Gandhian Dialogic: Rethinking the Centrality of Gandhian Discourse

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Abstract

Dialogue as a means of knowing, communicating, and transforming conflict has deep roots in India's civilizational history. From the speculative debates of the Vedic sages to the structured disputations within Buddhist councils, India cultivated an intellectual climate in which contradiction was neither feared nor erased but seen as integral to the pursuit of truth. In the modern era, Mahatma Gandhi emerges as a singular figure who reinterpreted and revitalized this dialogic inheritance. Rather than constructing a tightly organized ideological system, Gandhi fashioned a moral practice grounded in conversation, reciprocal understanding, disciplined self-restraint, and an unending pursuit of truth. His political and ethical methods were based not on conquest or domination but on the transformative potential of interaction between morally accountable human beings.

This paper seeks to explore Gandhian dialogic as a comprehensive worldview rather than a mere political technique. It analyses Gandhi's engagements with prominent thinkers and leaders of his time, including B. R. Ambedkar, Rabindranath Tagore, Subhas Chandra Bose, Jawaharlal Nehru, Jayaprakash Narayan, and M. N. Roy. These interactions reveal Gandhi's capacity to treat dissent not as threat but as an opportunity for mutual learning. Simultaneously, this study addresses contradictions in Gandhi's approach—moments in which his dialogic commitments appeared constrained by paternalism, moral absolutism, or socio-cultural blind spots.

Finally, the paper situates Gandhian dialogic within contemporary global challenges: political polarisation, digital misinformation, identity-based violence, majoritarian nationalism, ecological crises, and widening global inequities. It argues that Gandhi's commitment to non-violent dialogue remains profoundly relevant, offering a lens for reconstructing ethical citizenship and cultivating pluralistic coexistence in a fragmented world.

Keywords: Dialogic ethics, Gandhian thought, satyagraha, conflict transformation, ahimsa, moral reasoning, non-violence.

1. Introduction

Human societies, across continents and historical periods, consistently generate mechanisms to differentiate between insiders and outsiders. These systems of classification—whether rooted in religious adherence, caste markers, racial traits, linguistic identity, gender norms, ideological leanings, or political affiliations—create mental and social boundaries that regulate belonging. At first, these boundaries may appear harmless or merely descriptive. However, as they become progressively rigid, they begin to crystallize into hierarchies. Differences that once reflected plural ways of being gradually transform into justifications for exclusion, suspicion, and hostility. Over time, communities internalize an "us versus them" worldview, where the "other" is imagined not merely as different but as deficient, threatening, or morally inferior. Under such conditions, the leap from prejudice to symbolic violence, and from symbolic violence to physical violence, becomes dangerously small. Dialogue withers, the willingness to listen diminishes, and aggression becomes normalized as a default mode of relating to those perceived as outsiders.

Mahatma Gandhi became acutely aware of this psychological and sociopolitical degeneration early in his career, particularly during his experiences with racial discrimination in South Africa. He witnessed firsthand how violence—whether expressed through dismissive attitudes, discriminatory legislation, or overt physical brutality—takes root when individuals and groups cease to recognize the interiority, dignity, and humanity of those they oppose. Gandhi understood that before violence manifests outwardly, it germinates inwardly in the form of hardened hearts and closed minds. The breakdown of dialogue precedes the eruption of conflict. Unlike many nationalist thinkers of his generation, who tended to interpret anti-colonial struggle as a battlefield between oppressor and oppressed, Gandhi approached politics from an ethical standpoint that foregrounded relationality, communication, and moral transformation (Malhotra, 2022). For him, the political arena was not simply a site for power competition but a space in which human beings could confront and refine their moral selves.

Gandhi's distinctiveness does not rest solely in his advocacy of non-violence; rather, it lies in his reconceptualization of conflict itself. He rejected the notion that conflict is an unavoidable clash of opposing wills. Instead, he saw it as a communicative breakdown—a failure of mutual understanding and empathetic engagement. This reframing allowed Gandhi to view adversaries not as obstacles or enemies to be subdued, but as fellow moral agents with the potential for reflection, growth, and ethical awakening. For Gandhi, dialogue was not merely a strategic tool for negotiation or political compromise; it was an essential pathway toward truth. Because

truth, in his view, could never be fully possessed by a single individual, it had to be approached relationally, through sustained encounters with differing viewpoints.

This belief shaped his entire political methodology. What we describe as Gandhian dialogic rests on the conviction that truth reveals itself not through monologue but through interaction; not through coercion but through persuasion; and not through the elimination or silencing of opponents but through respectful engagement with them. Gandhi embraced contradiction, self-questioning, and intellectual evolution as necessary features of a genuine search for truth. He understood that all perspectives—even his own—were inherently partial. Only through persistent dialogue, through the willingness to hear and be heard, could individuals collectively move closer to truth's horizon.

Although Gandhi's style of reasoning owes much to ancient Indian traditions of philosophical debate, spiritual inquiry, and deliberation, it was also profoundly shaped by his encounters with Western thinkers such as Tolstoy, Ruskin, Thoreau, and Socrates. From these figures he absorbed ideas about conscience, moral autonomy, civil disobedience, and dialogic examination of beliefs. The resulting fusion created a remarkably innovative political ethic—one that placed communication, empathy, and mutual respect at the center of collective life.

This paper seeks to deepen the academic understanding of Gandhian dialogic by pursuing several interconnected objectives:

- To map its intellectual foundations within both Indian philosophical traditions and global moral thought.

- To examine its epistemological structure—Gandhi's distinctive understanding of truth, knowledge, and moral inquiry.

- To analyze its operationalization within Gandhi's political engagements and leadership style.

- To evaluate its ethical implications for resolving conflict and transforming relationships.

- To scrutinize its internal tensions and contradictions, including its limitations.

- To illuminate its enduring relevance in the contemporary world, characterized by polarization, ideological extremism, and communicative fractures.

In a time when public discourse is increasingly fragmented and societies are plagued by alienation, dehumanization, and asymmetrical forms of violence, Gandhi's dialogic method emerges as a compelling counter-vision. It offers not only a way to coexist peacefully but a pathway toward ethical renewal, collective healing, and a more humane political culture. In the

fractured landscape of twenty-first-century modernity, Gandhian dialogic provides a moral vocabulary through which societies may begin to rebuild trust, foster empathy, and reimagine the possibilities of democratic coexistence.

2. Dialogic Foundations in Indian Thought

2.1 Dialogic Imagination in Ancient India

India has long nurtured a tradition of philosophical inquiry grounded in conversation, dialogic reasoning, and the free contestation of ideas. Examples abound:

- **The Rig Veda's Nasadiya Sukta**, which famously admits uncertainty about creation
- **Upanishadic dialogues**, such as *Yājñavalkya–Gargi*, *Uddalaka–Shvetaketu*, and *Nachiketa–Yama*
- **Buddhist debates** codified in texts like the *Kathāvatthu*
- **Jain doctrines of** *anekāntavāda* (many-sidedness of truth)
- **Classical Sanskrit disputation** (vadashastra), which emphasized intellectual humility

These traditions reveal a civilizational ethos that embraces multiplicity, questions authority, and values intellectual inquiry. They also demonstrate that disagreement is not an obstacle to truth, but a pathway toward its deeper realization.

Gandhi drew deeply from this heritage. While he was not a systematic philosopher in the technical sense, he embodied this cultural disposition toward dialogue in his political life.

2.2 Bhakti, Sufi, and Folk Dialogic Traditions

Beyond elite scholarship, India's popular traditions also celebrate dialogic forms.

- **Bhakti poetry** invites direct questioning of God.
- **Sufi interactions** emphasize openness, spiritual conversation, and emotional exchange.
- **Folk storytelling traditions** such as Pandvani and Baul songs engage audiences in participatory meaning-making.

These traditions taught Gandhi that truth is not owned by intellectual elites but emerges through shared moral experience.

2.3 Western Influences on Gandhian Dialogue

Gandhi absorbed insights from Western thinkers who championed:

- **Conscience and ethical individualism** (Thoreau)
- **Non-possessive social life** (Ruskin)
- **Universal love and moral fellowship** (Tolstoy)
- **Dialectical questioning** (Socrates)

Socratic influence is particularly visible. Gandhi believed:

- Truth must withstand examination.
- Moral claims must remain open to critique.
- Dialogue is a form of self-purification.

Thus, Gandhian dialogic is a bridge between Indian pluralistic reasoning and Western moral inquiry.

3. Gandhian Dialogic as a Mode of Knowing

3.1 Truth as a Collective Horizon

For Gandhi, truth (*satya*) is infinite and ungraspable in its totality. Human beings perceive fragments of truth filtered through experience, bias, and capacity. Therefore:

- No individual has monopoly over truth.
- Dialogue is necessary for mutual correction.
- Truth emerges from the interplay of perspectives.

In this sense, Gandhian dialogic is grounded in **epistemic humility**—an awareness of human limitation that invites openness.

3.2 Experimentation and Revision

Gandhi called his autobiography *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*. The word *experiments* is crucial. For Gandhi:

- Truth is not static but evolving.
- Ethical life is laboratory-like, requiring trial and adjustment.
- Dialogue provides feedback that corrects moral error.

His lifelong willingness to modify his views—even deeply held ones—demonstrates his commitment to dialogic knowledge.

3.3 Dialogue as Self-Transformation

In Gandhian epistemology:

- Dialogue is not aimed merely at winning arguments.

- It is meant to transform the self.
- To listen genuinely is to grow morally.

Thus, for Gandhi, dialogue operates at both social and spiritual levels.

4. Political Practice of Gandhian Dialogic

4.1 Dialogues with British Authorities

Gandhi's political struggle against colonialism was not conducted through hatred. His letters to the British Viceroys illustrate:

- respectful critique
- appeals to conscience
- acknowledgment of shared humanity

He refused to demonize individuals even while condemning systemic injustice.

This approach unsettled both colonial officials and violent nationalists because it did not conform to conventional logics of resistance or submission.

4.2 Dialogues with Indian Leaders

4.2.1 Gandhi–Ambedkar: Equality vs. Spiritual Reform

Their debate concerned:

- structural vs. moral solutions to caste oppression
- political autonomy vs. ethical interdependence

Gandhi believed caste inequalities could be reformed through moral change; Ambedkar insisted on institutional and structural transformation.

Their interaction produced:

- the Poona Pact
- new public conversations on caste justice
- mutual recognition of each other's ethical seriousness

Despite disagreements, both influenced each other's thinking.

4.2.2 Gandhi–Tagore: Machine vs. Spirit

Tagore criticized Gandhi's focus on the charkha (spinning wheel). Gandhi saw it as:

- symbol of self-reliance
- economic democratization
- spiritual discipline

Tagore worried it romanticized poverty.

Their respectful debate enriched nationalist philosophy.

4.2.3 Gandhi–Subhas Chandra Bose: Discipline vs. Freedom

While Bose favored militarization and swift political action, Gandhi emphasized non-violence and moral persuasion. Their disagreements reveal competing visions of national liberation. Gandhi's insistence on tolerating hostile slogan-shouting exemplified his dialogic ethics.

4.2.4 Gandhi–M. N. Roy: Ethics vs. Scientific Socialism

Roy saw Gandhi as insufficiently radical. Gandhi saw Roy as overly structural. Their exchanges broadened Indian debates on socialism, ethics, and human agency.

5. Ethical Principles Underlying Gandhian Dialogic

Gandhi's dialogic worldview rests upon a constellation of ethical principles that shaped the way he interpreted human relationships, political engagement, and moral responsibility. These principles—ahimsa, satya, and an unwavering commitment to love and respect—function not merely as philosophical ideals but as practical disciplines meant to guide every interaction. Gandhi believed that dialogue could only flourish in an ethical environment where both parties approached each other with sincerity, humility, and a willingness to transform. Thus, the ethical foundations of Gandhian dialogic form the moral architecture that sustains his broader political and epistemological commitments.

5.1 Ahimsa (Non-Violence)

For Gandhi, ahimsa was far more than the mere absence of physical violence; it was an active and dynamic force grounded in goodwill and compassion. He rejected the idea that non-violence meant passive endurance or silent submission. Instead, Gandhi envisioned ahimsa as a creative energy capable of transforming relationships and opening pathways for meaningful dialogue. This form of non-violence requires the active refusal to humiliate, injure, or diminish the other, even under conditions of deep conflict. Gandhi insisted that the ethical treatment of opponents was essential not only because it preserved their dignity but because it allowed them to remain open to moral persuasion and self-reflection. Ahimsa, in this context, becomes the ethical foundation upon which dialogic engagement rests: only when violence—physical, emotional, or rhetorical—is renounced can genuine communication take place. Through

compassion toward adversaries, Gandhi attempted to reorient the political arena away from cycles of domination and retaliation, toward a more humanistic mode of conflict engagement.

5.2 Satya (Truth)

Gandhi's understanding of satya is integral to his philosophy of dialogue. He rejected the notion of truth as a static or absolute possession that could be claimed by any individual. Instead, he argued that truth is fundamentally relational: it unfolds through collective inquiry, mutual correction, and shared experience. Because human beings are limited by perspective and conditioned by circumstance, no one can grasp the totality of truth in isolation. Dialogue, therefore, becomes the indispensable method through which truth is both pursued and clarified. Gandhi believed that truth is tested through struggle, suffering, and the willingness to revise one's convictions in light of new insights. It is always evolving, and its pursuit demands moral courage and humility. In this view, dialogic engagement is not merely a social act but a process of ethical self-discovery. By inviting diverse viewpoints into conversation, Gandhi sought to create a moral space in which truth could emerge gradually, as the product of shared commitment rather than unilateral assertion.

5.3 Love and Respect

A third essential principle underlying Gandhian dialogic is his deep faith in the political and ethical significance of love and respect. Gandhi believed that love was not confined to personal or private relationships; it had a vital role to play in the public realm as well. For him, love functioned as a political force capable of disarming hostility and making constructive dialogue possible. Respect, similarly, was not limited to polite behavior but constituted a profound moral discipline. It required recognizing the intrinsic worth of every individual, including opponents, and treating them with dignity even during intense disagreements. Gandhi's commitment to love and respect reflected his broader anthropological optimism—the belief that every human being carries within them the capacity for moral transformation. This optimism shaped his dialogic method by ensuring that adversaries were never dismissed as irredeemable or morally inferior. Instead, they were approached as partners in a shared search for truth.

6. Conflict Transformation in Gandhian Thought

Central to Gandhi's political philosophy is the idea that conflict, rather than being an occasion for hostility or coercion, represents an opportunity for creative moral engagement. Gandhi

approached conflict not as an unavoidable disruption but as a moment that exposes underlying injustice and invites ethical transformation. His commitment to non-violent dialogue provided a framework for addressing the root causes of conflict while safeguarding the dignity of all parties involved. Gandhi's method offers an alternative to conventional models of conflict that rely on force, reprisal, or repression. Instead, he emphasized reform, persuasion, and relational transformation as the means through which lasting peace could be achieved.

6.1 Conflict as Structural

Gandhi recognized that conflict rarely arises solely from the intentions or actions of individual people. Rather, he argued that injustice is often embedded within social, economic, and political structures that shape human behavior. Caste hierarchies, colonial systems, economic exploitation, and discriminatory institutions all generate patterns of inequality that set groups against one another. For Gandhi, addressing conflict therefore required looking beyond personal animosities and examining the systems that produce them. His approach emphasized systemic reform, ethical dialogue, and moral persuasion as necessary tools for transforming these deep-rooted injustices. Through dialogic engagement, individuals could identify and challenge the structural forces that perpetuate inequality, making conflict resolution more meaningful and sustainable.

6.2 Critique of Repression

A cornerstone of Gandhi's conflict philosophy was his firm opposition to repression in all its forms. He believed that coercion—whether political, economic, or psychological—inevitably breeds resentment and deepens social divisions. Violence, in Gandhi's view, does not eliminate alternative perspectives but merely forces them underground, where they continue to fester. Repression silences dialogue and obstructs the mutual understanding necessary for reconciliation. It harms not only the oppressed, who suffer immediate consequences, but also the oppressor, whose moral capacities are eroded by the exercise of domination. Gandhi insisted that authentic and lasting peace cannot be achieved through suppression or fear. Only through open, dialogic engagement—grounded in empathy and ethical reasoning—can conflict move toward resolution. Thus, Gandhian dialogic rejects domination and embraces communication as the primary means for transforming both individual relationships and collective conditions.

6.3 Fasting as Ethical Dialogue

Gandhi's use of fasting represents one of his most distinctive contributions to modern conflict ethics. Contrary to critics who dismissed fasting as a manipulative or coercive tactic, Gandhi understood it as a form of moral discipline and ethical dialogue. By fasting, Gandhi sought to elevate the moral quality of public discourse and appeal directly to the conscience of those with whom he shared a deep relational bond. Fasting was not intended to compel opponents through guilt but to awaken moral introspection and remind them of their ethical responsibilities. Gandhi believed that suffering borne voluntarily could communicate sincerity and moral urgency more effectively than words alone. Fasting therefore functioned as a dialogic gesture— a non-verbal mode of communication grounded in trust, vulnerability, and mutual recognition. It created a moral space in which adversaries could re-evaluate their positions, soften their hostility, and open themselves to transformation.

7. Contradictions and Limits of Gandhian Dialogic

7.1 Patriarchal Practices

His treatment of Kasturba and some ashram rules demonstrated tensions between his ideals and personal practices.

7.2 Limited Structural Awareness

Ambedkar's critique revealed Gandhi's insufficient attention to structural violence embedded in caste systems.

7.3 Moral Absolutism

His unwavering commitment to certain principles sometimes limited pragmatic flexibility.

7.4 Dialogic Failures

Gandhi struggled to engage with extremist groups who rejected pluralistic moral universes.

8. Contemporary Relevance of Gandhian Dialogic

8.1 Combatting Polarization

In the age of:

- social media aggression
- echo chambers
- ideological silos

Gandhian dialogic offers tools for rebuilding public trust.

8.2 Peace-Building Initiatives

Gandhian principles influence:

- restorative justice
- truth and reconciliation commissions
- community mediation

8.3 Ecological Ethics

Gandhi's emphasis on simplicity and interdependence aligns with sustainable development debates.

8.4 New Leadership Models

Gandhian leadership values:

- vulnerability
- humility
- dialogue
- ethical courage

9. Conclusion

Gandhi's dialogic method provides one of the most compelling moral frameworks for addressing contemporary conflicts. His insistence on empathy, listening, and negotiation challenges the modern tendency toward polarization and ideological rigidity. Even with its contradictions, Gandhian dialogic remains a transformative resource for reimagining political culture, ethical community, and global coexistence.

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