

Exploring the Ahimsa in Restoring Peace to a Turbulent Postmodern World

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Abstract-- This article explores the relevance of Jain Ahimsa and Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy of non-violence in addressing contemporary issues of violence and injustice. In the modern world, where conflicts, wars, and systemic oppression persist, Ahimsa provides a framework that transcends mere non-violence in action and extends to thoughts, words, and intentions. By examining the ethical underpinnings of Jainism and Gandhi's Satyagraha, the article demonstrates how these principles can be applied to current crises, including global conflicts, environmental degradation, and social inequality. Gandhi's approach, which involved empathy, inner peace, self-discipline, and non-violent resistance, offers a transformative method for resolving conflict and creating lasting peace. Additionally, the article addresses how Gandhi's methods, such as non-violent protests, economic boycotts, and community mobilization, remain powerful tools for combating oppression and promoting justice. Through this discussion, the article emphasizes the enduring relevance of non-violence as a strategy for overcoming violence and building a just society. By illuminating the potential of Jain Ahimsa and Gandhi's Satyagraha to address pressing societal challenges, this article aims to contribute to the discourse on non-violence as a transformative force for individual and collective healing in an increasingly violent world.

Keywords – Mahavrata, Ahimsa, Satya, Satyagraha, violence, Social justice, Peace, Post-Cold War, Cyber-violence

I. INTRODUCTION

Ahimsa, a key ethical principle in many Indian religions, is derived from Sanskrit and translates to 'non-injury'. It signifies non-violence, not just in physical actions, but also in words and thoughts. According to Dasgupta, Ahimsa involves refraining from causing harm to others through speech, action, or thought. It stands in contrast to *himsa*, which refers to injury and encompasses any act, including thoughts and words, that harm the life force of living beings.¹ Essentially, Ahimsa means avoiding harm to oneself or others, whether intentional or unintentional.

In a world increasingly plagued by violence, injustice, and conflict, the need for non-violent solutions has never been more urgent. From global wars to domestic and systemic violence, the destructive forces at play today challenge the very fabric of human coexistence.

Amidst this turmoil, the ancient Indian philosophy of Ahimsa, as practiced by the Jains and later adopted by Mahatma Gandhi, offers a compelling framework for addressing these issues. Ahimsa, which means non-violence or non-injury, extends beyond physical harm to encompass thoughts, words, and actions, urging individuals to embrace compassion, empathy, and respect for all living beings. Gandhi's application of Ahimsa through his philosophy of Satyagraha—non-violent resistance—was not just a political tool but a moral imperative. He believed that non-violence held the power to transform societies, heal divisions, and promote justice without perpetuating further harm. In the face of today's global challenges, including wars, environmental degradation, and social inequalities, Gandhi's vision of Ahimsa offers a path toward peace and reconciliation.

This article explores how Jain Ahimsa and Gandhi's approach to non-violence can provide solutions to contemporary issues of violence and injustice. By examining the foundational principles of Ahimsa and Gandhi's strategies, the article aims to highlight the enduring relevance of non-violence in addressing the complex problems of our time.

II. PANCHA MAHAVRATA

In Jain ethics and religion, the concept of Ahimsa, or non-violence, stands as a central principle of Jain philosophy. The Jain community, known as the Jain Sangha, consists of monks, nuns, and lay followers (lay-brothers and lay-sisters). According to Jain philosophy, while lay followers are not required to adhere to the strictest rules, monks and nuns must observe these laws with utmost discipline. Jain philosophy distinguishes between two sets of rules: the Pancha Mahavrata, followed by monks and nuns, and the Pancha Anuvrata, observed by lay followers. The Pancha Mahavrata comprises five core spiritual practices: 1. Ahimsa (non-violence), 2. Satya (truth), 3. Asteya (non-stealing), 4. Brahmacharya (chastity or self-restraint), and 5. Aparigraha (renunciation of material possessions in thought, word, and deed).² These principles are deeply interconnected and form the foundation of Jain spiritual practice.



III. AHIMSA

For Jains, Ahimsa is not only a core principle of their philosophy but also the very foundation of their belief system. Ahimsa encompasses all the "negative" aspects, such as avoiding harm, injury, or hurting others. For householders or laypeople, this means refraining from intentionally causing harm to any living being through thoughts, words, or actions, including unnecessary harm to plants.³ Beyond these negative aspects, Ahimsa also includes positive qualities like kindness, love, compassion, and gentleness.

Ahimsa refers to the abstinence from causing harm to any form of life. Life is not confined to only moving creatures but also exists in non-moving entities, such as plants and beings that inhabit bodies like the earth.² Ahimsa, the principle of non-violence, extends beyond avoiding harm to humans and includes non-injury to all living beings. The Jain ideal emphasizes refraining from causing harm not just to animals but also to these non-moving forms of life. Jain monks and nuns, in their strict adherence to this principle, are even known to cover their mouths with cloth to avoid inhaling and unintentionally harming airborne organisms. This practice raises fundamental questions about our connection to other beings and the significance of their lives. What responsibility do humans have toward other forms of life? How can we ensure the protection of these lives? According to Jainism, Ahimsa provides the answer to these questions. However, the strict observance of Ahimsa (Pancha Mahavrata) is meant primarily for monks and nuns, while laypersons (Pancha Anuvrata) are encouraged to practice it in a less rigorous form. Laypeople are advised to begin by abstaining from harming beings with two or more senses, as the ideal of total non-violence is seen as too difficult for ordinary individuals. The Jain concept of Ahimsa arises logically from their metaphysical belief in the inherent equality of all souls and the principle of reciprocity—treating others as we would wish to be treated. Contrary to the views of some critics, who dismiss Ahimsa as a remnant of a primitive reverence for life, it is, in fact, a deeply ethical stance. Since every soul has the potential to attain greatness, it follows that we must acknowledge the worth and rights of all forms of life, treating them with the same respect we would expect for ourselves. Thus, respect for life in all its manifestations becomes a moral obligation that cannot be ignored.⁴ The Jain strives to fulfill this duty in every small action, aiming to remain completely consistent with the fundamental principle of Ahimsa they have embraced.

Non-violence goes beyond merely refraining from taking life; it also includes avoiding thoughts or words that support the taking of life, as well as neither allowing nor encouraging others to harm any form of life. Ahimsa, the principle of non-violence, extends beyond avoiding harm to humans and includes non-injury to all living beings.

Satya refers to the abstinence from falsehood. Truthfulness goes beyond merely stating what is true; it involves speaking in a manner that is both truthful and also kind and pleasant. To fully uphold this vow, one must overcome greed, fear, and anger, and even refrain from excessive joking. **Asteya** means refraining from theft, which involves not taking anything that has not been freely given. **Brahmacharya** signifies abstinence from self-indulgence, commonly interpreted as celibacy. It requires renouncing all forms of desire (kama), both external and internal, subtle and gross, worldly and spiritual, direct and indirect. To maintain this vow fully, one must avoid every form of self-indulgence. **Aparigraha** refers to detachment from all possessions and attachments. It involves giving up attachment to sensory objects like pleasing sounds, touch, colors, tastes, and smells.⁵ Jain philosophy emphasizes that attachment to worldly objects leads to bondage and the cycle of rebirth. Without renouncing attachment, liberation is unattainable. Jains believe that every living being possesses a soul or immaterial self, which is burdened by the actions from previous lives. These past actions, along with present ones, cause the attachment of karma—a material substance (pudgala)—to the soul. As long as the soul remains influenced by karma, it continues to cycle through different existences. The path to salvation, or liberation, involves removing the material karma that clouds the soul's true knowledge and preventing any further accumulation. To fully grasp the Jain path to salvation, it is essential to understand their expansive view of Ahimsa and its central role in the practices of both laypeople and ascetics.⁶

IV. GANDHI ON NON-VIOLENCE

As Gandhi expressed in a 1916 issue of "Modern Review," *Ahimsa* represents non-harm, non-injury, and non-violence, including a vow not to harm any living being through thought, word, or deed. It also involves refraining from harboring hatred, acting out of anger, or engaging in exploitation. On the positive side, *Ahimsa* embodies the highest forms of love, such as compassion, kindness, and gentleness.⁷ Many do not realize that it requires immense strength of character to practice gentleness—an act that is far from cowardly or fearful.

It is comparable to a skilled opera singer, who can project their voice to the farthest row but must also master the art of singing softly, which is a difficult task. Gandhi was influenced by Jaina philosophical idea Ahimsa or non-violence and Satya or truth. He points out that Ahimsa is the mean and Satya is the end. This Jaina's ahimsa is modified by the Gandhi that is very important in our modern and postmodern era.

In Hindu scriptures, God is referred to by a thousand names, yet none of these names fully encompass the divine, which is why it is said that God is Truth. This claim arises from the quest to find a name or category for the universal reality, which is God, a reality that seems to elude all forms of description. Furthermore, God is described as Truth because only God is truly real. For Gandhi, Truth is not merely an attribute of God; rather, God is Truth itself. The word 'Truth' is derived from 'sat,' which means 'that which exists.'⁸ The earlier assertion that "God is Truth" evolved into the conviction that "Truth is God,". The term "truth" consistently carries a clear meaning. Gandhi recognized that it is rationally possible to doubt or even deny the existence of God. However, it is inherently contradictory to deny truth, as one cannot simply dismiss it.⁹ While skeptics may reject the notion of God, they cannot dismiss Truth itself. Truth stands as the sole element that is entirely universal and all-encompassing. Additionally, Gandhi emphasized that truth represents the essence of reality. According to Gandhi, "My uniform experience has convinced me that there is no other God than truth."¹⁰

According to Gandhi, "Truth and Non-violence are the same and interconnected which are impossible to separate and entangle."¹¹ They are two sides of a same coin or a unstamped metallic disc. Ahimsa is the means and Truth is the end. Means to be means must always be within our reach, and so ahimsa is our supreme duty. If we take care of the means, we are bound to reach the end sooner or later.¹² For Gandhi, the concept of Ahimsa carries both negative and positive connotations. However, he considered the positive aspect more fundamental, as it encompasses the negative and reflects its true essence. According to Gandhi, killing or causing harm constitutes an act of violence only under specific conditions, such as anger, pride, hatred, or malicious intent. Any harm inflicted with these motives is considered *himsa* or violence. In its negative sense, *ahimsa* refers to refraining from killing or causing injury. The positive aspect of *ahimsa* is essentially love, which Gandhi viewed as a feeling of unity and oneness.¹³ For Gandhi, love is the force that purifies one's inner life, fostering noble emotions such as benevolence, compassion, forgiveness, tolerance, generosity, kindness, and sympathy.

Satyagraha, often referred to as "truth force," "soul force," or "love force," is a technique rooted in *ahimsa* (non-violence) and based on love.¹⁴ Gandhi explained that *satyagraha* is a powerful force against violence, tyranny, and injustice. It requires immense patience and perseverance from the *satyagrahi* (the one practicing it), as it seeks to confront and transform these negative forces through non-violent resistance and moral strength.

V. MODERN AND POST-MODERN ERA

In our modern and post-modern era, violence manifests across various levels—within families, among friends, in society, and even between nations. History has borne witness to two devastating World Wars and the Cold War, where countless men, women, and children tragically lost their lives. This pervasive violence continues to shape our contemporary world, making it increasingly urgent to revisit the principles of non-violence as a solution to the ongoing global conflicts and social unrest. In 2024, we are witnessing several ongoing conflicts, such as the Russia-Ukraine war, the Israel-Hamas conflict, the unrest in Somalia, and the tensions between Taiwan and China, with the involvement of global powers like the USA in many of these disputes. These wars have resulted in the tragic loss of countless lives, both human and non-human, as the impact extends beyond people to animals and ecosystems. Our relentless destruction of nature, fueled by conflict and human actions, continues to exacerbate the environmental crisis, illustrating the far-reaching consequences of violence not only on societies but also on the planet itself. This structural entropy has been exacerbated by the lack of a direct, sustained external threat in the post-Cold War era. While concerns about weapons proliferation and rogue states persist, northern governance systems no longer face an immediate, credible, or existential external enemy.¹⁵ As a result, there is a subtle triumphalism associated with the liberal-democratic model. The challenges it now confronts are perceived primarily as internal—arising from economic policies, political structures, or psychological factors—rather than external forces threatening the system. The distinctiveness of deliberately targeting civilians and employing terrorist or guerrilla tactics is also subject to debate. Newman (2004:182) argues that earlier conflicts, like the Mexican Revolution (1910–1920) and the atrocities in the Congo Free State (1886–1908), serve as classic examples where civilians were primarily targeted. Aside from the Rwandan genocide, the "new wars" have not matched the scale of civilian casualties seen in historical genocides, such as those against the Herreros, Native Americans, Armenians, or Jews during the Holocaust.¹⁶

War continues to erupt across the globe, persistently manifesting itself despite widespread moral, political, and military efforts to suppress it. The old narratives of tribal disputes and the glorification of male valor in warfare no longer find universal appeal. While peace is widely promoted, with substantial military investment in so-called peacemaking, the global situation remains chaotic. Rapid advancements in technoscience have enabled the proliferation of mass weapons, including chemical, biological, and nuclear (CBN) arms, among numerous states, nationalities, and even small groups. Despite ongoing conflicts, global high-speed communication networks, economic integration, and peace initiatives strive to contain the chaos.¹⁷

The most visible and destructive form of violence in modern times is war. Armed conflicts, such as those between Russia and Ukraine, Israel and Hamas, or the ongoing tensions involving Libya, Syria and Yemen continue to claim countless lives. These wars not only lead to massive human casualties but also disrupt entire economies, displace populations, and devastate infrastructure. Modern warfare has evolved with the advancement of technology, leading to the widespread use of weapons that can target civilians, further exacerbating the humanitarian crises.¹⁸ Moreover, the global arms trade and political interests fuel such conflicts, ensuring their persistence.

Domestic violence is another pervasive form of violence that affects individuals on an intimate level. It includes physical, emotional, sexual, and psychological abuse, often within the confines of the home. Although traditionally focused on violence against women, it is increasingly recognized that men, children, and elderly individuals can also be victims. Domestic violence thrives in silence, stigma, and social acceptance in some regions, and its impact stretches beyond the immediate victim, affecting families and communities across generations.¹⁹ Despite legal frameworks aimed at protecting victims, domestic violence remains a significant issue worldwide.

Systemic violence refers to the structural and institutionalized forms of violence that are less overt but deeply rooted in society's operations. This includes economic inequality, racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination that perpetuate harm. For example, racial violence, which historically involved overt acts of aggression, now manifests in systemic exclusion and disadvantage, particularly in education, housing, and employment.²⁰ Gender-based violence, including the exploitation of women in labor markets and persistent pay gaps, represents another dimension of this form of violence.

Poverty, a byproduct of systemic violence, indirectly leads to higher mortality rates, poor access to healthcare, and substandard living conditions for many.

Economic violence refers to the deliberate control or exploitation of individuals through economic means. This form of violence manifests in global disparities in wealth, labor exploitation, unfair trade practices, and debt dependency. Large multinational corporations, in pursuit of profit, often exploit labor markets, particularly in developing nations, denying workers fair wages and humane working conditions. At a broader level, international financial systems and trade policies may disproportionately benefit richer nations while imposing restrictions and challenges on poorer countries, reinforcing global inequality.

In the digital age, cyber violence has emerged as a new and alarming threat. Cyberbullying, online harassment, identity theft, and hacking are all examples of how violence has permeated digital spaces. The anonymity provided by the internet enables perpetrators to inflict psychological harm on individuals and groups with less accountability. The rise of social media has exacerbated this problem, making it easier for violent rhetoric, misinformation, and hate speech to proliferate, which can have real-world consequences, including fostering division and inciting physical violence.²¹

VI. JAIN PERSPECTIVE ON RESOLVING VIOLENCE

Jain Ahimsa, or non-violence, is not merely the absence of physical harm but extends to thoughts, words, and actions. It embodies respect for all living beings, advocating for compassion, empathy, and harmony. By fostering an understanding of the interconnectedness of all beings, Jain teachings encourage individuals to empathize with others, reducing the likelihood of conflict. Emphasizing the inherent dignity of all beings can motivate individuals to advocate against discrimination, inequality, and systemic injustices. Inspired by the principles of Ahimsa, movements for social justice can adopt non-violent methods, challenging oppressive systems without resorting to aggression. The philosophy encourages nations to engage in dialogue and diplomacy rather than military actions, advocating for peaceful resolutions to conflicts. Jain teachings can inspire global solidarity movements that address injustices faced by marginalized groups, promoting human rights through non-violent means. Practicing non-violence towards oneself—through self-compassion and mindfulness—can alleviate mental health issues stemming from violence and trauma.

Communities grounded in Ahimsa can provide safe spaces for healing and recovery, fostering environments where individuals support one another. Schools can incorporate teachings on empathy and non-violence, encouraging children to respect differences and resolve conflicts peacefully. Initiatives that educate communities about the importance of non-violence can empower individuals to take action against violence in their own lives.

VII. GANDHI PERSPECTIVE ON RESOLVING VIOLENCE

Gandhi regarded Ahimsa as the core principle for conflict resolution, extending beyond the mere absence of physical violence to include thoughts, words, and actions. He believed that all living beings possess inherent worth, and harming them violates this principle. Satyagraha, his method of non-violent resistance, challenges injustice through civil disobedience and non-cooperation, while staying committed to truth and non-violence. The strength of Satyagraha lies in the moral authority of those who practice it, making it a potent weapon against oppression. Gandhi stressed the importance of understanding others' perspectives, advocating for empathy and compassion to recognize the humanity in adversaries. He believed that achieving societal peace required personal inner peace and self-discipline. He also encouraged individuals to sacrifice personal comforts, and even their lives if necessary, to uphold the cause of non-violence. He believed that to eliminate violence, it was essential to address its root causes, such as inequality and injustice. Gandhi worked to uplift marginalized communities, combat caste discrimination, and promote social justice. He championed grassroots movements and collective action, grounded in non-violence, as catalysts for substantial societal change. Education was another key element of Gandhi's vision for a peaceful society. He believed instilling values of non-violence, empathy, and social responsibility in future generations would contribute to long-lasting peace. Through non-violent protests, like the Salt March, Gandhi demonstrated the power of collective action in challenging unjust laws. He also promoted economic boycotts and non-cooperation with oppressive systems as effective non-violent strategies for change.

VIII. CONCLUSION

The article concludes that the principles of Jain Ahimsa and Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy of non-violence hold profound relevance in addressing the multifaceted violence and injustice of the contemporary world.

Jainism's comprehensive understanding of Ahimsa, which emphasizes non-injury not only in action but also in thought and speech, presents a holistic approach to fostering harmony across human and non-human life. Gandhi's Satyagraha—rooted in truth, empathy, and non-violent resistance—demonstrates that non-violence is not passive, but an active, moral force that can challenge systems of oppression, injustice, and inequality.

In today's world, plagued by wars, systemic violence, environmental destruction, and social injustices, the principles of Ahimsa offer a path toward resolving conflicts without perpetuating further harm. Gandhi's strategies of civil disobedience, grassroots mobilization, and peaceful protests remain powerful examples of how non-violence can lead to transformative social and political change. Ultimately, the article underscores that while the problems of the modern world are complex, non-violence is a timeless and potent force for creating sustainable peace and justice. By embracing the values of compassion, empathy, and respect for all life, society can work toward a future that honors the dignity and worth of every being.

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