

Gandhi's Satyagraha and the Earth Constitution



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Mahatma Gandhi developed an integrated world view within the very specific contexts of his struggles for justice and freedom in South Africa and India. Much of his thought regarding such basic concepts as satyagraha (clinging to truth), ahimsa (nonviolence), swaraj (self-determination, independence), and sarvodaya (the welfare of all) was articulated in the light of concrete struggles. Although some scholars have undertaken the task of extrapolating Gandhi's world view in terms of a general philosophy of liberation,¹ these studies have not generally extrapolated the theme of world federalism that Gandhi occasionally mentions in his writings. This paper will argue that Gandhi's relevance for the 21st century requires delineating the larger scope of his vision in relation to our contemporary situation and seeing the possibility of concretely actualizing that vision within the world federalism advocated by the Constitution for the Federation of Earth.²

Many studies correctly focus on satyagraha as a "clinging to truth" integral to the struggle against injustice and oppressive government, as a form of nonviolent resistance dedicated to breaking the cycle of violence and winning over the oppressors through transforming their hearts, allowing them to recognize the gigantic Truth that encompasses us all. While fundamental, this focus on satyagraha as resistance omits the deeper moral and theoretical framework implicit in Gandhi's work that points toward a transformed conception of human life, society, and the role of government. I will attempt to extrapolate the ways in which Gandhi's thought suggests the development of the global rule of law, administered by persons awakened to the

moral and spiritual dimensions of human life (summarized as satyagraha), and therefore to the significance of nonviolence in thought, word, and deed within every sphere of life.

1. Ahimsa and himsa. Like most philosophers of nonviolent social change, Gandhi never repudiated all use of force. He believed it was morally acceptable and pragmatically important for Indian soldiers to fight on the side of the British in World War One.³ He declared that if one lacked the courage to stand against injustice by nonviolent means, one should acquire the force of arms. Worse than using force is cowardice – refusing to stand against injustice out of fear: "I have been repeating over and over again," he writes, "that he who cannot protect himself or his nearest and dearest or their honor by nonviolently facing death may and ought to do so by violently dealing with the oppressor."⁴ For Gandhi, bodily life, as well as complex social life, occasionally required himsa. Ahimsa should not become a fetish that made practical functioning an impossibility.⁵

The perspective here should be clearly distinguished from the idea of violence as a "last resort," often appealed to by the defenders of violence as the final option when all else has failed, opening the door to militarized organized violence in defense of freedom or in revolutionary opposition to an oppressor. For Gandhi, nonviolence means an activation of a universal potential of our humanity, the realization of the deeper selfhood within us that we all share. Ahimsa, like satyagraha, means that ourselves and our institutions must be focused on clinging to the great Truth of our common humanity and our universal human situation.

If we do this, then any use of force will necessarily be premised on the minimum necessary to protect everyone involved. Under democratic government, a civilian police force could be trained in the minimum use of necessary force, protecting both the individual arrested and all bystanders. Gandhi stresses that the crucial element here is the intention behind the use of force. The necessary minimum use of force can never be militarized or directed toward intentional harm of a perceived "enemy."

“The essence of violence,” he declared, “is that there must be a violent intention behind the thought, word, or act, i.e., an intention to do harm to the opponent so-called.”⁶ An individual defending his or her family or civilian police seeking to arrest a person might use the minimum necessary force with the non-attached love (agape) of the New Testament or the karma yoga of the Bhagavad Gita – that is, without hatred or malice that desires to inflict suffering on a perceived enemy.

The concrete world in which we live requires that we deal effectively with dangerous institutions like militarized nation-states, dangerous forces like terrorism, and occasionally dangerous people. The task is to deal practically and justly with all these dangers without ourselves sinking into the cycle of violence and the corruption that it often entails. It requires not only personal clinging to truth but the conversion of our institutions to fundamental satyagraha as well.

2. Democracy and Socialism. Gandhi saw the connections between nonviolence and democracy. For democracy involves a set of institutions and a spirit that makes possible a maximum of individual liberty, nonviolent processes for social change, and the emphasis on persuasion and example rather than force and coercion. According to Raghavan Iyer, “this conviction made Gandhi concern himself with the possibilities of setting up a nonviolent police force, a nonviolent army, peace brigades and the like to mobilize popular opinion behind constructive programs.”⁷ That is, Gandhi saw the possibility of institutionalizing a regime of nonviolence.

The militarized modern state, on the other hand, is not and cannot be democratic, according to Gandhi. “The State,” he writes in 1935, “represents violence in a concentrated and organized form. The individual has a soul, but the State is a soulless machine, which can never be weaned from violence to which it owes its very existence.” Democracy, on the other hand, is not a condition in which people act like sheep: “Under democracy,” he writes, “individual liberty of opinion and action is jealously guarded.”⁸ The way to break the violence

of the modern state, we shall see, is to remove its so-called sovereignty, federating it, like the *pradesh* of India, the cantons of China, or the states of the United States, as interdependent regions within a larger federated whole premised on the gigantic truth of the sovereignty of the people of Earth.

Legitimate social change within truly democratic societies, of course, is always necessarily nonviolent. As Gandhi recognized, truly democratic societies institutionalize the means (through numerous channels) for citizen participation: discussion, public debate, exchange of information, public demonstrations, referendums, election of officials, and both individual or collective forms of action. Societies that are not truly democratic (all militarized national governments today) institutionalize empty forms of citizen participation as a propaganda mechanism for legitimating their power while in reality relegating decision-making to special power groups like corporations, the rich, dominant elites, the military, those with “security clearances,” etc.

For Gandhi, and for the philosophy of nonviolence, genuine democracy definitely requires a tremendous reduction in the gap between rich and poor. In this, he agrees with John Dewey who argued that progress in democracy necessarily required a democratization of the sphere of economic decision-making as well as the sphere of politics. “A nonviolent system of government,” Gandhi writes, “is clearly an impossibility so long as the wide gulf between the rich and the hungry millions persists.”⁹ It is important to recognize here that it is precisely “government” that can become “a nonviolent system.”

“The extension of the law of nonviolence in the domain of economics,” he writes, “means nothing less than the introduction of moral values as a factor to be considered when regulating international commerce.”¹⁰ “True economics,” he declares, “never militates against the highest ethical standard, just as true ethics to be worth the name must, at the same time, be also good economics.”¹¹ Ethical economics means “socialism,” he affirms, a socialism that must come about through a non-

violent revolution. Gandhi writes:

By the nonviolent method, we seek not to destroy the capitalist, we seek to destroy capitalism. We invite the capitalist to regard himself as a trustee for those on whom he depends for the making, the retention, and the increase of his capital. Nor need the worker wait for his conversion. If capital is power, so is work. Either power can be used destructively or creatively. Immediately the worker realizes his strength, he is in a position to become a co-sharer with the capitalist instead of remaining his slave.¹²

According to me the economic constitution of India and for that matter the world, should be such that no one under it should suffer for want of food or clothing.... And this ideal can be universally realized only if the means of production of the elementary necessities of life remain in the control of the masses. These should be freely available to all as God's air and water are or ought to be; they should not be made a vehicle of traffic for the exploitation of others. Their monopolization by any country, nation or group of persons would be unjust. The neglect of this simple principle is the cause of the destitution that we witness today not only in this unhappy land but in other parts of the world too.¹³

"To bring this ideal into being," Gandhi states, "the entire social order has got to be reconstructed. A society based on nonviolence cannot nurture any other ideal."¹⁴

3. Warring Sovereign Nation-states versus World Federalism. Throughout Gandhi's writings, we witness his understanding that the transformation required by the ethics of nonviolence must ultimately reach beyond India to the entire world. Our planet must move beyond the obscenity of haves and have-nots, that is, beyond capitalism, and beyond the barbarism of war, repression, and exploitation. And war, repression, and exploitation were directly connected, for him. Speaking of the world order, he writes: "Immediately as the spirit of exploitation is gone, armaments will be felt as a positive unbearable burden. Real disarmament

cannot come unless the nations of the world cease to exploit one another."¹⁵ War can only be ended through a global system. Nonviolence is not merely a method of resistance against oppressors. Satyagraha, as Gandhi understands it, involves an entire ethical world view that points toward a transformed world order.

The entirely reconstructed social order, of which Gandhi speaks, must ultimately mean planetary transformation. It means a social order that treats every person as valuable in his or her self, that eliminates vast disparities between wealth and poverty, that supplies the basic necessities to all persons, that promotes liberty and freedom of conscience for all, and that eliminates armaments, militarism, and exploitation from all the nations on Earth. Although Gandhi never elaborates his theme of world federalism in substantial detail, he mentions this frequently enough for us to recognize this concept as fundamental to a planetary reconstructed social order based on the ethics of satyagraha.

In 1942, for example, he introduced a resolution to the Indian National Congress that read:

While the Indian National Congress must primarily be concerned with independence and defense of India in this hour of danger, the Committee is of the opinion that the future peace, security, and ordered progress of the world demand a world federation of free nations, and on no other basis can the problems of the modern world be solved. Such a world federation would ensure the freedom of its constituent nations, the prevention of aggression and exploitation by one nation over another, the protection of national minorities, the advancement of all backward areas and peoples, and the pooling of the world's resources for the common good of all."¹⁶

At the outset of the Second World War, as Japan invaded China, Gandhi wrote an open letter "To the Japanese" that stated in part:

I must confess at the outset that through I have no ill will against you, I intensely dislike your attack

upon China. From your lofty height you have descended to imperial ambition. You will fail to realize that ambition and may become the authors of dismemberment of Asia, thus unwittingly preventing World Federation and brotherhood without which there can be no hope for humanity.¹⁷

And in his correspondence with the government undertaken between 1942 and 1944, Gandhi wrote “The structure of a world federation can be raised only on the foundation of nonviolence, and violence will have to be totally given up in world affairs.”¹⁸

Like Immanuel Kant, Albert Einstein, Walter Cronkite, Isaac Asimov, Winston Churchill, Mikhail Gorbachev, and many others, Gandhi was a world federalist. He used the same phrase that Kant used in his 1795 federalist essay *Perpetual Peace*, the phrase “a federation of free nations.” My argument here is that Gandhi’s ideal of a world-wide ethics of satyagraha embodied in a federation of free nations is best served through the ratification of the Constitution for the Federation of Earth. In *Perpetual Peace*, Kant points out that freedom does not mean doing whatever one feels like: freedom, for both Kant and Gandhi, involves the maximizing of the democratic autonomy of each under consistent laws that empower all equally. Sarvodaya, the good of all, Gandhi says, transcends the utilitarian principle of the greatest good of the greatest number to the principle of the genuine well-being of the whole population, in this case the population of Earth.¹⁹

4. Gandhi’s Federalist Conception and the Earth Constitution. The Constitution for the Federation of Earth was developed through a cooperative process involving thousands of world citizens and four constituent assemblies, meeting in different locations around the world from 1958 to 1991²⁰ The Constitution disarms the nations by law and creates a world government that is itself non-military, thereby ensuring the cessation of war. It creates an economic order for the Earth premised on the sarvodaya of the Earth’s population and the welfare of future generations, thereby ending the institutionalized exploitation involving the

sovereign nation-states and global capitalism that Gandhi perceptively recognizes as interlinked causes of both war and the immense poverty in the world.

The Constitution includes two bills of rights for all the people of Earth, the first (Article 12) enforcing all the liberties that Gandhi insists are necessary to any free society and the second (Article 13) granting economic and social rights to every person that effectively realizes Gandhi’s requirement that all people on Earth have the basic necessities of life and that socialism be developed, eliminating the vast disparities between extreme wealth and poverty. Under the authority of Article 19 of the Constitution, the Provisional World Parliament has met fourteen times in many different cities around the world from 1982 to 2015. While not binding on the final world parliament commencing once the Constitution is ratified by the people and nations of Earth, in its seventh session in Chennai, India, the Provisional World Parliament passed World Legislative Act 22 as an “Equity Act” that limited disparity in income for the people of Earth between the lowest income (itself entirely adequate for a decent life) and the highest income as a ratio of one to four.²¹

The principle of the common good embodied in the Constitution encourages free enterprise and free production in many areas but does not allow vast concentrations of corporate wealth to economically exploit the poor in the service of even greater accumulations of wealth. The global banking and money supply is placed under the control of the people of Earth, eliminating currency speculation and manipulation by huge private banking conglomerates (the same conglomerates responsible for the current, on-going worldwide series of economic disasters). When a constitution is explicitly premised on the universal common good (sarvodaya), then “free enterprise” empowering local producers can be maintained and encouraged without this phenomenon disrupting and destroying that common good.

Under the Constitution low cost loans are offered to businesses, nations, or individuals who have an

idea that can contribute to sustainable production of the goods and services that the majority of people on Earth so badly need. The current system of exploitation of poor nations by transnational corporations, the World Bank, and the IMF is eliminated in favor of loans that empower local producers and conservers of the environment to contribute to economic self-sufficiency of localities, regions, and nations. Gandhi's concept of swaraj or economic independence is here given concrete form.

The World Government is explicitly designed and mandated to deal with all problems that are beyond the scope of national governments such as preventing war, eliminating global poverty, and protecting the global environment. The Constitution requires government to protect human rights and equity worldwide, and to encourage and empower economic and political swaraj for localities and nations. This latter involves the federal principle itself that includes levels of democratic government from the local to regional to national to world levels. A "federation of free states" does not mean that each does whatever it pleases, for this conception of freedom would lead right back to the present system of domination and exploitation. True freedom requires the rule of law empowering all levels of democratic decision-making equally from the ground up.

And any genuine rule of law among nations requires that the law be enforceable over individuals. Today's deeply flawed system of so-called "international law," claiming to hold entire nations responsible for their actions, is replaced by genuine law that holds individuals accountable. If national leaders violate world law (by allowing pollution, for example, violating human rights, or building weapons), then they are arrested and brought to trial as should happen to any criminal. A world federalist order of "free states" cannot and does not mean that national or corporate leaders are above the law. As Kant insisted, the enforceable rule of democratically legislated law is the very essence of genuine political freedom for all.

The Earth Constitution is likewise designed to

minimize violence, to resolve conflicts, and to pacify the world order through genuine democratic processes. As philosopher of nonviolence Robert Holmes insists:

The aim should not be to end conflict. That would be utopian and might not even be desirable. The aim should be to develop nondestructive ways of dealing with conflict. Violence by its very nature cannot do that. Nonviolence can. As Gandhi demonstrated, rather than approaching conflict with a view to trying to prevail at any cost, it's possible to approach it with a view to trying to see that the truth prevail – trying to see that the best solution emerge, whether or not it be one to which you were predisposed at the outset. People can learn this. They can be trained in techniques to implement it. They can incorporate it in their institutions.²²

This is precisely what the Earth Constitution mandates for the world police, the enforcement system, and the other organs of the Earth Federation. Civilian police are trained in the minimum use of force necessary to apprehend individuals suspected on violating the law, and they will only possess such weapons as necessary to apprehend individuals (Article 10). The individuals to be apprehended are no longer primarily the so-called "terrorists" that the present system of repression identifies as law-breakers. Suspects arrested under the Earth Constitution will be bankers or stock holders suspected of investing in military manufacturing, university engineers suspected of designing weapons, corporate executives suspected of producing weapons, transportation companies suspected of transporting weapons, or soldiers suspected of training people in the use of weapons. All these things are explicitly illegal under the Earth Constitution. The ethics of satyagraha understands that these are all clearly criminal activities. The only way to global peace is to establish a peace system as opposed to our current planetary war system.

The peace system under the Earth Constitution includes all the aspects of sarvodaya enumerated above. All weapons of war and militaries are eliminated. Disputes between nations will now be

handled by one of the eight benches of the World Supreme Court System. Poverty is eliminated worldwide: also a major source of conflict. Vital resources are conserved and equitably distributed: another source of conflict. The environment is protected and people are put to work restoring the forests and soils of the planet and increasing the agricultural and biospheric health of the planet. As Article 10 on “The Enforcement System” asserts: “The enforcement of world law and world legislation under this World Constitution shall be conceived and developed primarily as the processes of effective design and administration of world law and world legislation to serve the welfare of all people on Earth, with equity and justice for all, in which the resources of Earth and the funds and the credits of the World Government are used only to serve peaceful human needs, and none used for weapons of mass destruction or for war making capabilities.”

The World Police have an independent Department of Conflict Resolution (under Article 10 and World Legislative Act 32) that will deal with conflicts between ethnic, religious, national, cultural, or tribal groupings in a systematic and democratically participatory way, using well-developed principles of conflict resolution and nonviolence. One of the four major organs of the world government, called the World Ombudsmus (Article 11), is created to deal with the protection of human rights worldwide. It investigates complaints and protects people from possible violations of their rights by employers, corporations, other individuals, or nations. The World Ombudsmus also has the capacity to investigate the world police or any other organ of the world government and bring them to court if they are suspected of violating any rights of the citizens of Earth.

This is what a peace system looks like. Followers of Gandhi’s satyagraha should take note. Satyagraha on a world scale is not scornful of government but requires government, for the state can be converted from what we have seen Gandhi call “violence in a concentrated and organized form” to a peace system in which the inevitable rule of law in human affairs pacifies those affairs and establishes

(through example, proper constitutional design, education, and democratic processes) a regime of global nonviolence. Some have misread Gandhi in this respect, associating him with anarchism, the doctrine that the state itself is the problem.

For Gandhi, it is not government or the state itself that is the problem but the lack of moral principles informing the workings of the state. Satyagraha, however, the clinging to gigantic moral and spiritual truth, can inform the lives of government officials and political activists just as much as anyone else. It is possible to create a system of governmental power that encourages truly democratic and moral economic and political arrangements. The Earth Constitution, we have seen, premises the Earth Federation on the principles of sarvodaya, swaraj, absolutely minimal use of necessary force (ahimsa), and institutionalized programs of conflict resolution (part of satyagraha).

The Preamble to the Constitution reads in part: “Conscious that Humanity is One despite the existence of diverse nations, races, creeds, ideologies and cultures and that the principle of unity in diversity is the basis for a new age when war shall be outlawed and peace prevail; when the earth’s total resources shall be equitably used for human welfare; and when basic human rights and responsibilities shall be shared by all without discrimination.” The moral principles to which government officials must swear allegiance are here made explicit: a peace system, a system based on human welfare, and a democratic participatory system of rights and responsibilities without discrimination.

The Constitution does create a powerful world government under a parliamentary system in which the World Executive branch of government lacks authority to countermand the authority of the World Parliament in any way and is required to implement the laws and budgets passed by the Parliament, thereby preventing the possibility of tyranny so often associated with the executive branch of governments. Neither are the World Police controlled by the World Executive, but are directly accountable to Parliament as a separate

branch of government.

The World Parliament does have real power over the nations and peoples of Earth, a power necessary to prevent war, disarm the nations, eliminate poverty, and deal with our immense global environmental crises. However, as political philosopher Hannah Arendt points out in her book entitled *On Violence*, we must distinguish between power and violence. Real power diminishes to the degree that government finds violence or the threat of violence necessary. She writes:

Power needs no justification, being inherent in the very existence of political communities; what it does need is legitimacy.... Violence can be justifiable, but it never will be legitimate.... We saw that the current equation of violence with power rests on government's being understood as domination of man over man by means of violence.... To substitute violence for power can bring victory, but the price is very high: for it is not only paid by the vanquished, it is also paid by the victor in terms of his own power.... Power and violence are opposites; where the one rules absolutely, the other is absent. Violence appears where power is in jeopardy, but left to its own course it ends in power's disappearance. This implies that it is not correct to think of the opposite of violence as nonviolence; to speak of non-violent power is actually redundant. Violence can destroy power; it is utterly incapable of creating it.²³

The same principle holds in Gandhi's philosophy of nonviolence. Not only do a people aroused to nonviolence have an immense power that no tyrant can resist, for Gandhi, government itself, insofar as it is animated through the democratic participation of citizens, becomes powerful for that very reason. In his book *The Moral and Political Thought of Mahatma Gandhi*, Raghavan Iyer states that: "Gandhi regarded power, like welfare, to be wholly a by-product of social activity and the complex web of human relationships, as expressed through a variety of groupings, from the family upward. The more that political power which is based on coercion and hierarchy seems important, the greater the spiritual poverty of the society in

which this is allowed to happen. But society can and must be changed through the efforts of its most morally developed members."²⁴

Hannah Arendt agrees. For Gandhi, coercion and hierarchy are signs of the failure of legitimate political power. Violence ill-becomes societies or governments just as much as individuals. Governments can be nonviolent just as much as individuals. The Earth Constitution not only designs a world peace system based on our highest moral principles, as we have seen, it invites world citizens conscious of these principles to participate in the world federal government, giving us the real possibility of a planetary society of actualized satyagraha for the first time in human history.

Endnotes

1. Cf. Raghavan N. Iyer, *The Moral and Political Thought of Mahatma Gandhi*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1973; Ignatius Jesudasan, S.J., *A Gandhian Theology of Liberation*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984; R.K. Prabhu and U.R. Rao, *The Mind of Mahatma Gandhi*, Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1967; Glyn Richards, *The Philosophy of Gandhi: A Study of His Basic Ideas*, Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1991.
2. The Constitution can be found at www.worldparliament-gov.org or www.worldproblems.net.
3. Jesudasan, p. 54.
4. Prabhu and Rao, p. 144.
5. Richards, pp. 36-37.
6. Kripalani, Krishna, ed. *All Men are Brothers: Life and Thoughts of Mahatma Gandhi as Told in His Own Words*, New York: World Without War Publications, 1972, p. 91.
7. Iyer, pp. 186-187.
8. Kripalani, pp. 132-133.

9. Ibid., p. 120.
10. Ibid., p. 118.
11. Ibid., p. 144.
12. Ibid., 123-124.
13. Ibid., p. 118.
14. Ibid., p. 120.
15. Ibid., p. 112.
16. Hudgens, Tom A. Let's Abolish War. Denver: BILR Corporation, p. 14.
17. Fischer, Louis, ed. The Essential Gandhi: An Anthology of His Writings on His Life, Work, and Ideas. New York: Vintage Books, 1962, p. 296.
18. Prabhu & Rao, p. 460.
19. Richards, p. 44-45.
20. For the history of this movement see www.radford.edu/gmartin or www.worldproblems.net.
21. See www.worldproblems.net/english/legilation/summaries_en/world_legislation_contents.html.
22. Holmes, Robert L. ed. Nonviolence in Theory and Practice. Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1990, p. 139.
23. Arendt, Hannah. On Violence. New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1970, pp. 52-55.
24. Iyer, p. 57.



“A federation of all humanity, together with a sufficient means of social justice to ensure health, education, and a rough equality of opportunity, would mean such a release and increase of human energy as to open a new phase in human history.”

H G Wells
The Outline of History (1920)
Writer, Scientist