanced body (Pasquale, 2015; Beer, 2017). Critics also raise a more foundational, conceptual objection: since any agent capable of choosing to enhance itself must possess some prior, undesigned core that does the choosing, the transhumanist ideal of a wholly self-designed being is arguably incoherent (Hauskeller, 2013) Bioethical debate centres on weighing respect for innovation and individual freedom against justice, safety, and dignity (Tennison and Moreno, 2012; Nuffield Council on Bioethics, 2018).

It is worth noting that transhumanism is not monolithic in its political orientation. Acemoglu and Johnson (2023) distinguish technological trajectories that broadly share productivity gains across a population from those that concentrate gains among capital owners and a narrow technical elite, arguing that the difference is a matter of institutional choice rather than technological necessity. This distinction matters considerably for a Gandhian appraisal, since it suggests that the ethical evaluation of any given enhancement technology cannot be settled by reference to the technology alone; it depends equally on the institutional and economic arrangements within which the technology is embedded and disseminated.

3. Gandhi's Ethical Framework, Kumarappa's Economic Lens, and the Debate with Tagore

3.1 Gandhi's Key Principles

Gandhi's moral philosophy is plural and practice-oriented; important elements for our study include the following. Ahimsa (nonviolence) goes beyond physical nonviolence to include the avoidance of harm in social and economic relations (Gandhi, 1941). Technologies causing social or ecological harm would fail this test. Satya (truth) emphasises honesty and integrity in means and ends, and Gandhi's insistence that means must be consonant with ends, that a good end cannot redeem an unjust or deceptive method of pursuing it, has direct bearing on technologies whose benefits are oversold or whose risks are concealed from the publics who bear them. Aparigraha (self-restraint) finds Gandhi criticising the multiplication of wants and advocating modesty in consumption ("the earth provides enough... for every man's need, but not for every man's greed"), stressing limits to material acquisition. Swaraj and swadeshi denote decentralised self-rule and local self-reliance, which imply suspicion of centralised, monopolistic technological structures, whether biomedical or digital. Finally, antyodaya means prioritising the uplift of the poorest, the ethical merit of any policy or technology is judged by its impact on the "last

person."

Gandhi's moral methodology is pragmatic: he tests means by whether they foster moral development and social well-being. His ambivalence about machinery, "what I object to is the craze for machinery, not machinery as such" (Gandhi, 1909/2009), signals openness to appropriate technologies that correspond with moral ends. This nuance is frequently lost in popular caricatures of Gandhi as a wholesale opponent of modern technology; what he opposed was not the machine as such but the social relations of dependence, exploitation and idleness that an uncritical "craze" for machinery tended to generate.

3.2 Kumarappa: Economy of Permanence

Kumarappa extends Gandhi's ethical stance into economic critique. He distinguishes between economies that endure because they respect moral and ecological limits, and those that are transient, driven by accumulation and short-term gain (Kumarappa, 1945). He argues that technologies which displace labour in a labour-surplus society or concentrate wealth are socially destructive. His aphorism, "mass production is not the same as production by the masses", resonates with concerns about platform monopolies and the extraction of value in digital economies (Srnicek, 2017). Kumarappa's framework is particularly valuable for the present analysis because it supplies an explicitly economic register that Gandhi's own writing, oriented chiefly toward moral and political vocabulary, does not always make explicit: the question of who owns the means of enhancement, and on what terms access to them is rationed, is as much a Kumarappan as a Gandhian question.

3.3 The Gandhi–Tagore Debate: An Internal Gandhian Resource for Thinking about Technology

Gandhi's stance on technology was not formed in isolation; it was sharpened over nearly three decades of respectful disagreement with Rabindranath Tagore, conducted in essays, public lectures and private letters between 1915 and 1941 and later compiled as a single record of their exchange (Tagore and Gandhi, 1997 [1915–1941]). This debate shows Gandhi working through, in real time and against a formidable interlocutor, many of the same tensions that a transhumanist enhancement agenda raises afresh: the relationship between technology, dignity and equality; the dangers of converting a single technological practice into an unquestioned moral cult; and the difference between rejecting machinery as such and rejecting a particular social organisation of machinery.

The most extended phase of this exchange concerned the charkha (spinning wheel) and the khadi movement. Tagore, in essays such as "The Cult of the Charkha," argued that elevating a single mechanical activity to the status of a national moral symbol risked reordering the human mind into a state of conformity and that India's path forward lay through openness to science and intellectual development rather than through a narrow and uniform discipline of the body (Dutta and Robinson, 1997). Tagore did not oppose the practical use of the charkha to provide poor people with basic clothing; his objection was to its elevation into a totalising political-moral symbol, and to what he regarded as Gandhi's deeper suspicion of science as a path to national rejuvenation. Gandhi's reply, "The Poet and the Charkha," was notable for its civility even as it firmly held its ground (Bhattacharya, 1997). Gandhi clarified that he was not naïve to ask people to renounce all types of machinery (Bhattacharya, 1997), but he insisted that spinning restored dignity to labour and reduced dependence on exploitative economic structures in a way that purely intellectual or scientific advancement, however valuable in itself, could not.

What this exchange demonstrates, for present purposes, is threefold. First, Gandhi's critique of technology was never a critique of technology as such, but of technology's capacity to displace meaningful labour and concentrate dependence; the test he applied to the factory loom is structurally identical to the test a Gandhian analysis would apply to an automated decision system or a commercially gated enhancement therapy. Second, Tagore's counter-argument that an excessive nationalist or moralised attachment to a single technological practice (for Tagore, the charkha; one might say, for contemporary critics, either an uncritical technophilia or an uncritical technophobia) substitutes conformity for genuine deliberation, is itself a resource for a balanced Gandhian assessment of transhumanism, cautioning against treating either wholesale rejection or wholesale embrace of enhancement technology as self-evidently virtuous. Third, and most significantly for method, the manner of the debate, sustained, mutually respectful disagreement between two of modern India's most formidable minds, neither claiming a monopoly on truth, models the kind of participatory and deliberative engagement that this paper will later argue ought to govern decisions about enhancement and algorithmic technologies themselves (see Section 7.5).

4. Applying the Gandhian Test to Transhumanism

We apply Gandhi's criteria to six core transhumanist themes: (1)

enhancement and dignity, (2) inequality and distributive justice, (3) autonomy and control, (4) ecological and material consequences, (5) algorithmic governance and artificial intelligence, and (6) suffering, mortality, and meaning.

4.1 Enhancement and Human Dignity

Transhumanists argue that enhancing cognition, health, and longevity promotes human flourishing. Gandhi's test asks whether such enhancements foster dignity and moral capacity. If a modification increases someone's capacity to act ethically, relieve suffering, or participate fully in community life, Gandhi might view it as permissible. However, enhancements that instrumentalise persons, reducing them to efficiency or market value, would be morally problematic.

Gandhi placed dignity in the context of productive labour. Technologies that eliminate meaningful work without creating alternative forms of dignified activity would affront human dignity. Thus, cognitive enhancement that merely optimises productivity in exploitative labour markets would be suspect. Conversely, clinical treatments curing debilitating diseases clearly correspond to Gandhian compassion. The distinction Gandhi drew between spinning as dignified, self-disciplined labour and mechanised production as potentially alienating labour maps closely onto the distinction bioethicists draw between therapy, which restores a person to a baseline of functioning, and enhancement proper, which exceeds that baseline (Sharon, 2014); Gandhi's framework gives this distinction additional moral weight by tying it explicitly to the dignity of labour and self-reliant activity rather than merely to a clinical baseline. Hauskeller (2013) presses a related worry from outside the Gandhian tradition: cognitive and neurotechnological enhancements risk detaching a person's achievements and sense of self from anything authentically their own, a concern that reinforces, from a secular angle, Gandhi's insistence that dignity is bound up with self-disciplined, self-authored activity.

4.2 Inequality and the Politics of Enhancement

A fundamental Gandhian concern is justice for the weakest. Enhancements are likely to be expensive and unevenly distributed; without distributive mechanisms, they risk deepening inequality and creating a biologically stratified society (Fukuyama, 2002; Sandel, 2007). Gandhi would ask whether enhancement advances the cause of antyodaya or primarily benefits elites. Kumarappa's critique similarly supports this by highlighting how technologies producing concentrated wealth and dependence violate an economy of permanence. Piketty's

(2014) demonstration that returns to capital have, across long historical periods, tended to outpace returns to labour lends empirical weight to the Gandhian intuition that left to market forces alone, the ownership of enhancement technologies such as patents, proprietary genetic therapies, and premium neurotechnological devices, will tend to concentrate rather than disperse over time. Enhancement technologies should therefore be developed and governed with just access as a central objective, prioritising therapeutic applications that benefit the majority over elective enhancements for a privileged minority.

4.3 Autonomy, Control, and Swaraj

Transhumanism claims to expand autonomy; yet many enhancement technologies require ongoing infrastructural support, proprietary platforms, and data-intensive maintenance, which are potential vectors for centralised control (Zuboff, 2019). Gandhi's swaraj is self-rule from below; technologies that create dependence on distant corporations or states contravene swaraj.

Habermas (2003) argued that genetic interventions exert a kind of parental design that may compromise the future person's communicative freedom. Gandhi would extend such a concern into the ethical realm: any intervention that undermines an individual's moral agency or ethical self-development is problematic. The Indian experience with the Aadhaar biometric identification system offers a domestic illustration of this concern: while designed to extend welfare access, the system has also generated documented instances of exclusion, surveillance risk, and a centralisation of identity verification within infrastructure largely beyond the effective oversight of those who depend on it (Khera, 2019). A Gandhian reading would see in this episode a cautionary parallel for biomedical and neurotechnological enhancement systems, particularly those that, like Aadhaar, promise inclusion and efficiency but risk reproducing dependence on centralised, opaque, and difficult-to-contest infrastructure.

The policy implication is that governance ought to prioritise decentralised, community-controlled models such as data cooperatives and public infrastructures, protect against proprietary lock-in, and preserve individuals' capacity for moral self-determination.

4.4 Ecological and Physical Costs

Although transhumanist discourses commonly emphasise immaterial enhancement (software, cognition), the material basis of technologies is substantial—data centres, precious minerals, and biomedical

manufacturing have substantial ecological footprints (Crawford, 2021). The training of contemporary large-scale machine learning models alone has been shown to consume electricity and generate carbon emissions comparable to those of dozens of households over several years (Strubell, Ganesh and McCallum, 2019), a finding that complicates any easy assumption that cognitive or algorithmic enhancement is environmentally costless simply because it does not, like genetic therapy, require biological material inputs. Gandhi's environmental ethics, along with Kumarappa's insistence on ecological limits, suggest that a permissive attitude toward limitless enhancement is unsustainable. Some researchers in the machine learning community itself have begun to call for "Green AI," in which computational efficiency and environmental accounting are treated as first-order research priorities rather than afterthoughts (Schwartz et al., 2020), a development that, while not explicitly Gandhian in inspiration, converges with the spirit of aparigraha applied to computational rather than material consumption.

As a policy implication, strict environmental accounting should be adopted for both enhancement and algorithmic technologies, with requirements for demonstrable sustainability and comprehensive life-cycle impact assessments prior to large-scale deployment.

4.5 Algorithmic Governance and Artificial Intelligence

A Gandhian appraisal of transhumanism that confined itself to biomedical enhancement would address only half of the contemporary picture. Artificial intelligence systems such as recommendation algorithms, automated decision systems in welfare and criminal justice, and increasingly autonomous machine learning agents, constitute, on the transhumanist view itself, the other principal pathway toward the augmentation or transcendence of human cognitive limitation, whether through direct brain–machine integration or through the delegation of judgement to artificial systems that exceed unaided human cognitive capacity in narrow but consequential domains (Bostrom, 2014).

From a Gandhian standpoint, several concerns arise that mirror, and in some respects intensify, those raised by biomedical enhancement. First, the question of swaraj is especially acute in algorithmic systems, since their internal logic is frequently proprietary and inscrutable even to the regulators charged with overseeing them, a condition Pasquale (2015) terms the "black box society." A system whose reasoning cannot be inspected by those it governs is, on Gandhian grounds, difficult to reconcile with self-rule, irrespective of whether it improves aggregate efficiency. Second, the concern for

antyodaya applies with particular force to algorithmic systems used in welfare administration, credit scoring and policing, where errors and biases tend to fall disproportionately on those least able to contest them (Beer, 2017; Zuboff, 2019). Third, the concentration of advanced artificial intelligence research within a small number of well-resourced corporations and states raises, in an intensified form, the same concern about centralised control that Gandhi raised against large-scale centralised industry: a small number of actors now possess the capacity to shape the cognitive and informational environment of populations far beyond their own borders, a form of power Gandhi would likely have regarded as a particularly acute violation of decentralised self-rule.

At the same time, a wholesale Gandhian rejection of algorithmic systems would be as mistaken as a wholesale rejection of machinery; consistent with his own clarification in the debate with Tagore, the relevant question is not whether artificial intelligence exists but how it is owned, governed and deployed. Decentralised and open-source approaches to algorithmic development, participatory mechanisms for auditing automated decisions that affect vulnerable populations, and explicit ecological accounting for computational infrastructure (Section 4.4) would each represent, in Gandhian terms, an attempt to render artificial intelligence compatible with swaraj and antyodaya rather than a categorical rejection of the technology. Scholars working at the intersection of AI governance and the Global South have begun to make comparable arguments, cautioning against the uncritical transplantation of governance frameworks developed for, and largely by, wealthy economies into contexts with very different infrastructural, economic and political conditions (Arun, 2020), an argument that resonates closely with swadeshi's insistence on locally rooted rather than imported solutions.

4.6 Suffering, Mortality, and the Meaning of Life

Perhaps the deepest philosophical divergence concerns suffering and mortality. Transhumanists frequently aim to reduce suffering and extend life; Gandhi, however, recognised that suffering can be ethically transformative, central to practices like fasting and satyagraha. He did not romanticise suffering but saw it as having moral content that, when chosen, can promote self-discipline and social change.

The transhumanist quest to eliminate suffering and mortality may have unintended consequences for moral imagination and communal solidarity. Gandhi would ask whether eliminating certain forms of suffering would also remove vital ethical experiences that promote kindness and duty.

Thus, the ethical evaluation of enhancement and algorithmic technologies must include consideration of psychosocial and metaphysical consequences, in addition to physical well-being. This concern finds an unexpected ally outside Gandhian thought: Hauskeller (2013) similarly argues that eliminating ageing and mortality risks devaluing life itself and foreclosing forms of psychological maturation that only finitude makes possible, a secular echo of the Gandhian worry from a different philosophical starting point.

5. Points of Convergence and Analytical Engagement

Despite critical divergences, there are degrees of possible convergence, and it is worth dwelling on these at greater length than a purely oppositional reading of Gandhi and transhumanism would allow, since an exclusively adversarial framing risks reducing Gandhian ethics to a simple "no" where Gandhi's own practice, as the debate with Tagore illustrates, was considerably more discriminating.

Both Gandhi and many transhumanists value alleviation of severe suffering; treatments addressing disease, disability, and severe cognitive impairment can constitute genuine common ground. Both aim to improve human life; the disagreement is chiefly over means and distributive frameworks rather than over the underlying value of reducing avoidable suffering. If enhancement technologies can be designed to promote moral capacities, such as Savulescu and Persson's (2012) proposal for "moral enhancement" through neurofeedback or pharmacological intervention aimed at increasing empathy and reducing aggression is the clearest example, Gandhi might cautiously accept them, provided such interventions did not substitute for, but rather supported, the deliberate cultivation of self-discipline that he regarded as central to ethical development.

A further point of convergence, less often noted, concerns decentralisation. Certain strands within the broader transhumanist and technology ethics literature have themselves grown sceptical of concentrated technological power and have called for open, distributed and community-governed models of biotechnological and computational research (Toyama, 2015). Although such proposals are not typically framed in explicitly Gandhian terms, their underlying logic that technological benefit should not depend on submission to a small number of centralised gatekeepers is structurally continuous with swaraj and swadeshi. This suggests that the Gandhian critique of transhumanism is, at its most productive, not simply a critique of enhancement as such, but an argument for restructuring the political economy within which enhancement technologies are developed and

distributed.

However, transhumanism's technological optimism, value-neutrality about enhancement, and market-oriented diffusion stand in tension with Gandhi's moral restraint, distributive ethic, and ecological moderation. The deepest disagreement is arguably methodological rather than substantive. Where much transhumanist literature treats the desirability of a given enhancement as a question to be settled primarily by reference to individual preference and safety (More, 2013), Gandhi would insist that the prior question, whether the desire for a particular enhancement is itself worthy of cultivation, or rather a symptom of the very multiplication of wants that aparigraha counsels against, cannot be bracketed. This is not a rejection of individual choice as such, but an insistence that choice be exercised within a horizon of self-examination that contemporary liberal bioethics, with its emphasis on autonomy as non-interference, tends to treat as outside its proper remit.

6. Illustrative Case Analyses

6.1 Germline Editing (CRISPR)

Germline interventions have generational and social consequences (Gyngell et al., 2016). The 2018 case of the Chinese scientist He Jiankui, who edited the genomes of human embryos that were subsequently brought to term, drew international condemnation precisely because it proceeded without adequate deliberation, oversight, or demonstrated necessity. It targeted a trait (resistance to HIV) for which safer prophylactic alternatives already existed, raising the question of whether the intervention served therapeutic need or merely technological ambition. A Gandhian reading would treat this episode as a paradigm case of technology outrunning the deliberative and institutional capacity to govern it responsibly. Gandhian caution suggests prioritising somatic, therapeutic uses and resisting germline enhancement that redesigns human traits in ways that may entrench inequality or social preference, particularly where the underlying need could be met through less invasive and more easily reversible means.

6.2 Cognitive Enhancement and Neurotechnology

Closed-loop brain stimulation and neuroprosthetics can restore lost functions; these are ethically acceptable under Gandhi's lens when they restore dignity, for instance, in restoring motor function to a person with paralysis or restoring speech to a person who has lost it through injury or disease. Nevertheless, elective cognitive enhancement for competitive advantage, for example,

neurostimulation marketed to students or knowledge workers seeking an edge in examinations or performance reviews, would clash with Gandhi's social justice priorities, since such enhancements are likely to be available first, and perhaps only, to those who can already afford them, intensifying rather than easing competitive pressures across society as a whole.

6.3 Life-Extension Technologies

Efforts to dramatically extend lifespan raise questions about resource distribution and the meaning of a fulfilled life. Gandhi might accept a modest extension of life to address premature mortality. However, he would question indefinite life extension as hubristic and potentially unjust, particularly where a wealthy minority pursues such therapies in societies where large numbers of people still lack access to basic primary healthcare. The Gandhian question here is less about the metaphysics of mortality as such than about opportunity cost: resources, scientific talent, and regulatory attention devoted to marginal extensions of already long lives for the affluent represent resources not devoted to the antyodaya goal of securing a dignified lifespan for the world's poorest.

6.4 Algorithmic Welfare Administration

A fourth illustrative case, drawn from contemporary Indian governance, concerns the use of algorithmic and biometric systems in administering welfare entitlements. As noted above, the Aadhaar system, despite its stated aim of improving the efficiency and reach of welfare delivery, has been documented to produce exclusion errors that disproportionately affect the most vulnerable, precisely the antyodaya constituency Gandhi regarded as the ultimate measure of any policy's worth (Khera, 2019). This case demonstrates that the Gandhian test applies as readily to digital governance infrastructure as to biomedical enhancement, and that the harms in question need not involve dramatic transhumanist ambitions of transcending embodiment to nonetheless raise exactly the concerns about dignity, distributive justice, and centralised control that animate the Gandhian critique of more speculative enhancement technologies.

7. Governance, Precaution, and Policy: Translating Gandhian Ethics

Drawing on the Gandhian ethical framework, this section outlines governance principles for enhancement and algorithmic technologies.

7.1 Precaution with Moral Prominence

Adopt a precautionary governance stance that foregrounds human

dignity and justice rather than technocratic feasibility. Regulatory review boards should include ethicists, community representatives, and environmental experts, alongside the technical specialists whose expertise such boards have traditionally privileged.

7.2 Therapeutic First, Just Access

Prioritise therapeutic uses that address basic needs and public health before elective enhancements. Public financing, patent exceptions, and global health mechanisms can prevent a two-tier biology, in which the medically and computationally enhanced and the unenhanced diverge into something resembling distinct strata of humanity.

7.3 Community Ownership and Decentralisation

Encourage decentralised research infrastructures, publicly funded platforms, open-source protocols, and community biobanks, to avoid corporate monopolies. Data governance ought to follow models of data trusts or cooperatives that respect local autonomy, extending the logic of swadeshi from physical production to the ownership of biological and behavioural data.

7.4 Environmental Accountability

Require full life-cycle environmental evaluations, limits on high-resource processes, and mandated recycling and circularity obligations for biotechnological, neurotechnological and computational infrastructure alike, treating the carbon and mineral footprint of a large machine learning model with the same regulatory seriousness as the ecological footprint of a biomedical manufacturing facility.

7.5 Ethical Literacy and Participatory Deliberation

Promote ethical literacy and deliberative forums at local and national levels. Communities must have a voice in deciding which enhancements align with local values. The Gandhi–Tagore exchange discussed in Section 3.3 offers a model for the spirit in which such deliberation might proceed: sustained, civil, public disagreement between parties who respect one another's seriousness of purpose, rather than either uncritical technological boosterism or reflexive rejection.

These measures translate Gandhi's concerns for ahimsa, swadeshi, swaraj, and antyodaya into executable principles for contemporary institutional contexts.

8. Transhumanism and Peace: Ethical Possibilities and Risks

The relationship between transhumanism and peace is both complex

and underexplored. While transhumanism is typically discussed within the domains of bioethics and technology studies, its implications extend directly into peace studies, particularly questions of justice, violence, power, and human dignity. Peace, understood not simply as the absence of war but as the presence of social justice and human flourishing, provides a valuable structure for evaluating the ethical consequences of human enhancement. Johan Galtung's (1969) foundational distinction between direct violence, the visible, attributable infliction of harm, and structural violence, the avoidable impairment of fundamental human needs embedded within social, economic and political structures themselves, with no single identifiable perpetrator, is especially apt here, since many of the risks transhumanism poses are not violent in the direct sense but threaten to entrench precisely the kind of structural harm Galtung had in mind.

At its most optimistic, transhumanism offers the possibility of reducing direct and structural forms of violence. Technologies such as genetic engineering, neuro-enhancement, and AI-assisted healthcare could greatly reduce human suffering by addressing disease, disability, and psychological trauma (Bostrom, 2005; Savulescu and Persson, 2012). From this perspective, transhumanism corresponds to a key objective of peacebuilding: reducing avoidable suffering. The concept of "moral enhancement," which seeks to increase sympathy and reduce aggression through technological means, has been proposed as a route to more peaceful societies (Savulescu and Persson, 2012).

However, these possibilities entail considerable risks that may undermine peace. One of the most critical concerns is the possibility of increased inequality. Enhancement technologies are likely to be expensive and unevenly distributed, creating a divide between those who can afford enhancement and those who cannot. Those disparities may lead to new forms of structural violence, where inequality itself becomes a source of conflict (Fukuyama, 2002; Piketty, 2014). In this sense, transhumanism risks intensifying rather than easing the conditions that generate social unrest, precisely the kind of structural violence Galtung's framework identifies as a form of harm in its own right, irrespective of whether it culminates in overt conflict.

A related concern is the concentration of technological power. The development and control of enhancement and algorithmic technologies are likely to remain in the hands of powerful corporations and states. This raises the possibility of new forms of control, including surveillance, behavioural control, and biopolitical governance (Zuboff, 2019; Rose, 2007; Foucault,1978). From a peace perspective, such accumulation of power undermines autonomy and increases the likelihood of coercion, thereby contributing to structural forms of

violence.

The militarisation of enhancement and artificial intelligence technologies increases the complexity of their relationship to peace. Advances in AI and biotechnology are already being investigated for military applications, including augmented soldiers and autonomous weapons systems. These progressions not only increase the destructive capacity of warfare but also lower the threshold for conflict by reducing the human costs for those using such technologies (Crootof, 2015). In this context, transhumanism may contribute to the escalation rather than the prevention of violence; a Gandhian analysis would regard the development of autonomous lethal systems in particular as a direct contradiction of ahimsa, since it removes even the residual moral friction, the soldier's own conscience, weighed in the moment of decision, that has historically, if imperfectly, constrained the conduct of war.

8.1 Gandhian Perspective

From a Gandhian perspective, these risks are significant. Gandhi's conception of peace is based on the principles of nonviolence (ahimsa), self-rule (swaraj), and the welfare of the weakest (antyodaya). Any technological system that increases inequality, concentrates power, or undermines moral autonomy would be incompatible with these principles. Gandhi's emphasis on self-restraint also challenges the transhumanist assumption that all technological possibilities should be pursued. As he warned, the uncritical pursuit of human desires may cause social and ecological imbalance (Gandhi, 1909/2009).

Moreover, Gandhi would likely question the transhumanist reliance on technological solutions to normative problems. While moral enhancement intends to reduce aggression and increase empathy, it does so through external intervention rather than internal change. For Gandhi, peace cannot be engineered solely through technology; it requires ethical self-discipline and a devotion to truth and nonviolence. This distinction emphasises a fundamental tension between transhumanist and Gandhian approaches to peace and recalls Gandhi's broader insistence, repeatedly voiced across his disagreements with Tagore and others, that outward reform without inward transformation is unstable and ultimately self-defeating.

Environmental aspects add to the complexity of the relationship between transhumanism and peace. The advancement of advanced technologies requires substantial material resources and energy, contributing to environmental degradation (Crawford, 2021; Strubell, Ganesh and McCallum, 2019). Since ecological imbalance is progressively acknowledged as a source of conflict, particularly in

the Global South, the environmental impact of enhancement technologies must be considered in any assessment of their contribution to peace.

In countries such as India, these issues acquire additional urgency. Fast technological development coexists with deep social inequalities, eliciting concerns regarding access, regulation, and moral governance. A Gandhian framework would affirm the need to ensure that technological developments do not worsen existing disparities but instead contribute to fair and sustainable development (Khera, 2019; Arun, 2020).

To summarise, transhumanism offers both prospects and obstacles for peace. While it has the potential to reduce suffering, it also entails risks of increasing inequality, concentrating power, and undermining autonomy. A Gandhian perspective offers a valuable ethical framework for addressing these tensions, emphasising that peace requires not only technological innovation but also justice, restraint, and moral responsibility.

9. Limitations

This paper provides a normative mapping rather than empirical predictions, relying on an interpretive application of historical philosophical frameworks. While attempting to be rigorous, this approach inherently involves inferring Gandhi's likely stance on technologies he could not have foreseen, and the use of the Gandhi–Tagore correspondence as an interpretive resource is itself an extrapolation, since neither figure addressed biomedical or algorithmic enhancement directly. Additional interdisciplinary work is needed: empirical studies of public attitudes across diverse communities, techno-ethical assessments of specific enhancement pathways, and comparative policy analysis of regulatory models (e.g., European Union bioethics frameworks and World Health Organisation guidance). Future research might also fruitfully compare the Gandhian framework developed here with other non-Western ethical traditions, such as Buddhist, Confucian, and Ubuntu, which have likewise begun to be brought into conversation with transhumanist and AI ethics debates, in order to assess where a specifically Gandhian contribution is distinctive and where it converges with a broader non-Western critique of techno-liberal individualism.

10. Conclusion

Gandhi's ethical framework delivers a rigorous counterpoint to transhumanist optimism, leading to a stance that neither idealises technological progress nor disregards its power to alleviate suffering,

but rather critically evaluates it. Gandhi's moral test, grounded in ahimsa, satya, self-restraint, swadeshi, swaraj, and antyodaya, requires that enhancement and algorithmic technologies be evaluated primarily by their capacity to promote human dignity, social justice, environmental equilibrium, and moral autonomy. His long and civil disagreement with Tagore over science and machinery shows that this test was never a blanket rejection of technology, but a discriminating evaluation conducted in public, in dialogue, and without claiming final possession of the truth, a model of deliberation as relevant to today's enhancement and artificial intelligence debates as it was to the charkha debates of the 1920s.

A Gandhian perspective, therefore, advocates a careful, distributive, and community-centred approach to both enhancement and algorithmic governance. This includes prioritising therapeutic uses, preventing elite capture, embedding ecological limits, preserving the inspectability and accountability of automated systems, and ensuring that technology remains subordinate to virtuous objectives. For transhumanism to conform to Gandhian morality, its aims must shift toward collective flourishing rather than individual transcendence, a shift that would require not the abandonment of scientific ambition that Gandhi is so often, and unfairly, accused of demanding, but its reorientation toward the welfare of the last person.

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Cadets of Peace: Reimagining Gandhi's Shanti Sena for Schools, Colleges, and Teacher Education in the Twenty-First Century

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ABSTRACT

In an era marked by growing polarisation, misinformation, identity-based conflicts, ecological crises and declining trust in democratic institutions, educational systems face the challenge of preparing young people not merely for employment but also for peaceful coexistence. This paper proposes establishing Cadets of Peace as a structured, experiential framework for peace education in schools, colleges, and teacher education institutions in India. Drawing on Mahatma Gandhi's concepts of ahimsa, satyagraha, Nai Talim, the constructive programme and Shanti Sena, the paper argues that peacebuilding requires organised social practice rather than classroom instruction alone. Gandhi regarded peace not merely as the absence of violence but as a positive condition rooted in justice, cooperation, self-discipline and ethical citizenship. Situating the proposal within contemporary peace education, conflict transformation and global citizenship education frameworks, the paper develops a model that integrates ethical formation, conflict transformation skills, community engagement and democratic participation. It argues that Cadets of Peace can serve as a contemporary educational institutionalisation of Gandhi's constructive programme and Shanti Sena, enabling young people to become active agents of peace, social cohesion and democratic resilience.

Key words: *Gandhi, peace education, constructive programme, Shanti Sena, peacebuilding.*

1. Introduction

THE TWENTY-FIRST century presents a profound paradox. Advances in communication technologies, economic interdependence, and global connectivity have created unprecedented opportunities for cooperation, yet societies worldwide are increasingly confronted by polarisation, misinformation, identity-based conflicts, hate speech, ecological insecurity, and declining trust in democratic institutions (Galtung and Fischer, 2013; UNESCO, 2023). Young people encounter conflict not only in physical spaces but also through digital environments characterised by cyberbullying, online radicalisation and affective polarisation (Davies, 2019). These developments have renewed interest in education's role in fostering democratic citizenship, social cohesion, and peaceful coexistence.

The International Commission on Education for the Twenty-First Century, chaired by Jacques Delors, identified "learning to live together" as one of the four foundational pillars of education, arguing that schools must cultivate understanding, empathy, cooperation and conflict-management capacities among learners (Delors, 1996). Similarly, UNESCO's recent Recommendation on Education for Peace, Human Rights and Sustainable Development emphasises the need to equip learners with the knowledge, values, attitudes and skills necessary to become active agents of peace, justice and sustainability (UNESCO, 2023).

Although these concerns appear contemporary, they resonate strongly with Mahatma Gandhi's educational philosophy. Gandhi viewed education not merely as the transmission of knowledge but as the formation of character and the preparation of responsible citizens who can contribute to the common good (Gandhi, 1937). His concept of *Nai Talim* sought the integrated development of the head, heart and hand, combining intellectual growth with moral development and productive work. Education, in Gandhi's view, should nurture self-reliance, social responsibility and a commitment to truth and nonviolence (Kumarappa, 1951; Prasad, 1959).

For Gandhi, peace was not simply the absence of war or violence. Rather, it was a positive social condition rooted in justice, cooperation and right relationships. Writing in *Harijan*, Gandhi observed that peace is "a condition of mind brought about by a serenity of soul" and that lasting peace can emerge only among peaceful people (CWMG, Vol. 78, p. 312). This understanding anticipated later distinctions between negative peace and positive peace that became central to peace studies (Galtung, 1969). Gandhi's approach emphasised that peaceful societies could not be created through violent means because means and ends

were inseparable. As he argued in *Hind Swaraj*, the relationship between means and ends is analogous to that between a seed and a tree: the nature of the end is determined by the nature of the means employed (CWMG, Vol. 10, p. 289).

This paper asks: How can Gandhi's ideas of the constructive programme and Shanti Sena be reinterpreted as a structured peace education initiative within contemporary educational institutions? It argues that while peace education has increasingly been incorporated into policy frameworks, its implementation often remains fragmented, episodic and disconnected from sustained social practice. The paper proposes Cadets of Peace as a structured framework that combines Gandhian ethics, conflict transformation, experiential learning and community engagement to cultivate peacebuilding capacities among students and teachers.

Unlike many peace education programmes that focus primarily on awareness-raising, the proposed model seeks to institutionalise peacebuilding through organised training, service, and reflective practice. In doing so, it attempts to bridge Gandhian thought and contemporary peacebuilding scholarship while responding to emerging challenges such as polarisation, misinformation and democratic erosion.

2. Gandhi's Constructive Programme, Nai Talim and Shanti Sena

A central argument of this paper is that the proposed Cadets of Peace initiative should be understood not merely as a peace education programme but as a contemporary educational expression of Gandhi's constructive programme and *Shanti Sena*. While Gandhi's satyagraha campaigns have received considerable scholarly attention, Gandhi repeatedly insisted that constructive work formed the foundation of nonviolent social transformation (Gandhi, 1945/1957).

The constructive programme represented Gandhi's vision of social reconstruction. It included activities such as fostering communal harmony, eradicating untouchability, promoting village industries, improving sanitation, promoting women's empowerment, providing basic education, and promoting local self-governance. These activities were not peripheral to political struggle; rather, they were intended to create the social conditions necessary for a peaceful and just society (Iyer, 1973; Parel, 2006). Gandhi believed that sustainable peace required cultivating relationships, institutions, and habits that reduced social exclusion and fostered mutual responsibility. In this sense, constructive work can be understood as a form of preventive peacebuilding that addressed the underlying causes of conflict before they escalated into violence.

Recent scholarship has highlighted the relevance of Gandhi's constructive programme for contemporary peace studies. Moolakkattu (2026) argues that Gandhi's emphasis on community engagement, ethical transformation and institution-building anticipates key themes in contemporary conflict transformation theory. Rather than viewing peace as a static condition, Gandhi understood it as a continuous process of building relationships, addressing injustices and strengthening social cooperation. The constructive programme therefore functioned as a practical mechanism for creating what peace scholars would later describe as positive peace.

Gandhi's educational philosophy was closely connected to this broader vision of social transformation. *Nai Talim* sought to integrate intellectual learning with productive work, ethical reflection and community service (Gandhi, 1937). Education was expected to prepare learners not only for economic participation but also for responsible citizenship and social cooperation. By combining learning with service and reflection, *Nai Talim* anticipated many contemporary approaches to experiential and transformative education.

Gandhi's thinking on organised nonviolence culminated in his proposal for a Shanti Sena, or Peace Army, during the communal violence that accompanied the final years of British rule. Disturbed by growing Hindu-Muslim tensions, Gandhi proposed the creation of trained volunteers capable of intervening nonviolently in situations of conflict, assisting vulnerable communities and promoting reconciliation. In a letter to Sardar Patel, he described a peace brigade whose members would work among communities, prevent violence, and demonstrate, through personal example, the possibility of coexistence (CWMG, Vol. 95, p. 234).

Unlike conventional military organisations, *Shanti Sena* relied on moral authority rather than coercive power. Its members were expected to cultivate courage, discipline, self-restraint and a willingness to serve others. As Weber (1996, p. 12) observes, Gandhi envisioned *Shanti Sena* as an "ethical equivalent of military organisation without weapons." The objective was not to defeat opponents but to prevent violence and restore human relationships. Following Gandhi's death, Vinoba Bhave and Jayaprakash Narayan sought to institutionalise aspects of this vision through peace brigades engaged in mediation, relief work, reconciliation and community development (Ostergaard, 1985).

The significance of *Shanti Sena* lies not merely in its historical role but in its continuing relevance for contemporary peacebuilding. It demonstrates Gandhi's conviction that peace requires trained citizens capable of responding constructively to conflict. This insight remains

particularly relevant in educational settings, where young people increasingly confront social divisions, misinformation and identity-based tensions. Reinterpreted for contemporary institutions, *Shanti Sena* provides a conceptual foundation for developing organised peacebuilding capacities among students and teachers.

The proposed Cadets of Peace initiative extends this Gandhian vision into the educational sphere. Whereas Gandhi's *Shanti Sena* consisted primarily of adult volunteers responding to communal crises, Cadets of Peace focuses on preventive peacebuilding among students through dialogue, mediation, community engagement and civic participation. The objective is not direct intervention in violent situations but the cultivation of peace competencies that enable young people to become constructive citizens and community leaders. In this respect, Cadets of Peace represents an attempt to institutionalise the spirit of Gandhi's constructive programme and *Shanti Sena* within contemporary educational institutions.

3. Reinterpreting Shanti Sena: The Cadets of Peace Model

The proposal for Cadets of Peace seeks to reinterpret Gandhi's *Shanti Sena* within the context of contemporary educational institutions. While Gandhi developed *Shanti Sena* as a voluntary peace brigade capable of responding to communal violence and social unrest, present-day educational settings require a preventive rather than reactive approach. The objective is not to deploy students into situations of violence, but to cultivate the values, knowledge, and skills they need for constructive citizenship, democratic participation, and conflict transformation.

The Cadets of Peace model rests on three Gandhian principles. First, peace requires disciplined preparation. Gandhi consistently rejected the notion that nonviolence was passive or spontaneous. He argued that it demanded rigorous training, self-discipline and courage comparable to that required in military service (Bondurant, 1958; Weber, 1996). Second, peace must be grounded in service. The constructive programme demonstrated Gandhi's belief that social harmony emerges through practical engagement with community problems rather than abstract moral preaching (Gandhi, 1945/1957). Third, peacebuilding requires moral imagination—the capacity to see opponents not as enemies but as fellow human beings with whom relationships can be restored (Parel, 2006).

The proposed model, therefore, combines four interrelated dimensions:

1. Ethical Formation – developing values such as empathy,

nonviolence, compassion, responsibility and respect for diversity.

2. Conflict Transformation Skills – training in dialogue, mediation, negotiation, restorative practices and collaborative problem-solving.
3. Community Engagement – participation in service activities addressing local social and environmental challenges.
4. Democratic Citizenship – fostering active participation in civic life, respect for constitutional values and commitment to pluralism.

Unlike many peace education initiatives confined to classroom instruction, Cadets of Peace emphasises integrating learning and action. Students are expected not merely to learn about peace but to practice peace through community service, peer mediation, environmental stewardship, interfaith dialogue and democratic participation. This approach resonates strongly with Gandhi's conviction that education should combine reflection and action, knowledge and service, means and ends (Gandhi, 1937).

The term "Cadets of Peace" has been deliberately chosen to convey disciplined learning, public service, and organised citizenship. While the word "cadet" is often associated with military institutions, it can also signify structured preparation for public responsibility. Gandhi himself frequently employed metaphors such as "peace army" and "soldiers of peace" to describe those committed to nonviolent action (CWMG, Vol. 95, p. 234). In the present context, the term is redefined through the lens of nonviolence. Participants are not being prepared for military service or law enforcement but for constructive citizenship and peacebuilding. The emphasis is therefore on service, cooperation and democratic responsibility rather than hierarchy or coercion.

International experience demonstrates that such initiatives are both feasible and effective. UNESCO's Associated Schools Network (ASPnet) shows that educational institutions can successfully integrate peace, human rights, and global citizenship into their everyday activities (UNESCO, 2024). Similarly, UNESCO's Global Citizenship Education (GCED) framework promotes empathy, critical thinking and a sense of shared humanity (UNESCO, 2015). Programmes such as Seeds of Peace have shown that young people can develop dialogue skills, cross-cultural understanding, and leadership capacities when given structured opportunities for engagement (Wallach, 2000; Hammack, 2006).

India also has a rich tradition of youth engagement through programmes such as the National Service Scheme (NSS), the National Cadet Corps (NCC), the Student Police Cadet (SPC) initiative, and

Gandhigram's Shanti Sena. Each contributes important elements including service, leadership and civic responsibility. However, none systematically integrates Gandhian nonviolence, conflict transformation, experiential peacebuilding and teacher education into a single framework. Cadets of Peace seeks to fill this gap by bringing these diverse strands together in a coherent pedagogical model.

By embedding peacebuilding within educational institutions, the initiative seeks to transform schools and colleges into spaces where students learn not only academic subjects but also the skills and dispositions necessary for living together in diverse and democratic societies. In this respect, Cadets of Peace may be viewed as a contemporary educational expression of Gandhi's conviction that peace is not merely an ideal to be admired but a practice to be cultivated.

4. Theoretical Foundations: Gandhi, Peace Education and Conflict Transformation

The Cadets of Peace initiative draws upon four complementary intellectual traditions: Gandhian philosophy, peace education, conflict transformation and global citizenship education. Together, these traditions provide the conceptual framework for understanding peace not simply as the absence of violence but as the presence of justice, cooperation and constructive social relationships.

At the heart of the proposal lies Gandhi's conception of nonviolence as both an ethical principle and a method of social transformation. Gandhi rejected the assumption that conflict could be eliminated entirely. Instead, he argued that conflict should be approached through truth-seeking, dialogue and mutual transformation rather than coercion or domination (Bondurant, 1958). His concept of *satyagraha* involved holding firmly to one's convictions while remaining open to the truth of the other. Conflict was therefore understood not as a problem to be suppressed but as an opportunity for moral growth and social renewal.

This perspective shares significant affinities with contemporary conflict transformation theory. Lederach (2003) argues that sustainable peace requires more than resolving immediate disputes; it demands transforming the relationships, institutions, and social structures that generate conflict. Conflict transformation shifts attention from short-term settlements to long-term processes of relationship-building and social change. Like Gandhi, Lederach views conflict as a potentially constructive force capable of generating new possibilities for cooperation and justice.

The convergence between Gandhi and conflict transformation is particularly significant. Gandhi emphasised personal transformation,

ethical responsibility and constructive action, while conflict transformation highlights structural analysis, relationship-building and institutional change. Together they provide a holistic framework that addresses both individual and societal dimensions of peacebuilding (Moolakkattu, 2026).

Peace education constitutes the second pillar of the framework. Reardon (1988) argues that peace education cultivates the knowledge, values, and skills needed to prevent violence and promote social justice. Rather than treating peace as a discrete subject, peace education seeks to transform educational processes themselves by encouraging dialogue, cooperation and critical reflection. Harris and Morrison (2013) similarly emphasise that peace education should prepare learners to address interpersonal, social and structural forms of violence.

Recent developments in critical peace education have further expanded this perspective. Scholars argue that peace education must engage with inequality, discrimination, and power rather than focusing exclusively on interpersonal conflict (Bajaj, 2008; Bajaj and Hantzopoulos, 2016). From this perspective, peacebuilding involves not only fostering harmonious relationships but also addressing the structural conditions that generate exclusion and injustice. This approach resonates strongly with Gandhi's constructive programme, which sought to transform social relationships through practical efforts directed toward equality, dignity, and self-reliance.

Global citizenship education provides a third foundation. UNESCO (2015) argues that contemporary learners must be prepared to navigate an interconnected world characterised by cultural diversity, environmental challenges and global interdependence. Global citizenship education promotes empathy, critical thinking, intercultural understanding and a sense of shared responsibility. These goals complement Gandhian ideas of human unity and universal moral responsibility while providing a contemporary institutional framework for their implementation.

The Cadets of Peace initiative synthesises these traditions into a coherent educational model. From Gandhi, it draws on ethical formation and constructive action; from peace education, on participatory pedagogy and nonviolent values; from conflict transformation, on relational and structural analysis; and from global citizenship education, on intercultural understanding and democratic engagement. This synthesis enables the initiative to move beyond narrow conceptions of peace education as either moral instruction or skills training. Instead, it seeks to cultivate reflective, engaged and socially responsible citizens capable of contributing to peaceful and

democratic societies.

The theoretical contribution of the Cadets of Peace model lies precisely in this synthesis. It demonstrates that Gandhi's ideas remain relevant not merely as historical or philosophical concepts, but also as practical resources for addressing contemporary challenges of polarisation, misinformation, social fragmentation, and democratic decline. By integrating Gandhian thought with contemporary peacebuilding theory, the initiative offers a framework capable of bridging ethical formation and social transformation.

5. Implementation, Curriculum and Training Model

For the Cadets of Peace initiative to move beyond a conceptual proposal, it must be institutionalised through a structured and scalable implementation framework. The most effective model is a three-tier cascading approach consisting of teacher educators as master trainers, school and college teachers as facilitators, and students as Cadets of Peace. This approach builds upon existing educational infrastructure, reduces implementation costs and enhances sustainability (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Ramachandran, 2015).

Teacher education institutions occupy a strategic position in this model. Since teachers influence multiple generations of learners and play a critical role in shaping school culture, equipping future teachers with peacebuilding competencies can have a multiplier effect across the educational system (Page, 2008). Integrating Cadets of Peace into pre-service and in-service teacher education would therefore help institutionalise peace education rather than treating it as an optional or peripheral activity.

The curriculum should be developmental, age-appropriate and experiential. Rather than emphasising rote learning, it should cultivate peace competencies through reflection, dialogue, service and collaborative action. Ten broad thematic modules are proposed:

Module	Theme
1	Understanding Peace and Violence
2	Gandhi, Ahimsa and Satyagraha
3	Conflict Transformation and Mediation
4	Dialogue and Communication Skills
5	Digital Citizenship and Media Literacy
6	Diversity, Inclusion and Interfaith Understanding
7	Environmental Sustainability and Peace
8	Community Service and Constructive Work
9	Democratic Participation and Citizenship
10	Leadership for Peace and Social Change

The curriculum should be delivered through experiential methods,

including role-plays, simulations, reflective journals, community immersion, service-learning projects, peace circles, and participatory action research (Kolb, 1984; Freire, 1970). These approaches align with Gandhi's educational philosophy, which viewed learning as an active process rooted in experience and social engagement (Gandhi, 1937).

Assessment should move beyond conventional examinations and focus instead on reflective portfolios, community projects, peer evaluations and demonstrated competencies. Students should be evaluated not merely on what they know about peace but on their ability to apply peacebuilding skills in real-world contexts.

The Cadets of Peace programme should also function as an integrative platform rather than a stand-alone initiative. It can complement and collaborate with existing structures such as the National Service Scheme (NSS), the National Cadet Corps (NCC), the Student Police Cadet (SPC) programme, youth clubs, and community organisations. Such partnerships would allow the programme to draw on existing institutional capacities while placing stronger emphasis on conflict transformation, nonviolence, and democratic participation.

Particular attention should be given to contemporary challenges that increasingly affect young people. Activities may therefore include peer mediation, anti-bullying campaigns, digital citizenship initiatives, environmental stewardship, interfaith dialogue, awareness campaigns on misinformation, and community service projects. At the college level, students may engage in conflict mapping, election peace initiatives, restorative justice programmes and participatory research on local social issues.

A crucial aspect of implementation is organisational identity. While some form of collective identity may enhance motivation and visibility, symbols and practices must remain consistent with Gandhian principles. Optional khadi scarves, locally designed badges, and recognition for community service may be more appropriate than conventional uniforms. The emphasis should remain on service and inclusion rather than hierarchy or militaristic symbolism.

Ultimately, the success of Cadets of Peace depends on its ability to become part of the everyday culture of educational institutions. Peacebuilding should not be confined to special events or commemorative occasions; it must become a lived practice embedded in teaching, learning and community engagement.

6. Teacher Education, Community Partnerships and Policy Alignment

The long-term success of any peace education initiative depends upon the quality of teacher preparation and the strength of community

partnerships. Educational institutions alone cannot create peaceful societies. They require sustained collaboration with families, local governments, civil society organisations and community groups. Gandhi himself repeatedly emphasised that education and social transformation were inseparable processes (Gandhi, 1937; Iyer, 1973).

Teacher education institutions, therefore, occupy a pivotal position in the Cadets of Peace framework. Future teachers require competencies that extend beyond subject expertise. They must be able to facilitate dialogue, manage classroom conflicts constructively, address diversity sensitively and create inclusive learning environments. Peacebuilding should become an integral dimension of professional identity rather than an optional specialisation (Bekerman and Zembylas, 2017).

Training programmes for teacher educators and teachers should include:

Conflict-sensitive pedagogy.
Nonviolent communication.
Dialogue facilitation.
Restorative practices.
Trauma-informed teaching.
Critical media literacy.
Community engagement and participatory learning.

Such competencies are increasingly important in societies characterised by social fragmentation, misinformation and identity-based tensions.

Community partnerships are equally essential. Schools and colleges should collaborate with Gram Sabhas, local self-government institutions, youth clubs, NSS units, civil society organisations, religious communities and peace research centres. These partnerships can give students opportunities to engage in practical peacebuilding activities while addressing locally identified needs.

Examples of collaborative initiatives may include:

Election peace campaigns.
Interfaith dialogue programmes.
Environmental restoration projects.
Community mediation initiatives.
Disaster preparedness and relief activities.
Digital literacy and misinformation awareness campaigns.

Such activities reflect Gandhi's belief that peace is created through constructive action rather than passive goodwill.

The proposal also aligns closely with major educational policy frameworks in India. The National Curriculum Framework (2005) and the National Curriculum Framework for Teacher Education (2009) emphasise democratic participation, social responsibility, experiential learning and peace education. Similarly, UNESCO's Recommendation on Education for Peace, Human Rights and Sustainable Development calls for educational systems that cultivate peace, justice, sustainability and global citizenship (UNESCO, 2023).

Cadets of Peace provides a practical mechanism for operationalising these policy aspirations. While peace education frequently appears in policy documents, implementation often remains fragmented and dependent upon individual initiatives. By creating a structured framework with clear training pathways, community partnerships and institutional support, the proposed model seeks to bridge the gap between policy aspirations and educational practice.

Most importantly, the initiative recognises that peace cannot be taught solely through textbooks. It must be experienced through participation, reflection and service. In this respect, Cadets of Peace embodies Gandhi's conviction that education should prepare individuals not only for personal success but also for responsible participation in the life of their communities and the nation.

7. Safeguards, Limitations and Future Directions

While the Cadets of Peace initiative offers significant potential, several safeguards are necessary to preserve its integrity and effectiveness.

First, the programme must remain non-partisan. Educational institutions should not become arenas for political mobilisation or ideological indoctrination. The objective is to cultivate democratic citizenship and critical reflection rather than allegiance to particular political parties or movements.

Second, the programme must avoid militarisation. Although the term "cadet" is retained to convey discipline and service, the initiative should reject command-and-control structures, excessive hierarchy and militaristic symbolism. Its organisational culture must reflect cooperation, dialogue and inclusivity rather than authority and obedience.

Third, peace education should not be reduced to symbolic activities. Many educational programmes become confined to annual celebrations, competitions or awareness campaigns. The effectiveness of Cadets of Peace depends upon sustained engagement with real social challenges through practical action and reflection.

Several limitations should also be acknowledged. This paper presents a conceptual framework rather than an empirically tested

model. Pilot projects are needed to assess feasibility, effectiveness and scalability across different educational contexts. Implementation will also require substantial investment in teacher preparation, curriculum development and institutional support.

Another challenge is assessing peace competencies. While academic achievement can be measured relatively easily, evaluating outcomes such as empathy, dialogue skills, civic responsibility, and capacities for conflict transformation is more complex. Future research should therefore focus on developing robust evaluation frameworks that capture both individual and institutional outcomes.

Finally, the Cadets of Peace model should be adapted to different cultural, linguistic, and regional contexts within India. Gandhi's own approach emphasised local adaptation rather than uniformity, suggesting that flexibility should remain a guiding principle of implementation.

8. Conclusion

This paper has argued that peace education requires more than the inclusion of peace-related themes in school curricula. It requires organised social practice through which young people learn cooperation, dialogue, mediation, community engagement and democratic citizenship. While contemporary educational policy increasingly recognises the importance of peace, human rights and global citizenship, implementation often remains fragmented and disconnected from everyday institutional life.

Drawing upon Gandhi's concepts of *Nai Talim*, the constructive programme, and Shanti Sena, the paper proposes Cadets of Peace as a structured framework for embedding peacebuilding within schools, colleges, and teacher education institutions. The proposal seeks to reinterpret Gandhi's vision of organised nonviolence for contemporary educational settings. Whereas Gandhi's *Shanti Sena* mobilised volunteers to prevent communal violence and promote reconciliation, Cadets of Peace emphasises preventive peacebuilding through dialogue, mediation, community service and civic participation.

The paper has also demonstrated that Gandhi's constructive programme offers valuable insights for contemporary peace studies. Programmes promoting communal harmony, education, gender justice, environmental stewardship, social inclusion and local self-governance can be understood as forms of preventive peacebuilding aimed at addressing the structural roots of conflict. In this respect, Cadets of Peace represents not merely a peace education initiative but an attempt to institutionalise Gandhi's constructive programme within educational

institutions.

The proposal's theoretical significance lies in its integration of Gandhian philosophy, peace education, conflict transformation, and global citizenship education. By combining ethical formation with practical action, the model seeks to bridge the gap between values and practice, between reflection and engagement, and between means and ends. This synthesis is particularly relevant in a world increasingly characterised by polarisation, misinformation, ecological insecurity, and democratic fragility.

The proposal also addresses an important gap in Indian education. While peace education is widely endorsed in policy documents, scalable institutional mechanisms are still needed to translate policy aspirations into sustained practice. Through its emphasis on teacher education, experiential learning, community partnerships and democratic participation, Cadets of Peace offers one possible pathway toward such institutionalisation.

At a deeper level, the initiative reaffirms Gandhi's conviction that peace cannot be achieved through passive idealism. It requires disciplined preparation, constructive action and moral imagination. As Gandhi repeatedly argued, peace is not merely the absence of conflict but a way of living grounded in truth, justice and mutual respect. Educational institutions, therefore, have a responsibility not only to transmit knowledge but also to cultivate citizens capable of living together in diverse and democratic societies.

Future research should move beyond conceptual development to pilot implementation, impact assessment and comparative analysis across educational contexts. Such studies can help refine the model and evaluate its contribution to school culture, civic engagement, conflict transformation and democratic resilience. Nevertheless, the central argument remains clear: if peace is to become a lived social reality rather than an abstract aspiration, educational institutions must create structured opportunities for young people to learn and practice peace. Cadets of Peace represents one attempt to translate Gandhi's enduring vision of constructive nonviolence into the educational challenges of the twenty-first century.

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Book Reviews

Mehdi, Syed Sikander & Matt Meyer eds. (2026): *Building Peace: Reflections of Eminent Educators, From Personal to Political*. Gewerbestrasse, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. 441 pp. ISBN: 9783032111036, 303211103X Price: INR15230.

THE VOLUME – a collection of 20 essays besides the jointly written Introduction by the editors and the Foreword by Francisco Rojas Aravena – is written by a diverse group of people representing socially minded scholars, doctoral students, 'academic practitioners of peace and conflict transformation', social workers and activists, educational administrators, curators of museums, mediators, peace negotiators and a few others. The editors of the book present it against the background of contemporary crises: the Russia–Ukraine war, the genocide in Gaza, the Iran war, the threat of nuclear warfare in the Indian subcontinent, climate catastrophe, the near-collapse of the UN system and steady erosion of global multilateral institutions, the rise of authoritarian regimes, gender injustice, and economic exploitation and so forth. This contextualisation is timely, but the book does not always explain how the micro agenda of peace education detailed in the articles becomes relevant to the context and could address the larger issues of injustice endemic in our social life.

Peace in the discipline of International Relations is defined predominantly – though not exclusively – as some form of a balance of power that may obtain amongst the conflicting parties – individuals, groups, nations or any of their alliances. It is the balance that holds them from initiating the first strike with the fear that any first strike is bound to elicit massive retaliation from the adversary that would be unacceptable to the initiating party. All the contributors to this volume agree that peace defined in such a manner is perpetually fragile for it is constantly threatened by the spectre of conflict/war. By the turn of the century, a paradigm shift had occurred, particularly in South Asian academia, with the effect that peace is defined today in

terms of the triadic principles of rights, justice and democracy. One has to remember that this definition has not, however, made the old, security-centred definition redundant, insofar as most universities in India, in particular, and in South Asia in general, continue to adhere to this definition in their curricula on International Relations.

The book foregrounds the role of peace educators in building a global society. Peace figures in the book more as a personal commitment than as an organised collective endeavour. While peace is integral to community building and therefore necessarily puts one into relationship with others, it is always within the individual self that the initial stirrings for peace are first felt. This in no way should prompt us to conclude that collective endeavours do not play any role whatsoever in the making of peace. The essays included in the volume are written largely in an anecdotal style. Rich tributes are paid to the visionary leadership of Betty Reardon, regarded as a pioneer in feminist peace education, and Kazuyo Yamane, known for her efforts to help institutionalise museums globally as spaces of dialogue and reconciliation in sustaining peace movements. The essays offer a key to understanding why and how what takes off as a stirring for peace within an individual's mind gradually engulfs the masses and becomes a collective endeavour. An inquisitive researcher will find plenty of resources to theorise the complicated connection between an individual peace agent and these collective endeavours across the world. Not all individual efforts, however, culminate in organised peace interventions. John Moolakkattu seems to echo the same point when he argues that the development of Peace Studies in India, for instance, speaks of the same dilemma: 'Peace Studies has become an individual-centred enterprise rather than one that brings together some like-minded scholars from different disciplines, as seen in the West'.

It is at those critical junctures that the solitary journey of an individual peace agent is likely to be fraught with dangers. Foucault calls this 'fearless speech' (*parrhesia*), that is to say, a speech that is mouthed by oneself with the full knowledge of the dangers involved in the act. Betty Jenkins's story depicting the unarmed resistance in front of a row of tanks in Tiananmen Square in 1989 is a case in point. Such examples of individuals knowingly embracing death for speaking what they perceive as truth are certainly not rare even in recent history. It is at these junctures that peace undergoes a radical transformation from 'peace as power' to 'power of peace'. The book tells us stories of how peace education serves as a transformative pedagogy nurturing empathy, critical thinking, and intercultural dialogue. Rabindranath Tagore would have viewed education – not as a means of acquisition

of anything like property, power or prestige, but as an end in itself that induces one to become perpetually larger than what one already is, at any given point of time.

Kazuyo Yamane's work on peace museums illustrates how collective memory can be mobilised to resist violence and militarism mainly through visual media. The essay in that sense proves to be a valuable contribution, for it takes peace out of the virtually worn-out corpus of words and sounds. Visuality adds an entirely new dimension to our knowledge of peace.

Peace ideas are drawn from different regions, cultures and histories. The book includes essays that emphasise the importance of the knowledge, rituals, and community practices of the indigenous peoples of Australia and New Zealand and of African women's voices in challenging both colonial legacies and continuing violence unleashed on them, among others. Wolfgang Dietrich's article on 'One Too Many Peaces' gestures towards the variety of peace traditions. The book would have gained much had it pushed the point a step further by probing deep into the bearings of these traditions on an otherwise universalist understanding of peace that flattens out cultural differences and ignores the contested nature of peace itself. It would have been interesting to observe how such universalist understanding is sought to be read and translated in local and regional contexts and vice versa. This universalist understanding – sponsored and promoted as they are by the great Powers and global multilateral agencies – turns peace into what I have called an 'industry' that benefits them by allowing to intervene in the name of responsibility to protect (R2P) the civilians of the conflict-affected countries as well as the affected countries themselves that see in these interventions the prospects of getting funded in hard currencies at the time of lurking financial crisis. Peace too weaves its power net across countries and continents by imposing this understanding from above and threatens to colonise the world with a repertoire of rewards and punishments. One may read this argument together with John Moolakkattu's comment: 'One serious lacuna with Peace Studies and peace education programmes in India is the absence of a critical perspective. What constitutes peace is often what serves the establishment. This tends to develop a conformist attitude among the recipients, which is antithetical to the concerns of Peace Studies.' I am sure the book will be widely read by those for whom it is meant – the young researchers, scholars, peace advocates and activists.

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P.K.Kariyan with Fazeela Mehar, *Life of a Raavulan* (translated by V.Prathiba), Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2026), pp. xx+128. Price 500.00 only. Paperback. ISBN: 9789369732876.

THIS SMALL BOOK is an autobiographical account of an Adivasi who lived in Wynaad (Keralam). The author Kariyan Mooppan (1951-2020) belonged to the Raavulan community, which was matriarchal and ranked low on the social ladder. H was a renowned exponent of the tribal art form Gaddika and played a crucial role in bringing this Adivasi ritual performance into Kerala's public cultural sphere. His mother's brother naturally influenced the author's life and work. The latter was instrumental for sending him to the school and his subsequent career. The community was socially and economically backward, and exploited by the upper castes.

The book discusses the origin of the community. As per tradition, the termite king was instrumental in its beginning. The rituals for childbirth, marriage, funerals, etc., are covered. Caste discrimination was rampant not within the school but outside. He recollects, "The children of the landlords used to talk to us and play with us in school. Once they reached their homes, they acted differently. Once out of the school compound, we could not step into their houses or approach them. We were not allowed to even touch them" (p. 21).

It was a caste-ridden society dominated by the higher castes, such as the landlords, who held complete sway over the others. He adds that even if the community members built a house for themselves, its ultimate owner was the landlord. Each time a family moved, it had to build a new house for itself, while the lord could hand over the house left behind to another family. Likewise, whatever it planted on the land surrounding the house belonged to the landlord. He adds, "We could not even touch the produce – even if it was just a chilli plant. We needed the landlord's permission to pluck even one chilli. We had to often steal our own harvest to survive" (p. 26). The author cites many examples of how the low caste communities suffered at the hands of the high caste communities. One example is particularly atrocious. He was having tea sitting on a bench in a tea stall. A warrior came and asked him to get up, as he could not see a tribal sitting on a bench. But the shop owner intervened at which the caste conscious man left. Interestingly enough, in those days some people served tea to tribals in coconut shells.

But the conditions began to change. Once a Warrier thrashed a tribal boy as his cattle ate the paddy seedlings on the field. Varghese – a social activist – lifted the boy who had slapped the Warrier, and another boy did the same. Kariyan and many others saw this with

gratification.

He was seen as a good student. He wrote, "But one subject remained my stumbling block. I just about managed to pass the Hindi exams. Even when I tried to overcome this barrier, I couldn't make any progress. I would somehow scrape through. No amount of Tapasya would help me out to score more than the pass minimum" (p. 40).

With the passage of time, Naxalite movement emerged with the attendant violence in Wayanad in the sixties. Houses of landlords were attacked. Suspected Naxalites were arrested and tortured like holding them in boiling water Kariyan was also not spared. He writes, "And one of the policemen started kicking me on my thighs with his booted feet, while another beat me on the soles of my feet with a cane" (p. 78). He and others were thrashed and jailed for six months even though no charge sheet was filed. He devotes a chapter each to memories of the days spent in jail, the trial and his political statement, and imprisonment under MISA and the emergency.

Finally, freedom came and with it work for the community and the family. It was a travesty of truth that he was accused in a case in which he was not a part. He died at a ripe old age.

Broadly, these are the contents of this book. It is an autobiographical account of a tribal man who suffered largely for no fault of his own. To begin with, he was a victim of the caste system and subsequently of the political process. It makes an interesting study in this regard. At the same time, it has too many details are covered in it. They are essentially personal with little interest for an ordinary reader. However, the book remains an essential part of tribal history.

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