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## Role of Gandhian Satyagraha in Growing Religious Conflicts in the World

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### Abstract

Religion has been an inseparable aspect of human civilization; however, in the twenty-first century, religious conflict has emerged as one of the gravest threats to global peace. From the Middle East to South Asia, from Africa to Europe, the escalating violence, intolerance, and animosity perpetrated in the name of religion represent a profound crisis for human values. In this turbulent landscape, Mahatma Gandhi's doctrine of Satyagraha emerges as a relevant and effective framework for resolution. This research paper analyses how the core concepts of Gandhian Satyagraha—Ahimsa (nonviolence), Satya (truth), Sarva Dharma Samabhava (equal respect for all religions), the Constructive Programme, and self-purification—can contribute to the resolution of contemporary religious conflicts. Drawing on diverse case studies, historical examples, and contemporary conflict-resolution theory, the paper establishes that the Gandhian approach is capable not only of de-escalating religious violence, but also of fostering a durable culture of tolerance and coexistence.

**Keywords:** Satyagraha, Ahimsa, Religious Conflict, Sarva Dharma Samabhava, Conflict Resolution, Gandhism, Interfaith Dialogue, Nonviolent Resistance

### 1. Introduction

If the twenty-first century were to be designated "the century of religious conflicts," it would scarcely be an exaggeration. In this era of globalisation, while diverse civilisations and cultures converge, incidents of conflict and violence based on religious identity have simultaneously intensified. According to the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP), religion is a significant factor in more than fifty percent of the world's armed conflicts. The rise of the Islamic State (ISIS), the persecution of Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar, communal riots in India, Christian-Muslim violence in Nigeria, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are all distinct expressions of this religious violence.

Against this backdrop, the philosophy and methodology of Mahatma Gandhi — particularly his doctrine of Satyagraha — appear remarkably relevant. Gandhi was born into and worked within a society of profound religious diversity. He not only envisioned a unity of Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, and Christians, but also strove to translate that vision into practice. His Satyagraha was not merely a political instrument; it was a comprehensive life-philosophy rooted in human dignity, justice, and nonviolence.

The objective of this research is to examine how the foundational elements of Gandhian Satyagraha—truth, nonviolence, equal reverence for all religions, creative resistance, and dialogue—can prove useful in the context of today's religious conflicts. The study's relevance lies in the fact that when conventional diplomatic and military solutions are failing, the Gandhian alternative perspective may illuminate a new path forward.

## **2. Religious Conflict: Nature and Causes**

### **2.1 The Concept of Religious Conflict**

Religious conflict is generally defined as violence or tension in which religion serves as a central or significant motivating factor. It is important to note, however, that most religious conflicts do not arise from religion alone; political, economic, and social factors are equally significant. Social scientist Mark Juergensmeyer, in his influential work *Terror in the Mind of God* (2000), argued that religious conflict erupts when religion and politics form a toxic alliance, and when religious identity is perceived to be under threat.

Samuel Huntington's "Clash of Civilizations" thesis (1996) provided a theoretical framework for religious and cultural conflicts, although it has been subjected to extensive criticism. Scholars such as Edward Said characterised it as reductive and ideologically biased. Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that religious identity and cultural divisions play a significant role in contemporary conflicts.

### **2.2 Major Contemporary Centres of Religious Conflict**

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the Middle East — centred on sites sacred to Judaism, Islam, and Christianity simultaneously—has persisted for decades. The Shia-Sunni divide in Syria and the rise of ISIS represent the most terrifying face of religious extremism. In South Asia, religious tensions between India and Pakistan, persecution of Hindu minorities in Bangladesh, and Buddhist-Hindu conflict in Sri Lanka pose ongoing threats to regional stability. In Africa, Muslim-Christian tensions in Nigeria and Islamist extremism in Sudan have displaced millions. The atrocities committed against Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar by the Buddhist majority have been designated a genocide by the United Nations.

### **2.3 Root Causes of Religious Conflict**

Religious conflicts are typically rooted in several interrelated causes. The first is the politicisation of religious orthodoxy and identity — when political leaders exploit religion for self-interested ends, religious sentiments assume a violent character. The second is historical memory and accumulated injustice — wounds carried across generations are invoked to justify present violence. The third is economic inequality and competition for resources—when one religious community perceives itself as economically marginalised relative to another. The fourth is the role of information technology and hate propaganda — social media has become an accelerant for the rapid spread of religious hatred.

### 3. Gandhian Satyagraha: Philosophical Foundations

#### 3.1 The Development of the Concept of Satyagraha

"Satyagraha" — is a phrase that Gandhi himself created. Agra (perseverance) plus Satya (truth) equals unwavering devotion to the truth. As Gandhi began his fight against the Asiatic Registration Act in South Africa in 1906, he needed a term that would set his strategy apart from "passive resistance." Satyagraha, he said, was the way of those brave people who refused to bow to injustice but also refused to employ violence. It was not the weapon of the weak or cowards. Satya (Truth) was not a theoretical idea to Gandhi. He claimed that Truth is God, or more accurately, that God is Truth. This is an important distinction. It is possible to believe in Truth even if one does not believe in God. Gandhi therefore established a universal basis for his ethics that went beyond the limitations of any one religion. His theory was accepted by all religious groups for this very reason.

#### 3.2 Ahimsa (Nonviolence) — The Soul of Gandhism

Gandhi believed that ahimsa encompassed much more than just refraining from violence. The power of love and compassion was an active, constructive force. He said: "Nonviolence and love are two names for the same thing." Nonviolence brings people together where violence separates. Nonviolence has the power to turn even an enemy into a friend, whereas violence creates adversaries. In the American civil rights movement, Martin Luther King Jr. embraced Gandhi's nonviolence and admitted that his entire movement was morally based on Gandhi's ideas. Ahimsa's importance is heightened in the midst of religious disputes. Violence committed in the name of religion desecrates the essence of religion itself in addition to destroying human life. Gandhi felt that since the teaching of human dignity and love is at the heart of all religions, no true religion could condone violence.

#### 3.3 Sarva Dharma Samabhava — A Response to Religious Conflict

Gandhi's idea of Sarva Dharma Samabhava, or equal respect for all religions, is arguably the most applicable aspect of his philosophy to current religious disputes. It is important to distinguish this principle from secularism. Sarva Dharma Samabhava calls for equal respect for all religions, whereas secularism calls for the state to maintain its distance from religion. The scriptures of Sikhs, Muslims, Christians, and Hindus were all read at Gandhi's prayer meetings. Instead of calling this the "merger of religions," he called it the "harmony of religions." "Ishvara Allah Tero Naam" (God and Allah are Thy names) — a line from Gandhi's favorite hymn — symbolising Sarva Dharma Samabhava. During India's 1947 partition, when communal violence peaked, Gandhi travelled to Noakhali to join the victims and observe a fast. This fast was a potent Satyagraha gesture that was essential in bringing an end to the bloodshed in Calcutta.

#### 3.4 The Key Elements of Satyagraha

Gandhi recognized a number of crucial components of the Satyagraha movement. The first is Atma Shuddhi, or self-purification; the Satyagrahi must first cleanse the soul of fear and prejudice. The second is communication and compromise; Gandhi always placed a high value on interacting with the enemy. The third is civil disobedience, also known as Savinay Avagya, which is the nonviolent opposition to unfair laws and structures. The fourth is voluntary self-suffering, in which the Satyagrahi voluntarily bears the suffering instead of forcing it on the opponent, thus arousing the opponent's conscience. The fifth is the Constructive Program, which presents constructive options rather than only negative opposition.

## **4. Satyagraha and Religious Conflict: Historical and Contemporary Analysis**

### **4.1 South Africa: An Experiment in Multi-Religious Unity**

Between 1890 and 1914, Gandhi led a Satyagraha in South Africa that was fundamentally multireligious. Hindus, Muslims, Parsis, and Christian Indians all joined together to fight British authority at that time. Gandhi put religious differences aside in order to create a united front against injustice. This alone is a powerful illustration of how satyagraha may bridge religious differences and bring people together for a shared goal.

### **4.2 India's Freedom Struggle: The Pursuit of Hindu-Muslim Unity**

The Hindus and Muslims united in solidarity during Gandhi's campaign against the Rowlatt Act of 1919. The Khilafat Movement (1919–1924), which sought to protect the Ottoman Caliphate, received Gandhi's support. A lot of people were against this decision; B.R. Ambedkar called it "religious politics." But Gandhi wanted to create a common nationality that respected the feelings of Muslim community. Gandhi's travel to Noakhali and his fast during the tragic 1947 partition serve as examples of a type of satyagraha that had some success in halting intercommunal violence. Gandhi's Noakhali expedition, according to historians like Judith Brown, not only lessened violence but also showed the victims that they were not alone and that someone supported them in their quest for justice.

### **4.3 Martin Luther King Jr. and the American Civil Rights Movement**

Martin Luther King Jr. implemented Gandhi's Satyagraha in the United States from 1955 and 1968. The movement had a strong religious component even if its main goal was to combat racial prejudice. King created a potent moral movement by fusing Gandhian nonviolence with Christian theology. "Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that," he famously said. Gandhi's Ahimsa was accurately translated into Christian terms: "Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that."

### **4.4 Northern Ireland: The Protestant-Catholic Conflict and the Peace Process**

Gandhian principles are still relevant today, as seen by the settlement of the protracted Protestant Catholic conflict in Northern Ireland (The Troubles, 1968-1998). Gandhian ideals of communication, respect for one another, and recognition of past hurts served as the foundation for the Good Friday Agreement of 1998. Nobel Peace Prize winner and peace campaigner Mairead Maguire cited Gandhi as her main inspiration.

### **4.5 South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission**

The Gandhi's belief in the power of forgiveness and truth is embodied in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), which was founded in South Africa after apartheid under Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Desmond Tutu. The TRC provided victims with public recognition of their suffering and gave offenders the chance to confess to their crimes and request amnesty. The TRC was clearly successful in preventing civil conflict, notwithstanding its shortcomings.

## 5. Application of Satyagraha in Contemporary Religious Conflicts

### 5.1 Interfaith Dialogue — A Gandhian Perspective

Gandhi felt that sincere, truthful, and courteous communication between religions was the key to resolving religious disputes. Organizations like the United Religions Initiative, Religions for Peace, and the Parliament of the World's Religions are among the many interfaith projects that are now under progress. But the Gandhian viewpoint goes farther. Gandhi believed in "talking together," but he also believed in "working together" and "suffering together." Here, Gandhi's idea of the Constructive Programme is very pertinent. Religious barriers between individuals of different religions naturally disappear when they work together to address common social issues like poverty reduction, sanitation, and education. This is an example of how psychologist Gordon Allport's "contact hypothesis" was put into practice in 1954.

### 5.2 The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: The Potential of Satyagraha

One of the world's longest and most intricate religious-political disputes is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Although there are significant practical barriers, Gandhian Satyagraha might theoretically be applied in this situation. Gandhian Satyagraha was first used in the 1980s by Palestinian nonviolent activist Mubarak Awad. The Palestinian "Holy Land Trust" and the Israeli peace organization "Rabbis for Human Rights" are still working in this area today. According to Gandhian analysis, as long as both sides deny each other's human dignity, there will never be a sustainable peace in this war. And the core of Sarva Dharma Samabhava is this understanding of human dignity.

### 5.3 The Rohingya Crisis in Myanmar

In Myanmar, the Buddhist majority's persecution of Rohingya Muslims is an especially complicated situation. The glaring contradiction in this situation is that people who practice Buddhism, a religion that advocates for nonviolence, are using violence. According to Gandhian analysis, this indicates a failure of Buddhism's political instrumentalization rather than a failure of Buddhism in general. The tragic contradiction between political power and moral leadership is exemplified by the case of Aung San Suu Kyi, who was herself a follower of Gandhi and Nehru.

### 5.4 Communal Tensions in India and the Gandhian Response

India's post-independence history of communal rioting is extremely distressing. Gandhian organizations and people have been instrumental in promoting peace during the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992, the riots that followed, the Gujarat pogrom in 2002, and many other incidents. The Gandhian tradition is being carried on via peace committees, mohalla committees, and other interfaith interaction programs. Gandhi's Constructive Programme is shown by Ela Bhatt's Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), which unites women of many faiths. In the wake of the 2002 Gujarat riots, groups like Citizens for Justice and Peace worked to preserve the spirit of Satyagraha in a contemporary setting.

## 6. Limitations of Satyagraha: A Critical Assessment

### 6.1 Practical Limitations of Satyagraha

As we recognize the benefits of Gandhian Satyagraha, we also need to address its drawbacks and detractors. The most common critique is that Satyagraha works best when the enemy has a "moral conscience." Reinhold Niebuhr, a German theologian, maintained that Gandhi's strategy worked against the British Empire because Britain had a free press, a parliament, and public opinion, but that nonviolence was ineffective against a dictator like Hitler or Stalin. Gandhi's philosophy is sometimes criticized for requiring a high degree of moral discipline that is hard for regular people to maintain. In his criticism of Gandhi's views on the caste system, B.R. Ambedkar contended that Gandhism occasionally served to maintain rather than to question the status quo.

### 6.2 Modern Satyagraha: New Challenges

Gandhian Satyagraha needs to take on new forms in the digital age, when hate speech spreads quickly on social media. Modern-day versions of Satyagraha can include "Digital Satyagraha"—the nonviolent opposition to hate speech on social media, the fact-based debunking of false information, and the broad sharing of constructive instances of interfaith collaboration. Often considered the pioneer of contemporary peace studies, Johan Galtung integrated Gandhian principles into his Transcend Method. Galtung claims that "transcendence" in religious conflicts—the creation of a new reality that transcends the dispute itself—is a contemporary reformulation of the Gandhian Constructive Program.

## 7. A Gandhian Framework for Religious Conflict Resolution

A Gandhian framework for resolving religious disputes might be suggested based on the analysis presented above. There are five levels of intervention in this approach.

**Level 1 — Individual Transformation:** Gandhi believed that personal change is the first step toward societal change. The first step in resolving religious conflict is to eradicate ignorance, fear, and prejudice inside the individual. This calls for the growth of a Sarva Dharma Samabhava culture and interfaith education.

**Level 2 — Community-Level Communication:** The development of ongoing, organized communication between various religious groups. It is imperative that this conversation take place at both the "intellectual" and "heart" levels.

**Level 3 — Creative Collaboration:** Involving individuals from diverse religious backgrounds in common social endeavors. The "us" and "them" limits of identity erode as people collaborate.

**Level 4 — Peaceful Resistance:** The Satyagrahi reaction calls for nonviolent resistance when one religious group persecutes another, using the judicial system, the media, public protests, and international pressure.

**Level 5 — Institutional Reform:** Establishing laws and regulations that uphold the rights of religious minorities, forbid hate speech based on religion, and actively encourage interfaith understanding.

## 8. Conclusion

"Nothing is impossible for me if I have Truth on my side." Gandhi was adamant about this, and it is still very true in light of the religious disputes of today. This research paper has shown that Gandhian Satyagraha offers a thorough, moral, and useful framework for resolving religious disputes. The destructive cycle of religious violence is broken by Ahimsa. Satya provides the basis for fair discourse. Sarva Dharma Samabhava fosters tolerance and respect for people of different religious backgrounds. Additionally, the Constructive Program guides societies toward common human goals by bridging religious divides.

Gandhian Satyagraha is not a panacea; it has its limitations. Multifaceted responses are necessary for complex, multifaceted religious disputes. However, the Gandhian viewpoint offers a moral basis that is necessary for any political or technical solution to survive over time. Bombs and fatwas won't settle religious disputes in the twenty-first century. It will occur when we rediscover the love, compassion, and justice that are at the core of each of our religions. And Gandhi's Satyagraha remains an enduring light that leads us to that rediscovery. According to Gandhi himself, "You must be the change you wish to see in the world." Religious strife will be resolved internally, via the change of the human heart, rather than externally. And that's what Satyagraha is all about.

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