

Nonviolence in Jain Philosophy and the Ethical Praxis of Mahatma Gandhi: A Philosophical Analysis

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Abstract:

Nonviolence (Ahimsa) occupies a central position in Indian ethical thought. Among Indian philosophical traditions, Jainism articulates the most rigorous and systematic doctrine of nonviolence, elevating it to the supreme religious duty. Mahatma Gandhi, deeply influenced by Jain philosophy, transformed this spiritual ideal into a powerful socio-political method. This paper critically examines the metaphysical and ethical foundations of nonviolence in Jain philosophy and analyzes Gandhi's reinterpretation and application of Ahimsa in socio-political life. The study highlights both continuity and transformation between ascetic nonviolence and activist nonviolence.

Keywords: Ahimsa, Jainism, Gandhi, Satyagraha, Ethics, Political Philosophy

Introduction:

Ahimsa, or nonviolence, is one of the foundational ethical principles in Indian philosophy. While it appears in Hindu and Buddhist traditions, Jainism gives it the most comprehensive metaphysical and ethical grounding. In modern times, Mahatma Gandhi reinterpreted this ancient doctrine and applied it in the political sphere. This transformation marks one of the most significant developments in applied ethics in modern history. This paper aims to examine:

The philosophical foundation of nonviolence in Jainism.

Gandhi's reinterpretation of Ahimsa.

A comparative and critical evaluation of both perspectives.

Foundation of Nonviolence in Jain Philosophy:-

The doctrine of Ahimsa in Jainism is inseparable from its metaphysics. According to Jain ontology, reality consists of jiva (living substance) and ajiva (non-living substance). Every living being, from humans to microorganisms, possesses a soul capable of attaining liberation.

The teachings of Mahavira systematized the doctrine of nonviolence in its strictest form. Violence (himsa) is understood as any injury to a living being caused by thought, word, or deed. Such injury results in karmic bondage, which obstructs the soul's progress toward moksha (liberation). Therefore, nonviolence is not merely moral discipline but a metaphysical necessity for spiritual emancipation.¹

Jain texts declare: Ahimsa Paramo Dharma — Nonviolence is the highest religion.

Ethical Dimensions of Jain Ahimsa:

Jainism classifies violence into different categories:

- Sankalpi Himsa (intentional violence)
- Arambhi Himsa (violence in daily activity)
- Udyogi Himsa (occupational violence)
- Virodhi Himsa (defensive violence)

For ascetics (munis), absolute nonviolence (Mahavrata) is obligatory. Householders follow limited vows (Anuvrata), minimizing harm within practical life.

Ahimsa in Jainism extends to:

- Strict vegetarianism
- Avoidance of harsh speech
- Mental purity
- Careful conduct to avoid harming even microscopic beings

Thus, Jain nonviolence operates on three levels: physical, verbal, and mental.

The philosophical basis of this doctrine is elaborated in the Tattvartha Sutra, which systematizes Jain metaphysics and ethics.²

Gandhi's Reinterpretation of Nonviolence:-

While Jain Ahimsa is primarily ascetic and liberation-oriented, Gandhi transformed it into an instrument of social transformation.

Gandhi acknowledged his intellectual and spiritual debt to Jainism, especially through the religious atmosphere of Gujarat. However, he did not adopt its absolute asceticism. For Gandhi, Ahimsa was not merely non-injury but active love.

In his famous work, *An Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, Gandhi writes that Truth (Satya) and Nonviolence (Ahimsa) are inseparable.³ Nonviolence is the means; Truth is the end.

Satyagraha: Nonviolence as Political Praxis:-

Gandhi's most original contribution was the formulation of Satyagraha (holding firmly to truth). Unlike passive resistance, Satyagraha requires:

- Moral courage
- Willingness to suffer
- Refusal to retaliate

Appeal to the conscience of the oppressor

Through movements like the Non-Cooperation Movement (1920) and the Salt March (1930), Gandhi demonstrated that nonviolence could challenge imperial power without armed rebellion. Unlike Jainism's withdrawal from worldly engagement, Gandhi's nonviolence was dynamic, collective, and politically engaged.

Critical Evaluation:

Jainism presents the most radical ethical commitment to nonviolence in world philosophy. However, its strict asceticism may appear impractical in modern socio-political contexts. Gandhi's reinterpretation makes Ahimsa historically transformative. Yet critics argue that absolute nonviolence may not always be

viable in situations of extreme aggression. Despite this, both traditions affirm that moral self-discipline and compassion are foundational to human civilization.

Conclusion:

Nonviolence in Jain philosophy represents the highest spiritual ideal grounded in metaphysics and karmic theory. Gandhi appropriated this ideal and recontextualized it within political struggle and social reform. The transition from ascetic Ahimsa to activist Ahimsa marks one of the most significant developments in ethical thought.

Together, Jainism and Gandhi offer a profound framework for global ethics, peace studies, and political philosophy.

Footnotes:

1. S. Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, Vol. I (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 287.
2. Umasvati, *Tattvartha Sutra*, trans. Nathmal Tatia (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1994).
3. M. K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1927), Part II.

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3. Umasvati. *Tattvartha Sutra*. Translated by Nathmal Tatia. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1994.