



Review Article

A comparative study of Ethics of Jainism and of Mahatma Gandhi with Special reference to Ahimsa and observance of Vows

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ABSTRACT



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This paper examines the ethical frameworks of Jainism and Mahatma Gandhi with a special focus on Ahimsa (non-violence) and the observance of vows. Jainism, one of the oldest religions in the world, emphasizes strict adherence to Ahimsa and self-discipline through vows as core tenets of its ethical system. Similarly, Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy, deeply influenced by Jain principles, elevated Ahimsa to a universal moral ideal, incorporating it into his social and political movements. The objective of this study is to explore the commonalities between these two ethical approaches, particularly regarding the principles of non-violence and vow observance. Using secondary data sourced from books, journals, and research articles, the study undertakes a comparative analysis to reveal the shared values and their relevance in modern contexts. The findings highlight the enduring significance of Ahimsa and disciplined living in promoting personal and societal harmony. This comparative exploration aims to contribute to the broader understanding of how ancient and modern ethical frameworks converge in their pursuit of peace and moral excellence.

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Introduction

Ethics which is essentially preoccupied with the right behavior principle and whether the character of human beings is good or bad, is the basis of most philosophical and religious systems. The Indian context is characterized by the ethical philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi that is endowed with a unique central role and is built with the help of the most important principles of Satya (truth) and Ahimsa (non-violence). Gandhi himself claimed that true religion and true morality are inseparably tied together (Gandhi, 1968, p. 44) and made non-violence the core of morality itself. There is a deep echo of this ideological conceptualization of Ahimsa within the classical principles of Jainism, an Indian religion that lays an unsurpassed stress on ethical behavior and the practice of austerity. Being a non-theistic tradition, Jainism is, in fact, a moral religion with Ahimsa being not only a virtue but the highest spiritual discipline (Mahavratas) out of which all other moral vows derive (Jaini, 1998). In this paper, a comparative analysis of ethics of Jainism and Mahatma Gandhi is performed with a particular emphasis made on their notions of Ahimsa and the vows observance in order to argue that despite having been heavily influenced by Jain philosophy, Gandhian ethics differ in practice as they perceive non-violence as a tool of socio-political change (Satyagraha).

Review of Literature

Scholarly interest in the comparative ethics of Jainism and Gandhi has not been a recent development: the literature and

associated developments have been dominated by thematic parallels, and the factual impact of Jain principles on Gandhi during his early years. The scholarship is divisible into three broad categories, namely studies of Gandhian ethics, studies of Jaina ethics, and those which explicitly compare the two. Gandhian ethics literature has a large focus on the ontological connection between Satya (Truth) and Ahimsa (non-violence). Parel (2006) points out that Gandhi philosophy is an inseparable combination of these two ideas where Ahimsa is the instrument of achieving Satya. This is Iyer (1973) who expounds that the Ahimsa is not a passive virtue, but an active soul force (satyagraha) that demanded a lot of courage and discipline of Gandhi. Such scholars as Parekh, (2010) have also placed these principles in context in relation to the political strategy of Gandhi, and viewed them as utilitarian instruments of social and political change, shifting the discourse to applied ethics, rather than just philosophical one.

Literature on Jaina ethics gives an in-depth discussion of its ascetic and strict system. This seminal publication by Jaini (1998) is authoritative in the sense that the metaphysical explanation of the Jaina conception of Ahimsa as the lifelong commitment to non-harm is explained based on the doctrine of the soul (jiva) and karma. In his ethnographic article, Cort (2001) investigates the way these ideals are applied by not only monks but also by laypersons and illustrates the applications and other modifications of the mahavratas (great vows). Dundas (2003) provides a historical background particularly focusing on the idea that non-violence in Jainism is epistemologically necessary to spiritual cleansing and liberation (moksha) and therefore serves as an end,

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but not a means to an end, politically. As far as comparative studies are concerned the agreement is that Jainism influenced Gandhi. Historical associations have been followed by researchers such as Gandhi, (2008) using the examples of such Jaina philosopher as Shrimad Rajchandra whose influence on the mind of Gandhi on ethical issues was influential. Nevertheless, the literature tends to point at the major difference between Ahimsa as presented by Jainism, a personalized formula of spiritual liberation and Gandhi turned it into a group instrument of socio-political reform (Cort, 2000). It is a critical junction of departure that is the focus of a large part of the scholarship. Moreover, Flugel (2006) touches on the differences of the doctrines, saying that the Jaina vow of Satya is naturally subordinate to Ahimsa--any truth which harms violates the prime vow--whereas Gandhi saw them as equally important and mutually supporting. In this review, it becomes evident that although the current literature confirms the relationship and the major distinction points between the two ethical systems, there is a lack of a systematic point by point comparative analysis of the vows per se. The vows have been regarded in most studies as a side note to the overall talk of Ahimsa. This gap is addressed by the paper by putting observance of vows; Ahimsa, Satya, Asteya, Brahmacharya, and Aparigraha at the centre of the comparison, examining the vows as the constitutive elements that determine the scope and application of non-violence in each tradition.

Methodology

The research design utilized in this study is that of qualitative research with a comparative analysis of text. The main purpose is to make a systematic and deep comparison of the ethical values of Jainism and Gandhian philosophy, paying a particular attention to such notions as Ahimsa (non-violence) and keeping vows. It is based on the hermeneutics, the theory and practice of interpretation, because it is a critical reading and reading of religious and philosophical texts in order to grasp their meaning and contextual relevance (Smith, 1989). The analysis of the secondary data is the only reason why the research is conducted. In the acquisition of data, a great variety of authoritative textual sources were used. These comprise canonical Jaina writings, including the Tattvartha Sutra of Umasvati (1994) and the Acaranga Sutra, that give the groundwork to the Jaina ethical vows. Primary sources were consulted by means of the Gandhian corpus which comprised the autobiography of Gandhi, *The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (Gandhi, 1968), and his collected essays on ethical living. This primary text was collaborated by sound secondary scholarship, such as scholarly journals, published books, and other critical reviews of known experts in areas of religious studies, Indian philosophy and political philosophy.

Historical context

The striking similarity between Gandhian and Jaina ethics is not only a philosophical one, but also based on Gandhi personal history and cultural context. Since he was a young boy, Gandhi was placed in the environment where Jainism was in high demand. He was born in Gujarat, a center of Jaina culture, and his bonded religious mother used to frequent the temples of other religions, which gave him an exposure to a pluralistic religious environment (Gandhi, 2008). Above all, Jaina monks attended the court of his father at Rajkot, whose talks on non-violence and asceticism made a permanent impact on the young Gandhi. This early introduction was subsequently crystallized by his lifelong friendship and mentorship with the Jaina philosopher Shrimad Rajchandra. He was given strict intellectual training in the Jaina teachings by Rajchandra, who used to be cited by Gandhi as one of his major sources of influence, specifically the unyielding

dedication to truth and non-violence (Cort, 2000). This biographical background is essential to appreciating the fact that Gandhi did not merely abstractly assimilate ideas of Jainism; he absorbed them through experience and spiritual mentoring, which made them perceptible in his thought and conditioned his actions well before he ever wrote them down as a political ideology.

A comparative ethics

The present work fits into the context of comparative religious ethics, which is the sphere of studying moral teachings, practices, and rationalities of various religious cultures. It is not about ranking one system as a better system but getting to know their unique outlines, areas of intersection, and areas of divergence by a systematic comparison (Fasching, 2011). The internal structure of either of the two ethical systems, i.e., what they are based on, what rules (vows) they are derived and what their soteriological or social objective is will be analyzed. Through the dialogue between Jainism and Gandhian thought, this framework makes it possible to observe how a more ascetic and liberation-oriented ethic (Jainism) can be modified and changed into this-worldly, activist thinking, oriented toward social reform (Gandhism). The given method assists in shedding light on the mechanism of how the central ethical notions such as Ahimsa can be redefined throughout various historical and cultural settings without losing the aspect of a family similarity.

In order to make the further analysis clear, it is necessary to define the key concepts, on the basis of which this research is built. Ahimsa (non-violence) in this paper is construed along a spectrum. In its Jaina sense, it is an absolute, maximalist obligation to non-harm (abhaya), to all living beings (jivas) in thought, speech and action, and because of a metaphysical end of avoiding karmic influx (Jaini, 1998). Ahimsa in the Gandhian tradition keeps this principle of non-harm but is in many ways an active, strategic, force of love (agape or karuna), and truth-seeking in politics, which tolerates a measure of necessary harm as a part of human life on earth. Likewise, a vow (vrata or brata) can be explained as a promise, a commitment or a commitment to keep a certain rule of behavior. These are the mahavratas in Jainism, vows of absolute and lifelong asceticism and anuvratas less strict in regard to lay persons all intended to purify the spirit (Dundas, 2003). To Gandhi the vows were test runs with truth which were needed disciplines of a Satyagrahi in order to cultivate inner strength necessary to incur responsibility to do what is expected of him or her, the social service and service without any malice and selfishness (Gandhi, 1968). These definitions give the lexicon upon which further comparison is to be made.

Discussion

The results of this analysis reveal a complicated connection between the morals of Jainism and Gandhi which involves deep ideological inheritance with a lot of adjustment to the context. These results are synthesized to answer the main research question discussing the peculiarities of similarity and dissimilarity of their vision of Ahimsa and the way of vows keeping.

The most obvious overlap is that Ahimsa is axiomatically primed as the most fundamental virtue. Both systems radically reinvent the notion of strength as the physical dominance but as the self-control and valor necessary to withhold violence. This is a direct school of philosophy, and Gandhi internalized the Jaina doctrine that spiritual and moral power is power. Moreover, the five vows (Ahimsa, Satya, Asteya, Brahmacharya, Aparigraha) are adopted structurally, which also proves that the Jaina moral pedagogy has been borrowed directly. To both these vows are not prohibitions, but positive trainings necessary to purify the individual and mould a certain type of moral character. Such a

common structure points to the fact that Jainism provided to Gandhi a system of ethical training which was full and extreme enough and he considered it essential to the personal growth of his satyagrahis.

But there is a decisive adaptation which is seen by the point of divergence in the application and ultimate aim of these ethics. The method of Jainism is basically soteriological and individualistic. The preservation of Ahimsa and the vows is an ascetic discipline (tapas) which is meant to purify the individual soul (jiva) and liberate it out of the circle of birth and death (Jaini, 1979). All the actions are weighed against karmic results. In sharp contrast, the framework of Gandhi is sociopolitical and collectivist. These individual pledges he turned into weapons of social change. To Gandhi, practicing Brahmacharya meant saving energy to struggle with the aim of gaining independence; Aparigraha (non-possession) was the economic principle of trusteeship as a method of curbing inequality; and Ahimsa was the active policy of Satyagraha as the means to face injustice and to reform the society (Parekh, 1999). This is the most telling break with his Jaina influences, the move toward collectivity (Sarvodaya) in place of the individual salvation.

This splitting is further solidified in the way they treat truth. Satya is the end and Ahimsa the instrument in the ontology of Gandhi and therefore none can exist without the other so they are not of equal stature (Gandhi, 1968). On the other hand, Jaina ethics create a cascade of morals with Ahimsa as the most important vow. The dedication to Satya is relative and has to be secondary to the principle of non-harm; a truth that harms is truth that is deemed to be himsa (violence) (Dundas, 2003). This contrast exaggerates a more fundamental difference of philosophical differences: the system of Gandhi consists of the unalterable search of truth, even at the expense of a momentary strain, whereas that of Jainism consists of the unalterable avoidance of violence, even at the cost of remaining silent or only saying gentle words.

To sum up, although the ethical architecture that Gandhi has built undoubtedly relies on the borrowed materials of the Jainism, the structure and aim of the resulting structure are clearly his. He alienated a philosophy of personal liberation on a world-renouncing scale, and re-packaged it into a philosophy of social and political transformation on a world-affirming scale. Instead of moksha he substituted it with Swaraj (self-rule) and Sarvodaya. Thus, it is not a matter of replication but a pragmatic and creative translation. Gandhi respected the Jaina Ahimsa of a microscopic care of each individual soul to a Macroscopic undertaking of the liberation of an entire nation and this showed that these old vows were capable of such tremendous power to transform a modern world politics. The strongest illustration of this adaptation is the metamorphosis of Ahimsa alone. Gandhi took it no longer to be merely a personal pledge to spiritual cleansing, but the practical, tactical centre of Satyagraha--a mass soul force or truth force, intended to counteract and destroy structures of tyranny and inquiry. It was not an abdication of the world but a radical and bellicose stand in it. It was no longer moksha of one person but Sarvodaya -the well-being and upliftment of all beings in this world. This change in goal could not fail to cause a change in application. Although, in its utopian model, Jaina ethics requires maximum non-harm, Gandhi admitted a certain amount of necessary injury in the worldly life (e.g., eating, breathing) and was concerned with cleansing the will of actions. His was a relative Ahimsa in an imperfect world, when compared with the Jaina aim of absolute Ahimsa as the ideal.

Additionally, the truth/non-violence hierarchical argumentation is one more subtle point of departure. Satya is the end and Ahimsa the unavoidable means in the ontology of

Gandhi, i.e., they are two inseparable sides of the same coin. In the case of Jainism however, Ahimsa is the greatest vow, and Satya must be subservient to it; a truth which renders harmful an offense against the first vow of non-violence. This difference highlights one of the key philosophical distinctions: the system according to which Gandhi constructs its truth of fearless and uncompromising searching the truth and which sometimes requires the absence of any speech, or very cautious discretion; the system according to which Jainism constructs its truth of avoiding harm and which at times may require silence or extreme parsimony.

Finally, Jainism and Gandhi can be considered to be connected in the context of the creative and practical translation, rather than direct adoption. Gandhi was a political revolutionary who was not a Jain ascetic but understood the mightiness of Jaina ascetic. He borrowed a philosophy that was meant to liberate the individual, and managed to radically re-engineer it into a national liberation device and a social reform engine. He showed that old vows of renunciation could be tapped to be used in mobilizing the masses of politics and challenge contemporary colonial authority. Conclusive of this paper is, therefore, that, although the soul of the ethical code of Gandhi is Jaina in its origin and discipline, the body of this code, the practice of this code, and the end-goal of this practice was his own. The Gandhian synthesis represents a giant contribution to the active development of moral philosophy which ensures that eternal spiritual values can be integrated into the most urgent temporal problems that provide a sustainable outlook on a moral-filled, human-centered, and uncompromising search of the truth.

Conclusion

It has been demonstrated in this comparative study that Jainism and Mahatma Gandhi share a relationship of profound philosophical dependency that is intensively influenced by the differing ultimate ends. It is clearly shown in the analysis that the essence of the Gandhian ethics, which are the highest principles of Ahimsa (non-violence) and the framework of the five vows, is deeply embedded in the Jaina philosophy. Gandhi was exposed to the Jaina culture in Gujarat at a very early age, and the Jaina teacher Shrimad Rajchandra inspired him intellectually; this formed the moral and intellectual foundation on which Gandhi built his own philosophy. The formal resemblances cannot be overlooked: ahimsa is not a passive condition in both systems but an active, strenuous discipline, the supreme expression of courage and power. Moreover, the situation when five vows (Ahimsa, Satya, Asteya, Brahmacharya, Aparigraha) are adopted as the moral life standards represents the most explicit and direct connection of two codes of ethics. This common structure underscores the belief of Gandhi that austerity in self-purification and absolute personal integrity cannot be compromised as preconditions to any desirable moral activity in the world. Nonetheless, it would be too much of a simplification to think of Gandhian ethics as a direct development of Jainism. What is most vital is the critical divergence, and, in fact, the greatest innovation of Gandhi, the teleological reorientation of these common principles. Jainism is essentially a soteriological way. It's strictly and utterly rigorous practice of Ahimsa and the other vows is aimed at an even higher end: the cleansing of the self-soul (jiva) of the shackles of karma, and there with its liberation (moksha) of the continuous chain of birth and death (samsara). All actions are judged in terms of karmic effect to the individual aspirant. Personal spiritual practice is commonly located in society in this world view. In a radical re-interpretation, Gandhi reversed this priority. He took these ascetic vows of renouncing the world out of their largely monastic terrain, and remodeled them as powerful means of world-entry and social-political revolution. To Gandhi

Brahmacharya (celibacy) was to save the precious energy of the freedom struggle; *Aparigraha* (non-possession) was to be reinterpreted as the socio-economic doctrine of trusteeship, attacking material inequality and insisting upon economic and social equity; and *Asteya* (non-stealing) was to be redefined as the comprehensive demand of economic and social justice.

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