Gandhi and the Transformation of Indian Politics after 1885

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*Satyajit Dolui

Assistant professor, Department-History, Beta College of Education

Abstract: *Examining how Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi changed Indian politics after 1885, this essay explores how the nationalist movement shifted from elite constitutionalism to a mass-based, morally driven political culture. Gandhi, in my opinion, radically altered the definition and application of politics in colonial India rather than just introducing fresh strategies for resistance. By merging moral values such as truth (satya), non-violence (ahimsa), and self-rule (swaraj) into political activity, Gandhi challenged both colonial authority and traditional notions about power, leadership, and legitimacy. The paper investigates how Gandhian techniques of satyagraha, civil disobedience, and constructive programmes galvanized varied social groupings and transformed ordinary individuals into active political agents. Additionally, it critically examines current discussions and subsequent criticisms of Gandhian politics' limitations, especially with regard to caste, class, and institutional power. The study makes the case that Gandhi's lasting significance comes from his ethical reorientation of politics rather than from any one movement or policy accomplishment by placing him within the larger context of Indian nationalism after 1885. In the end, the book emphasizes Gandhi's significance for comprehending contemporary democratic practices and peaceful political change in India and beyond.*

Keywords: *Gandhi; Indian nationalism; satyagraha; non-violence; mass politics; political ethics*

1 | INTRODUCTION

The Indian National Congress was founded in 1885, marking a significant turning point in contemporary Indian political history. However, the politics that arose during its early decades were mainly limited to elite constitutionalism, petitions, and little interaction with the general public. In my opinion, Mahatma

*Corresponding Author
Satyajit Dolui, Assistant professor, Department-History, Beta College of Education
doluisatyajit@gmail.com

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Gandhi's ethical, ideological, and methodological intervention in the early 20th century was what really changed Indian politics, not just institutional advancements. Gandhi dramatically revolutionized the meaning, scope, and practice of politics in India by bringing new forms of mass participation, moral authority, and non-violent resistance, thereby turning Indian nationalism into a real popular movement. Within the framework of British liberal constitutionalism, early nationalist leaders like Dadabhai Naoroji, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, and Surendranath Banerjea expressed their political aspirations. Despite exposing colonial economic exploitation through his well-known Drain Theory, Naoroji maintained a moderate and parliamentary political approach (Naoroji, 1901, pp. 35–37). Similarly, Gokhale felt that political transformation could be achieved by patient persuasion and cooperation with the colonial power. Bipan Chandra notes that early Congress politics "functioned largely within the bounds of constitutional agitation and represented the interests of the educated middle classes" (Chandra, 1989, p. 85). These initiatives failed to engage India's sizable peasantry, labourers, and underprivileged people, despite laying a crucial intellectual foundation.

Gandhi's entry onto the Indian political scene following his time in South Africa signalled a dramatic break with this custom. Gandhi reinvented politics as a moral and spiritual activity centered in truth (satya) and non-violence (ahimsa). In Hind Swaraj, he criticized the Western model of modern politics and culture, claiming that "real home-rule is self-rule or self-control" (Gandhi, 1909/2010, p. 73). This paradigm changed the focus of politics from elite discussions to personal discipline, ethical action, and collective responsibility. Gandhi's belief that moral renewal and political freedom were inextricably linked revolutionized nationalist speech. One of Gandhi's most significant accomplishments was the creation of satyagraha as a strategy of political resistance. Unlike armed revolution or constitutional pleading, satyagraha seeks to transform the oppressor via moral appeal and popular non-cooperation. Gandhi described satyagraha as "a force which is born of truth and love or non-violence" (Gandhi, 1927, p. 106). This strategy enabled ordinary Indians—peasants, labourers, women, and students—to participate actively in the liberation fight. As Judith Brown adds, Gandhi "brought the masses into nationalist politics and gave them a sense of dignity and purpose" (Brown, 1994, p. 112).

Gandhi's leadership also revolutionized the organizational culture of the Indian National Congress. Under his influence, the Congress grew from a debating organization into a mass-based movement entrenched in communities and everyday life. Politics and social transformation were directly linked through the use of symbolic activities like khadi, the spinning wheel, and non-cooperation campaigns. According to Ramachandra Guha, Gandhi made nationalism "a lived experience rather than an abstract ideology" (Guha, 2018, p. 241). In addition to challenging colonial power, this blending of politics and social ethics addressed internal social hierarchies. Thus, Gandhi's significance resides not only in accomplishing political mobilization but in rewriting the fundamental language of Indian politics after 1885. He reinterpreted power via moral opposition, incorporated politics into the daily life of common people, and substituted elite-centric constitutionalism with mass engagement. Understanding this shift is key to grasping how Indian nationalism emerged into a broad-based movement capable of fighting colonial power and molding the future of democratic politics in India.

2 | POLITICAL CONTEXT AFTER 1885: FROM ELITE NATIONALISM TO MASS POLITICS

The political context that formed in India after 1885 was affected by the founding of the Indian National Congress and the gradual articulation of nationalist aspirations within a colonial framework. In its early phase, Indian nationalism was largely elite-driven, moderate in approach, and constitutional in spirit. This period, in my opinion, was essential in fostering political consciousness, but it was unable to inspire the great majority of Indians because it was socially and politically limited. This elite nationalism did not suddenly or inevitably turn into mass politics; rather, it was the outcome of historical circumstances, ideological arguments, and socioeconomic shifts that set the stage for Gandhi's eventual participation. The majority of the early Congress leadership was made up of professionals with Western educations

who thought British liberal principles were morally better. Political reform was sought by leaders like Dadabhai Naoroji, Pherozeshah Mehta, and Gopal Krishna Gokhale through resolutions, petitions, and discussions with colonial officials. Naoroji notably revealed the economic exploitation of India through his Drain Theory, saying that "India is being bled economically, and this drain is the root cause of Indian poverty" (Naoroji, 1901, p. 36). However, despite the radical implications of his economic analysis, the political techniques employed by early nationalists remained cautious and reformist. As Bipan Chandra writes, the early national movement was "moderate not in goals but in methods," relying mainly on constitutional agitation and elite opinion (Chandra, 1989, p. 87).

There were obvious drawbacks to this type of nationalism. It generally excluded peasants, labourers, women, and lower castes, and its language of politics was inaccessible to the majority. Sumit Sarkar writes that early Congress politics "operated within a restricted social base and addressed a colonial state that was largely indifferent to polite persuasion" (Sarkar, 1983, p. 29). The separation between nationalist leadership and general society grew increasingly visible as colonial policies worsened economic suffering, particularly through land revenue systems, commercialization of agriculture, and frequent famines. These systemic problems fostered mass dissatisfaction that elite constitutional politics could not fully address.

The first major breach within this political framework came with the growth of aggressive nationalism in the early twentieth century, especially during the Swadeshi Movement (1905–1908). Bengal's division revealed the boundaries of moderate politics and produced new leaders like Lala Lajpat Rai, Bipin Chandra Pal, and Bal Gangadhar Tilak. Tilak's vow that "swaraj is my birthright and I shall have it" signalled a turn toward mass appeal and direct political action (Tilak, 1918, p. 15). Yet, even this era of extremism struggled to sustain mass mobilization on a national scale and often relied on intermittent agitation rather than consistent engagement. By the time Gandhi entered Indian politics after 1915, the paradoxes of elite nationalism had become clear. A new style of leadership that could reconcile nationalist doctrine with popular experience was desperately needed in the political sphere. As Judith Brown writes, the period after 1885 witnessed "a slow but decisive movement from politics of representation to politics of participation" (Brown, 1994, p. 108). It is impossible to comprehend Gandhi's subsequent achievements without acknowledging this background of dissatisfaction with elite politics and the rising call for inclusive political action. Thus, the political climate following 1885 constitutes a transitional phase in Indian nationalism—one defined by intellectual awakening but social constraint. The ideological underpinnings of freedom were established by elite nationalism, but its inability to involve the masses required a fundamental shift in political approach and style. This transformation from elite politics to popular politics established the historical backdrop against which Gandhi reinterpreted Indian nationalism, converting it into a broad-based movement centered in everyday socioeconomic reality rather than elite constitutional rhetoric.

3 | GANDHI'S INTELLECTUAL AND POLITICAL FORMATION

Understanding Gandhi's revolutionary impact on Indian politics after 1885 needs particular attention to his intellectual and political formation, which grew through a persistent conversation between personal experience, ethical thought, and cross-cultural ideas. Gandhi, in my opinion, was not born a nationalist leader; rather, his political ideology developed over time as a result of his experiences with colonial injustice, religious doctrine, and contemporary political theory, most notably during his time in South Africa. It was here that Gandhi's moral perspective coalesced into a distinctive political praxis that later redefined Indian nationalism.

Gandhi's early influences were anchored in his home milieu and religious upbringing. Raised in a Vaishnava household heavily affected by Jain ethics, he imbibed concepts of non-violence, self-restraint, and moral discipline from an early age. Reflecting on this formative period, Gandhi subsequently said

that "the principle of ahimsa was implanted in me by my parents" (Gandhi, 1927, p. 33). However, until they faced the brutal realities of racial discrimination in South Africa, these ethical sensitivities remained primarily personal. The legendary episode at Pietermaritzburg in 1893 represented, in Gandhi's own words, "the moment when my passive submission changed into resistance" (Gandhi, 1927, p. 89). This encounter turned his moral values into a political consciousness anchored in dignity and fairness. Equally essential was Gandhi's connection with Western intellectual traditions. His reading of authors such as Leo Tolstoy, John Ruskin, and Henry David Thoreau played a vital influence in forming his critique of contemporary society and governmental power. Tolstoy's The Kingdom of God Is Within You strongly affected Gandhi, leading him to recognize that the book "overwhelmed me" and highlighted the moral grounds of non-violent resistance (Gandhi, 1927, p. 156). Ruskin's Unto This Gandhi's views on the social responsibility of economic life and the moral equality of all sorts of labour were further supported by this. Gandhi characterized reading Ruskin as a "turning point" that convinced him that "the good of the individual is contained in the good of all" (Gandhi, 1908/2011, p. 41). His vision of a decentralized, moral society based on social harmony rather than commercial rivalry was eventually shaped by these concepts.

South Africa also served as the laboratory in which Gandhi created satyagraha as a novel technique of political struggle. Unlike earlier forms of resistance, satyagraha blended moral reasoning with social action, relying on self-suffering rather than force. Gandhi characterized it as "truth-force or soul-force" anchored in love and non-violence (Gandhi, 1920, p. 7). According to academics, this invention represented a significant break from both violent revolution and constitutional petitions. According to Judith Brown, Gandhi's South African experience enabled him to "experiment with leadership, mobilization, and discipline in ways that anticipated his later mass movements in India" (Brown, 1994, p. 36). Gandhi had already solidified his conceptual framework by the time he returned to India in 1915. However, he deliberately made the decision to relearn India via travel, observation, and conversation with labourers and peasants. His conviction that politics must be based on actual social realities rather than theoretical abstractions was reflected in this purposeful engagement. Gandhi's strength, according to Ramachandra Guha, was his capacity to "translate complex moral ideas into practices intelligible to ordinary Indians" (Guha, 2018, p. 98). Thus, Gandhi's intellectual and political training was not exclusively traditional nor Western, but a creative synthesis that enabled him to alter Indian politics by integrating ethics, popular involvement, and disciplined resistance.

4 | GANDHI'S POLITICS: THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TRANSFORMATION

Gandhi's politics, in my opinion, constitute a radical reinterpretation of political action itself, wherein moral self-transformation became inextricably linked to institutional and societal change. Unlike dominant modern political theories that prioritize state power, coercion, or elite negotiation, Gandhi grounded politics in moral agency, collective discipline, and the everyday practices of common people. His contribution after 1885 did not only affect the techniques of Indian nationalism; it transformed its very syntax by presenting a politics anchored in truth, non-violence, and popular engagement. Theoretically, Gandhi disagreed with the notion that violent or immoral methods could be justified for political purposes. He repeatedly contended that means and objectives are interdependent, notably declaring that "they say 'means are after all means.' "Means are after all everything," in my opinion (Gandhi, 1920, p. 77). This emphasis constituted a fundamental rupture from both revolutionary violence and constitutional restraint. Gandhi viewed satyagraha as a moral concept rather than a strategy, characterizing it as "a force born of truth and love or non-violence" (Gandhi, 1920, p. 3). By placing political power in ethical suffering rather than physical force, Gandhi undermined the underpinnings of colonial authority, which relied on compliance reinforced by fear.

Gandhi put these ideas into reality by transforming them into collective action strategies that shifted Indian politics in the direction of the masses. Movements such as the Non-Cooperation Movement and

the Civil Disobedience Movement were aimed not just to fight British authority but to morally reform Indian society. Gandhi made it clear that the transfer of power from British to Indian elites was not the only aspect of independence (swaraj). In Hind Swaraj, he cautioned that "if India copies England, it is my firm conviction that she will be ruined" (Gandhi, 1909/2011, p. 42). Thus, positive programs supporting khadi, village industries, and social reform—which taught people responsibility and self-discipline—accompanies political resistance. According to academics, Gandhi's politics were revolutionary because of this combination of theory and practice. Louis Fischer observes that Gandhi "made politics a branch of ethics and ethics a matter of everyday conduct" (Fischer, 1950, p. 91). This ethical politicization facilitated unprecedented popular mobilization without dissolving movements into chaos or violence. Judith Brown similarly contends that Gandhi's leadership resided in his capacity to "link symbolic action with strict moral codes, thereby sustaining mass participation over long periods" (Brown, 1994, p. 214). The Salt March of 1930 demonstrates this synthesis: a simple act of breaking the salt restriction became a tremendous moral drama that exposed the injustice of colonial control while exacting personal sacrifice from participants.

Gandhi's redefining of political leadership was equally revolutionary. He eschewed charismatic dominance in favour of accountability, humility, and service. Gandhi emphasized that "a satyagrahi obeys the laws of society intelligently and of his own free will" until conscience required rebellion (Gandhi, 1920, p. 66). This viewpoint blurred the boundary between obedience and opposition, producing a politically conscious population rather than passive followers. Gandhi's lasting impact was to transform nationalism into "a shared moral project rather than a struggle confined to educated elites," as Ramachandra Guha points out (Guha, 2018, p. 112). All things considered, Gandhi's politics revolutionized Indian nationalism by fusing moral philosophy with methodical application. By redefining power as moral authority and resistance as self-suffering, Gandhi not only fought colonial oppression but also altered the connection between politics, society, and the person in modern India.

5 | LIMITS, DEBATES, AND CRITIQUES

Although Gandhi had a significant and far-reaching impact on Indian politics after 1885, in my opinion, it was not without controversy or significant drawbacks. Gandhi's moralization of politics sparked heated discussions among his contemporaries and later academics who questioned the approaches' efficacy and social repercussions. Because they highlight the conflicts between idealism and political reality, popular mobilization and social hierarchy, and ethics and power, these criticisms are crucial to a fair understanding of Gandhian politics. The viability of satyagraha and nonviolence in the face of systemic oppression is one of the main criticisms. B. R. Ambedkar firmly stated that moral appeals alone could not destroy profoundly entrenched systems of control. Reflecting on Gandhi's emphasis on moral reform, Ambedkar stated that "political tyranny is nothing compared to social tyranny and a reformer who defies society is a much more courageous man than a politician who defies government" (Ambedkar, 1936/2014, p. 254). From this perspective, Gandhi's focus on moral persuasion was inadequate to combat caste injustice because it placed too much trust in the moral conversion of oppressors rather than institutional and legal protections.

Another big dispute evolved around Gandhi's leadership style and its implications for democratic politics. While Gandhi galvanized the masses, critics have contended that his authority often based on his moral appeal rather than institutional accountability. Jawaharlal Nehru, though highly admiring of Gandhi, acknowledged this contradiction when he stated that Gandhi's influence was "not that of a dictator, but something far more powerful—moral authority" (Nehru, 1946/2004, p. 361). For some researchers, this moral authority risked inhibiting internal dissent within the nationalist movement, since disagreement may be portrayed as ethical failure rather than political difference. Marxist historians have further criticized Gandhi for redirecting nationalist struggle away from class strife. By prioritizing harmony over structural economic change, A. R. Desai contended that Gandhian nationalism eventually "checked

the development of a radical anti-imperialist consciousness among the masses" (Desai, 1948/2005, p. 219). Gandhi's emphasis on class cooperation and trusteeship was viewed from this perspective as maintaining current economic disparities while disguising them in moral terms.

There have also been critics of Gandhi's symbolic politics. While mass rituals, fasts, and marches were effective in mobilizing, other scholars consider them as emotionally charged techniques that simplified difficult political issues. Shahid Amin observes that public interpretations of Gandhian activities often veered from Gandhi's own aims, creating "multiple meanings that could not be fully controlled by elite nationalist leadership" (Amin, 1984, p. 16). The ideal of disciplined non-violence was occasionally tested by violent outbursts and societal conflicts brought on by this discrepancy between aim and reception. Despite these objections, it would be inaccurate to reduce Gandhian politics to its limitations. Gandhi's importance, according to Partha Chatterjee, is in "reconfiguring the domain of the political itself by drawing the masses into ethical and symbolic participation" rather than in providing a perfect political model (Chatterjee, 1993, p. 89). The arguments surrounding Gandhi, in my opinion, demonstrate the politics' continuing importance because they compel us to address unanswered issues of power, morality, and social justice in contemporary politics.

6 | GANDHI'S LEGACY FOR MODERN INDIAN POLITICS AND BEYOND

From my perspective, Gandhi's most enduring legacy rests not merely in securing India's independence, but in transforming the moral imagination of politics in India and around the world. After 1885, he transformed Indian politics and established a paradigm where political action was inextricably linked to civic engagement, ethical duty, and self-control. This legacy continues to inform current Indian democracy while simultaneously inspiring global movements for justice, peace, and civil rights. Even though political practice has frequently fallen short of these goals, Gandhi's legacy may be seen in India's constitutional commitment to democracy, civil freedoms, and social justice. Gandhi repeatedly cautioned that independence would be meaningless without moral discipline. He stated that "independence means voluntary restraint and discipline, voluntary acceptance of the rule of law" (Gandhi, 1942/1999, p. 48). This view affected the early leadership of the Indian Republic, particularly those such as Jawaharlal Nehru, who admitted that Gandhi had made politics "a matter of conscience rather than mere expediency" (Nehru, 1946/2004, p. 372). Gandhi's emphasis on civic resistance, dissent, and moral critique remained a crucial counterbalance in democratic life, even as postcolonial India adopted centralized planning and governmental control.

Gandhi's contribution to political culture is the normalization of large-scale engagement and protest as acceptable forms of democracy. Gandhi "taught Indians to think of themselves as citizens rather than subjects," according to Ramachandra Guha (Guha, 2018, p. 529). Movements headed by peasants, workers, environmental activists, and anti-corruption campaigners have often drawn—explicitly or implicitly—on Gandhian techniques of non-violent resistance and moral appeal. Gandhi's view that voluntary suffering can reveal injustice more effectively than coercion is reflected in the continued use of hunger strikes, marches, and symbolic gestures as potent political instruments in India. Beyond India, Gandhi's influence has been enormous and transformational. (King, 1958/2010, p. 135) Martin Luther King Jr. freely admitted that "Christ gave us the goals and Mahatma Gandhi the tactics" of nonviolent action. Similarly, Nelson Mandela noted that Gandhian non-violence in South Africa illustrated how "moral force could challenge brutal authority" (Mandela, 1994, p. 92). These global uses of Gandhian politics indicate that his ideas transcended specific cultural and historical settings, creating a universal vocabulary of ethical resistance. Gandhi left behind a dynamic legacy, nevertheless. Gandhian politics could be viewed as a "resource for critical engagement rather than a blueprint to be mechanically followed," as explained by Partha Chatterjee (Chatterjee, 2008, p. 63). This, in my opinion, is the exact reason Gandhi is still relevant in the twenty-first century. In an era dominated by political divisiveness, ecological crises, and the normalization of violence, Gandhi's insistence on truth, discussion, and non-

violence challenges both authoritarianism and cynical realpolitik. His legacy lives on not as a completed theory but rather as an ethical standard that is being used to evaluate contemporary politics in India and elsewhere.

7 | CONCLUSION

In this work, I have argued that Gandhi's post-1885 engagement in Indian politics was not just a tactical change within the nationalist movement, but rather a fundamental metamorphosis. Gandhi changed the connection between power, society, and the person by redefining politics as an ethical activity based on truth, non-violence, and self-discipline. His emphasis on satyagraha and swaraj enabled the transition from elite-driven constitutional politics to majority involvement founded in moral responsibility and collective action. Gandhi's politics contested both indigenous hierarchies and colonial dominance, arguing that both institutional and internal reform were necessary for independence. At the same time, the arguments and critiques around his ideas—particularly concerning caste, class, and political realism—demonstrate that Gandhian politics was neither consistent nor unopposed. However, because they still influence how academics and politicians approach his legacy, these conflicts highlight the breadth of his influence. From my perspective, Gandhi's ongoing significance resides in his reinvention of politics as a realm of ethical struggle, where means and objectives remain linked. Gandhi's vision continues to provide a crucial framework for assessing democratic practice and envisioning more compassionate forms of political reform in an era characterized by political violence, polarization, and a crisis of moral authority.

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