

Mohandas K. Gandhi vs. Contemporary Leaders

Comparative Political Leadership

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*On 2 October 2019, it will be the 150th anniversary of the birth of **Mohandas K. Gandhi** in Gujarat, India. I would like to reflect on the visionary leadership that Gandhi offered the world, briefly comparing it with some national leaders of today, and to invite you to emulate Gandhi's leadership.*

While Gandhi is best remembered for being the mastermind and leader of the decades-long nonviolent struggle to liberate colonial India from British occupation, his extraordinary political, economic, social, ecological, religious and moral leadership are virtually unknown, despite the enormous legacy he left subsequent generations who choose to learn from what he taught. This legacy is available online in the 98-volume [Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi](#).

While touching on Gandhi's legacy in each of these regards, I would particularly like to highlight Gandhi's staggering legacy in four of these fields by briefly comparing his approach to politics, economics, society and the environment with the approach of contemporary political leaders such as **Jair Bolsonaro** (Brazil), **Xi Jinping** (China), **Emmanuel Macron** (France), **Viktor Orbán** (Hungary), **Narendra Modi** (India), **Benjamin Netanyahu** (Israel), **Shinzo Abe** (Japan), **Vladimir Putin** (Russia), **Mohammad bin Salman** (Saudi Arabia), **Boris Johnson** (UK) and **Donald Trump** (USA).

Before doing so, let me offer a little basic background on Gandhi so that the foundational framework he was using to guide his thinking and behaviour is clear.

Gandhi in Brief

In order to develop his understanding of the human individual and human society, as well as his approach to conflict, Gandhi engaged in ongoing research throughout his life. He read avidly and widely, as well as keenly observing the behaviour of those around him in many social contexts in three different countries (India, England and South Africa). Shaped also by the influence of his mother and his Hindu religion, this led to Gandhi's unique understanding of the human individual and his approach to the world at large.

For a fuller elaboration of the points about Gandhi discussed below and the precise references, see relevant chapters and sections on Gandhi in [The Strategy of Nonviolent Defense: A Gandhian Approach](#).

Gandhi's conception of the human individual and human nature

In order to understand Gandhi generally, it is imperative to comprehend his conceptions of the human individual and human nature simply because these are the foundation of his

entire philosophy.

Gandhi attached enormous importance to individual responsibility. He also had a very positive view of human nature. Gandhi believed that humans could respond to 'the call of the spirit' and rise above selfishness and violence. Moreover, this was necessary in their quest for self-realization. Self-realization, as the Gandhian scholar **Professor Arne Naess** explains it, 'involves realizing oneself as an autonomous, fully responsible person'.

In Gandhi's view, this quest is an individual one that relies on nonviolence, self-reliance, and the search for truth. 'To find Truth completely is to realize oneself and one's destiny.' But what should guide this search? According to Gandhi, it can only be the individual conscience: The 'inner voice' must always be 'the final arbiter when there is a conflict of duty'. And in his view, 'the voice of God, of Conscience, of Truth or the Inner Voice or "the still small Voice" mean one and the same thing.'

This point is centrally important, because the usual descriptions of Gandhian nonviolence stress its morality, humility and sacrifice while neglecting the fundamental norm 'that you should follow your inner voice whatever the consequences' and 'even at the risk of being misunderstood'.

The point, of course, is that **creation of the nonviolent society which Gandhi envisioned required the reconstruction of the personal, social, economic and political life of each individual**. 'We shall get nothing by asking; we shall have to take what we want, and we need the requisite strength for the effort.' Consequently, the individual required increased power-from-within through the development of personal identity, self-reliance and fearlessness.

So what is fearlessness? For Gandhi, it means freedom from all external fear, including the fear of dispossession, ridicule, disease, bodily injury and death. In his view, progress toward the goal of fearlessness requires 'determined and constant endeavour'. But why is fearlessness so important? Because a person who is fearless is unbowed by the punitive power of others and that makes them powerful agents of change.

Gandhi's approach to society and political economy

Gandhi's conception of society is based on a rejection of both capitalism and socialism.

In relation to capitalism, he rejected the competitive market and private property, with their emphasis on individual competitiveness and material progress and their consequent greed and exploitation of the weak. He also rejected the major institutions of capitalism, including its parliamentary system of democracy (which denied sovereignty to the people), its judicial system (which exacerbated conflict and perpetuated elite power), and its educational system (which divorced education from life and work).

In relation to socialism, he rejected its conception of conflict in terms of class war, its claim that state ownership and centralization are conducive to the common welfare, its emphasis on material progress, and its reliance on violent means.

The Gandhian vision of future society is based on a decentralized network of self-reliant and self-governing communities using property held in trust, with a weak central apparatus to perform residual functions. His vision stresses the importance of individuals being able to satisfy their personal needs through their own efforts - including 'bread labor' - in

cooperation with others and in harmony with nature.

For Gandhi, this horizontal framework is necessary in order to liberate the exploiter and exploited alike from the shackles of exploitative structures. This is vitally important because, in his view, 'exploitation is the essence of violence.' Self-reliance and interdependence must be built into the structure in order to enhance the capacity for self-regeneration and self defense and to eliminate the potential for structural violence inherent in any dependency relationship.

This social vision was clearly evident in Gandhi's 'constructive program', which was intended to restructure the moral, political, social and economic life of those participating in it. The constructive program was designed to satisfy the needs of each individual member of society and was centrally concerned with the needs for self-esteem, security, and justice. The program entailed many elements, some of which are outlined below in order to illustrate this point.

A crucial feature of the constructive program was the campaign for communal unity. This was intended to encourage reciprocal recognition of the identity of Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Jews and those of other religions. According to Gandhi, all people should have the same regard for other faiths as they have for their own.

The campaign to liberate women was intended to secure self esteem, security, and justice for those most systematically oppressed by India's patriarchal society. 'Woman has been suppressed under custom and law for which man was responsible... In a plan of life based on nonviolence, woman has as much right to shape her own destiny as man.'

The campaign for the removal of untouchability was meant to restore self-esteem, dignity, and justice to the Harijans (Gandhi's term for those without caste) in Hindu society. Similarly, the constructive program was concerned with recognizing the needs of indigenous peoples and lepers throughout India. 'Our country is so vast... one realizes how difficult it is to make good our claim to be one nation, unless every unit has a living consciousness of being one with every other.'

The khadi (handspun/handwoven cloth) and village industries programs were intended to make the villages largely self-reliant and Indians proud of their identity after centuries of oppression and exploitation under British imperial rule. Khadi, Gandhi argued, 'is the symbol of unity of Indian humanity, of its economic freedom and equality.' The struggle for economic equality was aimed at securing distributive justice for all. It meant 'leveling down' the rich, who owned the bulk of the nation's wealth, while raising the living standards of 'the semi-starved' peasant millions.

Thus, Gandhi stressed the centrality of the individual and the importance of creating a society that satisfied individual human needs. 'The individual is the one supreme consideration'; individuals are superior to the system they propound. In fact: 'If the individual ceases to count, what is left of society?... No society can possibly be built on a denial of individual freedom.'

According to Gandhi then, the foundation of this nonviolent society can only be the nonviolent individual: No one need wait for anyone else before adopting the nonviolent way of life. Hesitating to act because the whole vision might not be achieved, or because others do not yet share it, is an attitude that only hinders progress.

So how is this nonviolent society to come into being? For Gandhi, the aim is not to destroy the old society now with the hope of building the new one later. In his view, it requires a complete and ongoing restructuring of the existing social order using nonviolent means. And while it might not be possible to achieve it, 'we must bear it in mind and work unceasingly to near it'.

The political means for achieving this societal outcome entailed three essential elements: personal nonviolence as a way of life, constructive work to create new sets of political, social, economic and ecological relationships, and nonviolent resistance to direct and structural violence.

Gandhi the nonviolent conflict strategist

So what did nonviolence mean to Gandhi?

According to Gandhi: 'Ahimsa [nonviolence] means not to hurt any living creature by thought, word or deed.' The individual, humanity, and other life forms are one: 'I believe in the essential unity of [humanity] and for that matter of all that lives.'

Given Gandhi's understanding that **conflict is built into structures and not into people, and that violence could not resolve conflict** (although it could destroy the people in conflict and/or the issues at stake) his religious/moral belief in the sanctity of all life compelled him to seek a way to address conflict without the use of violence. Moreover, despite his original training as a lawyer in England and his subsequent practice as a lawyer in South Africa, Gandhi soon rejected the law as a means of dealing with conflict too, preferring to mediate between conflicting parties in search of a mutually acceptable outcome.

According to Gandhi, British imperialism and the Indian caste system were both examples of structures that were perpetuated, in large part, as a result of people performing particular roles within them. The essence of Gandhi's approach was to identify approaches to conflict that preserved the people while systematically demolishing the evil structure. Moreover, because he saw conflict as a perennial condition, his discussions about future society are particularly concerned with how to manage conflict and how to create new social arrangements free of structural violence.

More importantly, according to Gandhi conflict is both positive and desirable. It is an important means to greater human unity. Professor Johan Galtung explains this point: 'far from separating two parties, a conflict should unite them, precisely because they have their incompatibility in common.' More fundamentally, Gandhi believed that conflict should remind antagonists of the deeper, perhaps transcendental, unity of life, because in his view humans are related by a bond that is deeper and more profound than the bonds of social relationship.

So how is conflict to be resolved? In essence, the Gandhian approach to conflict recognizes the importance of resolving all three corners of what Galtung calls the 'conflict triangle': the attitude, the behavior, and the goal incompatibility itself. The Gandhian method of conflict resolution is called 'satyagraha', which means 'a relentless search for truth and a determination to reach truth', it is somewhat simplistically but more widely known (and practiced) in English as 'nonviolent action' (or equivalent names). While the perpetrator of violence assumes knowledge of the truth and makes a life-or-death judgment on that basis,

satyagraha, according to Gandhi, excludes the use of violence precisely because **no one is capable of knowing the absolute truth**. Satyagraha, then, was Gandhi's attempt to evolve a theory of politics and conflict resolution that could accommodate his moral system.

It is for this reason then that 'Satyagraha **is not a set of techniques**'. This is because the actions cannot be detached from the norms of nonviolence that govern attitudes and behavior. Therefore, an action or campaign that avoids the use of physical violence but that ignores the attitudinal and behavioral norms characteristic of satyagraha cannot be classified as Gandhian nonviolence. Moreover, the lack of success of many actions and campaigns is often directly attributable to a failure to apply these fundamental norms to their practice of 'nonviolent action' (by whatever name it is given locally). To reiterate: 'Satyagraha **is not a set of techniques**'.

But Gandhi was not just committed to nonviolence; he was committed to strategy as well. Because he was a shrewd political analyst and not naive enough to believe that such qualities as truth, conviction and courage, nor factors such as numbers mobilized, would yield the necessary outcomes in conflict, he knew that strategy, too, was imperative.

Consequently, for example, he set out to develop a framework for applying nonviolence in such a way that desirable outcomes were built into the means of struggle. 'They say "Means are after all means". I would say "means are after all everything". As the means so the end.'

Gandhi the ecologist

According to Karl Marx, the crisis of civilization was created by the production relations of capitalism; for Gandhi, it was created by the process of industrialization itself. This process both stimulated and was fueled by the unrestrained growth of individual wants. The remedy, according to Gandhi, lay in individuals transforming themselves and, through this transformation, founding a just social order.

He argued that social transformation, no matter how profound, would be neither adequate nor lasting if individuals themselves were not transformed. A part of this strategy was 'the deliberate and voluntary reduction of wants'. Gandhi did not begrudge people a reasonable degree of physical well-being, but he made a clear distinction between needs and wants. 'Earth provides enough to satisfy every [person's] need but not for every [person's] greed.'

But, as with everything else in Gandhi's worldview, he did not just advocate this simple material lifestyle; he lived it, making and wearing his own khadi, and progressively reducing his personal possessions.

Contemporary Political Leaders

While contemporary national leaders obviously display a wide variety of styles, it is immediately evident that individuals such as Jair Bolsonaro (Brazil), Xi Jinping (China), Emmanuel Macron (France), Viktor Orbán (Hungary), Narendra Modi (India), Benjamin Netanyahu (Israel), Shinzo Abe (Japan), Vladimir Putin (Russia), Mohammad bin Salman (Saudi Arabia), Boris Johnson (UK) and Donald Trump (USA) might be readily identified as representative of virtually all of them.

And whatever one might say about each of these leaders, it is clear from both their words and behaviour that none of them regards the human individual and their conscience as the foundation on which their national societies or even global society should be built. On the

contrary, individuals are destroyed, one way or another, so that society is not inconvenienced more than minimally by any semblance of 'individuality' or individual conscience.

Moreover, while in some countries there are clearly articulated doctrines about reducing inequality and, in a few cases, some effort to achieve this, there is little or no concerted effort to restructure their national societies and economies so that inequality is eliminated; on the contrary, the wealth of the few is celebrated and defended by law. None of these leaders wears a local equivalent of khadi to express their solidarity with those less privileged and model a lifestyle that all can (sustainably) share.

The oppression of certain social groups, such as women, indigenous peoples, racial and religious minorities, particular castes or classes, those of particular sexual and identity orientations or with disabilities, remains widespread, if not endemic, in each of these societies with considerably less than full effort put into redressing these forms of discrimination.

Not one of these leaders could profess an ecological worldview (and national policies that reflected a deep commitment to environmental sustainability) or the simplicity of material lifestyle that Gandhi lived (and invited others to emulate).

And not one of them could pretend that killing fellow human beings was abhorrent to them with each of these countries and their leaders content to spend vast national resources on military violence rather than even explore the possibility of adopting the strategically superior (when properly understood and implemented) strategy of nonviolent defense that Gandhi advocated. 'I have always advised and insisted on nonviolent defence. But I recognize that it has to be learnt like violent defence. It requires a different training.' See [The Strategy of Nonviolent Defense: A Gandhian Approach](#) or, more simply, [Nonviolent Defense/Liberation Strategy](#).

For just a taste of the discriminatory, destructive and violent policies of contemporary political leaders, see ['Equality Reserved: Saudi Arabia and the Convention to End All Discrimination against Women'](#), ['156 Fourth World Nations suffered Genocide since 1945: The Indigenous Uyghurs Case'](#), ['Weaponizing Space Is the New Bad Idea Coming From Washington D.C.'](#) and ['Report Shows Corporations and Bolsonaro Teaming Up to Destroy the Amazon'](#). But for further evidence of the support of contemporary political leaders for violence and exploitation in all of their forms, just consult any progressive news outlet.

As an aside, it is important to acknowledge that the world has had or still does have some national leaders with at least some of Gandhi's credentials. It also has many community leaders who display at least some of these credentials too, which is why there are so many social movements working to end violence, inequality, exploitation and ecological destruction in their many forms.

Was Gandhi realistic? Was he right?



But even if you concede that Gandhi was a visionary, you might still ask ‘Was Gandhi realistic?’ Surely it is asking too much for modern political leaders to live simply and nurture ecological sustainability, to work energetically against all forms of inequality and discrimination, and to deal with conflicts without violence, for example. Especially in a world where corporations are so powerful and drive so much of the inequality, violence and ecological destruction that takes place.

Of course, ‘Was Gandhi realistic?’ is the wrong question. With human beings now on the brink of precipitating our own extinction – see [‘Human Extinction by 2026? A Last Ditch Strategy to Fight for Human Survival’](#) – the more appropriate question is ‘Was Gandhi right?’

And if he was, then we should be attempting to emulate him, however imperfect our attempts may be. Moreover, we should be endeavouring to improve on his efforts because no-one could credibly suggest that Gandhi’s legacy has had the impact that India, or the world, needs.

Can we improve on Gandhi?

Of course we can. As Gandhi himself would want us to do: ‘If we are to make progress, we must not repeat history but make new history. We must add to the inheritance left by our ancestors.’

One key area in which I would improve on Gandhi is an outcome of doing decades of research to understand the fundamental cause of violence in human society: the dysfunctional parenting and teaching models we are using which inflict virtually endless ‘visible’, ‘invisible’ and ‘utterly invisible’ violence on children and adolescents. See [‘Why Violence?’](#), [‘Fearless Psychology and Fearful Psychology: Principles and Practice’](#) and [‘Do We Want School or Education?’](#)

This cause must be addressed if we are to have any chance of eliminating the staggering and unending violence, in all of its forms, from our families, communities and societies while empowering all individuals to deal fearlessly and nonviolently with conflict.

Hence, I would encourage people to consider making [‘My Promise to Children’](#) which will require them to learn the art of nisteling. See [‘Nisteling: The Art of Deep Listening’](#).

For those who need to heal emotionally themselves in order to be able to engage with children in this way, see [‘Putting Feelings First’](#).

There are several vitally important reasons why a radical reorientation of our parenting and teaching models is necessary as part of any strategy to end human violence. One reason is that the emotional damage inflicted on children leaves them unconsciously terrified and virtually powerless to deal with reality; that is, to respond powerfully to (rather than retreat into delusion about) political, military, economic, social and ecological circumstances. As casual observation confirms, most individuals in industrialized societies become little more than mindlessly obedient consumers under the existing parenting and teaching models. See [‘Love Denied: The Psychology of Materialism, Violence and War’](#). ***This is as far as it can get from Gandhi’s aspiration to generate individuals who are fearless.***

Moreover, at their worst, these parenting and teaching models generate vast numbers of people who are literally insane: an accurate description of most of the political leaders mentioned earlier but particularly those who pull the strings of these leaders. See [‘The Global Elite is Insane Revisited’](#).

Another reason that a radical reorientation of our parenting and teaching models is necessary is so that we produce a far greater number of people of conscience who can think, plan and act strategically in response to our interrelated existential crises. Too few people have these capacities. See, for example, [‘Why Activists Fail’](#) and [‘Nonviolent Action: Why and How it Works’](#). Consequently, most activism, and certainly that activism on issues vital to human survival, lacks the necessary strategic orientation, which is explained in [Nonviolent Campaign Strategy](#).

A fourth reason that transformed parenting and teaching approaches are necessary is that it will open up a corner of the ‘conflict square’ that Gandhi (and Galtung) do not discuss: the feelings, particularly fear, that shape all conflicts (that is, the other three corners of the ‘conflict square’: attitude, behaviour and goal incompatibility) and then hold them in place. Fear and other suppressed feelings are central to any conflict and these must be heard if conflict is to be resolved completely. But, more fundamentally, conflict is much less likely to emerge (and then become ‘frozen’) if fear and other feelings are not present at the beginning. Imagine how much easier it would be to deal with any situation or conflict if the various parties involved just weren’t scared (whether of the process and/or certain possible outcomes). See [‘Challenges for Resolving Complex Conflicts’](#).

Anyway, separately from the above, if you share Gandhi’s understanding that the Earth cannot sustain the massive overconsumption that is now destroying our biosphere, consider participating in a project that he inspired: [‘The Flame Tree Project to Save Life on Earth’](#).

And consider signing the online pledge of [‘The People’s Charter to Create a Nonviolent World’](#).

Or, if none of the above options appeal or they seem too complicated, consider committing to:

The Earth Pledge

Out of love for the Earth and all of its creatures, and my respect for their needs, from this day onwards I pledge that:

1. ***I will listen deeply to children*** (see explanation above)
2. ***I will not travel by plane***
3. ***I will not travel by car***

4. ***I will not eat meat and fish***
5. ***I will only eat organically/biodynamically grown food***
6. ***I will minimize the amount of fresh water I use, including by minimizing my ownership and use of electronic devices***
7. ***I will not buy rainforest timber***
8. ***I will not buy or use single-use plastic, such as bags, bottles, containers, cups and straws***
9. ***I will not use banks, superannuation (pension) funds or insurance companies that provide any service to corporations involved in fossil fuels, nuclear power and/or weapons***
10. ***I will not accept employment from, or invest in, any organization that supports or participates in the exploitation of fellow human beings or profits from killing and/or destruction of the biosphere***
11. ***I will not get news from the corporate media (mainstream newspapers, television, radio, Google, Facebook, Twitter...)***
12. ***I will make the effort to learn a skill, such as food gardening or sewing, that makes me more self-reliant***
13. ***I will gently encourage my family and friends to consider signing this pledge.***

Despite the now overwhelming odds against human survival, can we get humanity back on track? Gandhi would still be optimistic: 'A small body of determined spirits fired by an unquenchable faith in their mission can alter the course of history.'

Are you one of those 'determined spirits'?

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