

## Jaina vow of *ahimsā*, normative nonviolence and Gandhi's *Satyāgraha*

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### Abstract

In the climate of a strident Brāhmaṇical orthodoxy circa 6-4<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE, arose two resistant *śramaṇa* movements, Jainism and Buddhism that evolved alternative ontologies and moral systems with far-reaching ethical, ecological and political ramifications in South Asia and globally to the present day. In this lecture I wish bring out the importance of the Jaina normative ethics applied fervently by M. K. Gandhi in his own espousal of nonviolence (*Ahimsa*) and nonviolent resistance (*Satyāgraha*).

While, Jainism does embrace a deep metaphysics, salvific soteriology, and non-theistic theodicy, I will argue that we can derive a normatively-based secular worldview and principled ethics of nonviolence, relevant also in the age of liberalism. This principle has been applied to deep ecology, also to *svaraj* or self-rule ideals developed by early 20<sup>th</sup> century Indian liberal thinkers.

The second normative model of nonviolence that I examine is the Gandhian strategy of *satyāgraha* for resolving conflicts and seeking justice in morally compromised situations. While ostensibly a model of resistance and protest with the three elements of truth-grounding, non-harming, and suffering, the 'activist' element has been charged with harbouring covert coercive and therefore militant underpinnings. This contention has been a subject of much debate, but arguably detracts from the significant achievements in real-*politik*, and for the trajectory towards the end of the ideology of war that many scholars believe will be achieved only with the global espousal of an ethics of nonviolence. Gandhi himself explained the paradox by suggesting that where social and ecological injustice is perceived, one could consider several options, beginning with passive resistance, moving toward active nonviolent strategy; however, should all else fail, a more militant stance, calibrated nevertheless to cause least harm to the adversary, may be an option.

To illustrate the case, two examples will be drawn on: 1. The freedom struggle in India, from home-rule to 'Quit India', to its eventual independence without as much as a bullet being fired from the side of the freedom fighters. 2. Gandhi's impact on the African American Civil Rights Movement. A generation of Civil Rights leaders and activists came under the spell of the powerful Black educators and preachers who had visited India or read and published on Gandhi's moving enactments in South Africa and then in India. This began with D E B Dubois, a first Black Harvard PhD and sociologist, who wrote on Gandhi in 'The Crisis' that he edited from 1910. In the next 50 years, as they say, "the mantra of nonviolence cotton on". This culminated in Martin Luther King Jr's conviction in the efficacy of the Indian philosophy of nonviolence to achieve racial justice, that helped him mobilize a mass movement, systematically enacting

*satyāgraha*-style sit-ins, nonviolent human barricades, civil disobedience, marches, rallies, noncooperation strikes, and pickets, spiced with passionate speeches, while risking arrests or police beating. Since then, the strategy of nonviolent resistance has been adopted across the globe for various and vastly different causes, including environmental or ecological justice, land rights, womens' rights, animal rights, anti-child labour and human trafficking, immigrant and refugee rights, to name a few.

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