Gandhi and the Posthumanist Agenda: An Early Expression of Global IR

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The recent debates on Global IR emphasize the vital roles that non-Western knowledge-forms can play in strategic mainstreaming of the relational ethics of 'post-humanism'. That is, the theoretical-practical approach that propositions an inclusive account of the importance of not just the human actors but also the non-human actors in global political life, such as nature, earth's processes, plant and animal systems, technospheres, forms of viruses, and so on (Cudworth, Hobden and Kavalski 2018, Brasovan 2017, Kavalski 2020, Shih 2020). Since Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1957), or the Mahatma (great soul) as he is popularly known, vehemently made an appeal to acknowledge an 'identification with all that lives', his viewpoints come across as an untapped repository that could be evoked to supplement the post-humanist agenda of Global IR. In fact, Gandhi's way of foregrounding the post-humanist agenda borrows from a range of conceptualizations – such as, *ahiṃsā* (non-injury or non-violence), *satyāgraha* (truth-force), *tapasya* (spiritual heat), *sarvodaya* (welfare for all) and *swadeshi* (self-sufficiency) – that arise from the Indian textual traditions of the *Vedas* and *Bhagavad Gītā*. This article aims to explain how these conceptualizations based on the Indic knowledge-forms can initiate a dialogic interaction between the seemingly divergent approaches of 'Western modernity' and 'non-Western traditionalism', thereby imaginatively informing the Global IR discourse.

The Twin Pillars of Gandhi's Political Practice: Ahiṃsā and Satyagraha

Gandhi's ideas, more than most in recent times, have struggled to advance Indian ethics beyond the pale of an apparently diminishing relevance in a modern, civilizing and globalizing world. Perhaps Gandhi doesn't have much to offer as an ethical theoretician – as Bimal Krishna Matilal (one of my own mentors and progenitors of the two volumes on Indian Ethics: 2007, 2023), once put it to me. But, it is said, Gandhi's genius lay in his practical wisdom, especially his ability to take an idea from a traditional practice or context (e.g., fasting) and apply it to contemporary issues or situations, whether on dietary matters or in an act of civil disobedience. For this he would attract criticism from both traditionalists and modernists alike.

Gandhi led a nationalist struggle against British sovereignty in India, which sparked a spate of anti-colonial movements throughout the globe. The way or means by which he was able to achieve this feat, and how this ties in with the particular ethics he gave voice to, is particularly significant. That in the process he also ended up questioning many of the traditional (Hindu) values and customary practices, as well as a host of modern (Western) values, though perhaps not overturning them, is also significant. So, for example, he grew up a vegetarian on customary Hindu grounds; but after a short lapse, he switched his moral justification for vegetarianism to ethical consideration for animals.

Gandhi is a curious mix of the radical and the conservative. For example, he took up the cause of civil rights in South Africa, but his struggle did not extend much beyond rights for the Indian community. Still, he set an example with sagely guidelines for 'civil resistance' which some Black leaders and their Christian sympathizers of the time also followed. Indeed, the ANC was modelled after the Natal Indian Congress. Returning to India, Gandhi was much

anguished by the injustices of the caste, class and religious divisions that had taken deep root in the Indian society. He became a champion of the cause of the 'untouchables', whom he gave the name *harijan* (people of the Lord), and he railed against the prejudices and 'the evils of the caste system'. It looks as though Gandhi is set to have the entire structure dismantled.

In the long run, however, Gandhi defended the *varṇa* (a social structure based on the division of labour), on the grounds that it is (1) different from the divisive social structure based on the hierarchical notions of caste/jati (it should be noted that while jati and caste are often used interchangeably, jati has a broader connotation and is also used to refer to various groups and subgroups within and outside the caste system); (2) a sensible scheme for demarcation of work, (3) a law of human nature, and hence part of *dharma*. *Dharma* here is an all-embracing conception, and perhaps unique to Indian thought, which has many and varying meanings, beginning with 'fixed principles' in the Vedas and ranging from ordinance, usage, duty, right, justice, morality, virtue, religion, good works, function or characteristics to 'norm', 'righteousness', 'truth' and much else (Kane 1969). The word is derived from the Sanskrit root *dhṛ*, meaning to form, uphold, support, sustain, or hold together. It connotes the idea of that which maintains, gives order and cohesion to any given reality, and ultimately to nature, society, and the individual. It is also central to other Indian traditions like Buddhism, Sikhism, and Jainism, each with its own understanding of *dharma*.

What Gandhi didn't find agreeable was the inordinate privileges one caste, especially the Brahmin has arrogated to itself. Inequality, he thinks, is not an issue in the design, but it becomes a problem when the structure gets tilted vertically (Gandhi 1965, 29, 80). The enigma of *dharma* oddly places constraints on the otherwise splendid idea of civil and human rights that Gandhi awakens to rather early in his career, but it also helped him forge a principle of human action which itself has buttressed the struggle for rights of one kind or another in different quarters. That principle is non-violent action or, as Gandhi also called it, *ahiṃsā*.

Ahiṃsā is a fundamental rational intuition and the highest virtue, at least in Jaina ethics, which is both a philosophical system and a way of life in its own right and was founded around 500 BCE by Mahavira, an ascetic and unorthodox teacher thought to be a contemporary of the Buddha, to whom he is often compared. Jainism is decidedly non-theistic, rejecting, like Buddhism, belief in a 'supremely personal God'. With its broad understanding of sentient life force, Jaina ethics inevitably reflects, as Albert Schweitzer put it, an uncompromising 'reverence for all life'. The moral restraints that follow from this intuition comprise dietary habits, such as non-consumption of meat, alcohol, and foods of certain kinds, and ruling against the abuse, subjugation, exploitation, ill-treatment, tormenting, discarding and slaying of 'all breathing, existing, living, sentient creatures.' There are prohibitions against the injurious treatment of animals, such as beating, mutilating, branding, overloading and deprivation of food and space. The Jaina ethical worldview can and is examined in light of normative ethics and debates regarding styles and approaches to religiously and socially inspired activism.

Gandhi first toyed with non-cooperation, an idea which he discovered in Tolstoy and Henry Thoreau. This was reinforced by his Quaker friends in South Africa. It underpins the idea of 'non-resistance', meaning the renunciation of all opposition by force, when faced with evil, injustices and oppression. Gandhi initially called this 'passive resistance'; although he modified his strategy, and adopted a newly-coined term, *satyāgraha* (truth-force), which better reflects the Indian basis of this technique. What this implies is that Gandhi, no longer content with simply 'turning the other cheek' or just withholding taxes and obligations, or advocating 'go slow', looked for a method by which to bring the adversary to (1) confront the situation and meet 'eye-to-eye' on the issue in dispute, and (2) redress the evil or wrong without coercing or inflicting injury or violence onto the other party. In developing this method, what Gandhi did in effect is to combine three cardinal notions that had long currency in Hindu, Jaina and Buddhist ethics, namely, *satya*, *ahiṃsā*, and *tapasya*.

The last of these, *tapasya* (spiritual heat), is an austere practice associated with asceticism. For Gandhi this concept provides a framework for the cultivation of courage, fortitude, stamina and most importantly *disinterestedness* (here invoking the *Bhagavad Gītā*), necessary for the successful deployment of the ensuing technique. A synthesis of asceticism and duty is found in the unique concept of*niṣkāma karma* or disinterested action, a central precept of the *Bhagavad Gītā*. What this implies is that one does not forsake one's apportioned duties but performs them in complete disregard of their fruits or consequences. Action is a universal necessity, and the individual has a 'right'

only to the performance of the action and not to its fruit (*Gītā* 2.47) (Buitenen, 1985). The argument is that it is not acting that enslaves, but rather the thought that one is the cause, the agent and enjoyer of the act; stripped of this linear causal thinking no action can be binding on the self, which is free to start with. This disinterested action ethics might look somewhat like Kant's ethic of 'duty for duty's sake', or acting from respect for the Law (hence the Categorical Imperative), however, the basis and presuppositions of the two positions are radically divergent and perhaps even mutually contradictory (for difference between Kant and Gītā, see Radhakrishnan, 1911, Hutchings and Bilimoria, 1988, Mohanty, 2007).

Satya has to do with 'truth', but truth in three senses, namely, of being truthful, the truth of knowledge and the truth of being or reality. Its original sense is of course derived from '*sat*', which means the 'is' of existence. For Gandhi, Truth is God – by which he means we should continue to strive for truth beyond all human conception, in a spirit of creative tolerance. On the practical level, *satya* means truth as action, or *satyagraha*, which suggests the idea of 'seizing' or 'holding firmly to a good cause'; thus satyagraha is a categorical attitude or 'force' by which one holds firmly to, grasps and hangs in there until truth triumphs in the situation. And this truth-force, he argues, must meet the needs of society at large beyond the individual's selfish ends (Gandhi 1968).

There lurks in the idea of *satyāgraha* all the connotations of a force, or exertion, of pushing oneself, or doggedly putting one's foot down, and so on. The force could be a subtly coercive one, or an overtly injurious or violent one. This is where Gandhi finds the Jaina precept of *ahiṃsā* or 'not causing injury or harm to another being' to be most instructive. Of course, we shouldn't overlook the Hindu and Buddhist emphasis on just the same precept. Gandhi acknowledged as much and used this negative precept of non-injury to qualify *satyāgraha* so that no hurt or harm should arise. But Gandhi did more: he transformed *ahiṃsā* into a dynamic condition for a stratagem that does not stop until the goal of the action is achieved. In other words, far from a passive 'do not' injunction, *ahiṃsā* (non-injury), when intertwined with *satyāgraha* (truth-force), becomes a positive mode of action that raises the intent of this injunction to a much higher ethical level: it seeks to bring about what is right in the situation at hand. Further, the interest of the other party is not compromised, for activists would rather suffer injury on themselves than have it inflicted on the other; and compassion or 'love', as Gandhi calls it, as well as utter humanity or humility, must accompany the action. This, Gandhi believed, can be universalized to form a principle of 'disinterested non-violent action'.

This principle is then put to use in political action, in a civil disobedience movement, in non-violent freedom and civil rights struggles, some of which have achieved remarkable results. One can argue whether the application of this principle in some instances does or does not entail coercion, and whether this would nullify the principle; or whether the inadvertent violence unleashed in the process defeats the purpose altogether. The consensus of those who have been influenced by this principle, such as Martin Luther King, Jr., in leading the struggle for the rights of African Americans in the 1960s, is that the purpose is never defeated.

The Blend of Ahiṃsā and Satyāgraha: Gandhi's Recipe for Post-humanism

Gandhi is better known for his ethics of *ahiṃsā* and *satyāgraha* than for his post-humanist environmental philosophy. However, just as leaders of non-violent civil rights movements across the globe attribute their inspiration to Gandhi's strategy of making the oppressors confront their own unjust practices, leading environmental theorists and activists in India and other parts of the world defer to Gandhi's insights and practices in the area of ecology as well. While much of what Gandhi said or wrote on ecology is of an anecdotal nature, his criticism of structures antithetical to a healthy ecological life-world ramified into ideas which developed and were put into action in different areas of environmental concern. Gandhi's importance as an environmental thinker may be marked in terms of the strategies and vistas opened up by his pursuits, both public and private, towards a sustained animal and environmental liberation struggle. Looked at another way, Gandhi's environmental thinking is rooted in his larger philosophical and moral thinking.

Very early on, Gandhi came to the realization that morality is an inexorable part of the objective reality he preferred to call Truth (read God), and that nature was a substance within this reality. This makes Gandhi a moral realist. It follows from this moral ontological, as in traditional wisdom, that nature was not there merely for human use or as an

appendix to civilization but was a presence, much like one's nourishing nurse, to be respected. Gandhi's Hindu background taught him about the basic elements that constituted the physical and material world – namely, earth, water, fire, ether and space, which he saw ritually invoked in home worship as well as in meditational practices. Indeed, Hindu biocosmology, with its large pantheon of gods and goddesses, appeared to share these elemental constituents in varying measures and permutations.

During his education in England, Gandhi rediscovered the virtues of his family's vegetarianism, albeit on the moral grounding articulated by Henry Salt, and inspired by Shelley, Thoreau, Whitman and Ruskin. At the same time, Gandhi sought out theosophists who initiated him into a non-ritual moral reading of the *Bhagavad Gītā*; this instilled humanitarian ideals that were to take Gandhi further towards a complete break with Western civilization (he endorsed some key ideas of modernity but held the West responsible for not practising in the colonies what it had been preaching for centuries). In South Africa, where he went to practise as an attorney, Gandhi withdrew from time to time to deepen his understanding of Tolstoy, the Upanisads, Quakerism, the Gospels through contacts with Trappists, Methodists and Jewish acquaintances. He also tried his hand at living in a commune.

The influence of Ruskin's *Unto This Last* led Gandhi to write his own treatise on *sarvodaya* (welfare for all), which became the basis of the movement of the same name which he launched upon his return to India in 1914. It was part of the larger programme he envisioned for India of *swadeshi* (self-sufficiency) and had outlined in his manifesto *Hind Swaraj* (written in Gujarati in 1909). Both socio-ethical directives, as well as that of non-violent resistance or *ahiṃsā*, were propelled by the common volitional determination of *satyāgraha* or truth-force. The influence of the Jaina ethical precept of non-injury, as discussed earlier, is also notable (which Buddhism and Hinduism also heed and which has its parallel in the Golden Rule of 'turning the other cheek' or 'non-resistance', as Tolstoy had christened this practice). Under Gandhi's impetus, however, this basically passive and individual stance becomes a positively empowering and collective experience with enormous potential for unleashing liberative but, at times, also coercive and indignant energies (Bondurant 1985).

From these general articulations and stances also sprang the more practical ideal of a minimal or 'reactionary' economy and Luddite manufacturing skills, such as the humble spinning wheel (*charkha*) and weaving of yarns (*khādī*), and small-scale farming. Gandhi also experimented extensively with 'earth treatments' and 'dietetics' as means of healing and rejuvenation that did not depend on chemical-based medicines and toxic pollutants. Personal ecology for him was the basis for social and environmental ecologies as well (Gandhi 1957, 271). Traditional methods of farming, husbandry and irrigation were explored in the Ashrams which Gandhi helped set up in different regions.

Gandhi's overall environmental philosophy was based on what human beings needed rather than what they wanted. His early introduction to the teachings of Jainas, theosophists, Christian sermons, Ruskin and Tolstoy, and most significantly the *Bhagavad Gītā*, had a profound impact on the development of Gandhi's holistic thinking on humanity, nature and their ecological interrelation. His deep concern for the disadvantaged, the poor and the rural population created an ambience for an alternative social thinking that was at once far-sighted and immediate. Gandhi was acutely aware that the demands generated by the need to feed and sustain human life, compounded by the growing industrialization of India, far outstripped the finite resources of nature. This might nowadays appear naïve or commonplace, but such pronouncements were as rare as they were heretical a century ago. Gandhi was also concerned about the destruction, under colonial and modernist designs, of the existing infrastructures which had more potential for keeping a community flourishing within ecologically sensitive traditional patterns of subsistence, especially in the rural areas, than did the incoming Western alternatives based on nature-blind technology and the enslavement of human spirit and energies.

The moral principle for which Gandhi is best known is that of active non-violence, derived from the traditional moral restraint of not injuring another being. The most refined expression of this value is in the great epic of the *Mahābhārata,* (c.100 BCE to 200 CE), where moral development proceeds through placing constraints on the liberties, desires and acquisitiveness endemic to human life. One's action is judged in terms of the impact it is likely to have on another. Jainas had generalized this principle to include all sentient creatures and biocommunities alike. Advanced Jaina monks and nuns will sweep their path to avoid harming insects and even bacteria. Non-injury is a

non-negotiable universal prescription. Gandhi (1962, VI. 29) relates this principle to the value that the *Bhagavad Gītā* places on the welfare of all beings:

The one whose self is disciplined…

Sees the self abiding in every being

And sees every being in the self;

He sees the same in all beings.

The transcendence of the self from constricting human conditions of desire and attachment and the prudential ethic of not causing injury to other beings for fear of attracting more karma into one's soul is turned by Gandhi into a categorical value: one does X because X is right and it is also just from the position of the other. This principle, more than anything else, becomes the foundation stone for Gandhi's approach to environmental ethics. His obsession with the hygiene of humans and animals alike – safer waste disposal systems and cleanliness of both the body and the surrounding environs – have been meticulously noted in the Gandhian literature and his own writings. Gandhi's weakness, as many writers have pointed out, is that he did not compose a systematic treatise on this subject, nor did he lead a major ecological campaign in the way that he did political campaigns, such as the symbolic 'Salt March', an act of nationalist defiance against the British monopoly over access to sea salt. His impact, nevertheless, has been tremendous, and Gandhi's visions, if not his words, have certainly left traces in the great works on ecological thinking, especially those of Arne Naess and other 'deep ecology' or pan-ecotheistic thinking in recent decades. We should as well as mention the Indian variety led by Sunderlal Bahuguna and Vandana Shiva; and the remarkably effective protests led by Medha Patkar against damning and the Chipko women against trees being unnecessarily felled. Gandhi, with his advocacy of *sarvodaya* and radical empowerment of microeconoculture, was a forerunner of the avant-garde movements associated with 'sustainable ecology' and the Greens. But Gandhi went further in some respects with his emphasis on the absoluteness of non-violence and *dharma*.

Gandhi was also adamant about the need for a rigorous ethic of non-injury in our treatment of animals (Gandhi 1959, 34-35). On active environmental renewal projects, Gandhi wrote in 1926 that for India the next step should not be destructive agriculture but the planting of fruit trees and other vegetation as these provide nourishment, stability in the soil, and attract rainfall as well as provide fodder for the insect and animal world (Harris 1988, 274). The implications of such simple ecological wisdom have only just begun to dawn on a tech-fested agricultural economics. Likewise, Gandhi's symbolic insistence on *khādī* spinning was instructive for the avoidance of factory-emitted pollution, desalination of soil through over-cultivation and dependence on raw materials produced through suffering caused to animals (e.g., silk and wool). Gandhi's advocacy of simple living through the principles of ahiṃsā and satyāgraha challenges us to reconsider our lifestyle engendered by the pressures of contemporary consumerism. Some questions we must ponder include: Can social duty be expanded to include ecological community? What new modalities of caring for the earth can Gandhian ethics inspire? Can *dharma* be re-interpreted in earth-friendly terms for the purpose of imagining a post-Western alternative to the modern Western industrial 'civilization'?

Gandhi's Ethics of Post-Humanism: a Synthesis between Tradition and Modernity

In modern India, a stereotyped spiritual Gandhi has become something of an impediment to wider scholarship. This has undermined the relevance of Gandhi's post-human ethics, as expressed through his critique of modernity, urban industrial civilization, and Western knowledge systems, and discounted the value of his personal and social experiments for sustainability and human progress. Attention to Gandhi's views on the role of science and technology has been insufficient. Gandhi's thinking in these areas have drawn wide attention and he inspired a number of movements, such as deep ecology, vegetarianism, minimalist farming, non-polluting and non-wasteland industry, civil rights, and the role of women in education and politics. Gandhi's contribution to ethics in the context of modernity and its post-phase is discussed at length in Bilimoria and Rayner (2023).

Modernity, of course, is not just contemporaneity, but signifies a difference of worldview shaped by developments in

science, technology, and social and economic organization. Western modernity has meant rationalization in the Weberian sense: differentiation of spheres of life, the rise of capitalism, liberal democracy, and the nation-state. The question concerns the normative universality of Western modernity, and whether modernization signifies Westernization. Weber certainly thought so, and his study of Hindu ethics was, at least in part, motivated by a developmental logic similar to Hegel's pointing to the inevitability of processes of rationalization, the 'disenchantment of the world,' and the 'iron cage' of modernity.

Gandhi, by contrast, strongly resisted the equation of modernization and Westernization. Much as Gandhi admired aspects of Western modernity – its scientific temper, its pragmatism, efficient organization, and civil liberties, for example – he considered it a fundamentally violent and destructive form of life. One could argue that Gandhi offered an alternative 'non-Western form of modernity' that embodied a different set of values and ideals, which blended what he considered to be the best of both Indian tradition and modernity. It is a mistake to regard Gandhi as a staunch traditionalist as he is often described. This characterization overlooks the fact that Gandhi was quite critical of many aspects of Hindu orthodoxy, from caste and untouchability to its seeming lack of concern for questions of social and economic justice. By the same token, modernity for Gandhi did not imply the wholesale rejection of tradition. This tension between tradition and modernity is evident, for example, in the evolution of Gandhi's views about technology. From the wholesale rejection of modern technology that is prominent in his manifesto *Hind Swaraj*, we see him moving toward an approbation of what is nowadays called 'appropriate technology,' that is, technology adapted to human scale and to the needs and resources of a particular people. Hence his fascination with the sewing machine and the chain-dangling watch that he carried with him at all times.

In 'Indian Thought: Between Tradition and Modernity', J. N. Mohanty argued that non-academic Indian philosophers like Gandhi have managed a synthesis of the traditional and the modern while remaining deeply rooted in the Indic tradition. In Gandhi's case, this traditionalism embraces the world of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, his own eclectic version of the Indic philosophy *Vedānta*, and the devotional ideas of medieval Hindu saints (Mohanty 2001, 1995). Gandhi, while being remarkably open to Western thought, remained deeply rooted in Upanisadic mysticism. And yet in spite of the traditionalism of Upanisadic mysticism, his influence on modern India and the world presents itself as a peculiar political experiment that promises to add to the contemporary discourse on Global IR, a discourse which seeks to reconcile the gaps between Western modernity and non-Western traditionalism.

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