

SKBU JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY
PEER REVIEWED

**GANDHIAN NON-VIOLENCE IN THE ERA OF CLIMATE CRISIS: AN
ETHICAL REASSESSMENT**

Ashok Bachhar

Introduction:

When Mahatma Gandhi wrote *Hind Swaraj* in 1909, his warning seemed directed at a colonial civilization intoxicated by mechanical progress and material greed. Yet, more than a century later, his critique stands vindicated in the face of a global ecological emergency. The twenty-first century's crisis is not born of scarcity but of excess—of human desire, relentless industrialization, and an unbridled faith in technology. The climate crisis, unlike conventional wars, manifests as what Rob Nixon calls “slow violence,” a dispersed and delayed destruction that gradually corrodes ecosystems and lives across generations (Nixon, 2011). Gandhi's moral philosophy of *ahimsā* (non-violence) thus re-emerges as a timely ethical lens—not as a spiritual relic but as a radical principle for ecological survival. In the Anthropocene, this principle demands expansion beyond human interactions to encompass the natural world. Every act of overconsumption, every emission, and every instance of resource wastage constitutes a subtle form of ecological violence. Gandhi's insistence on inner discipline, moderation, and respect for all life finds direct resonance in today's call for sustainable living and carbon responsibility (Gandhi, 1957). Equally relevant is Gandhi's idea of *swarāj*—self-rule—which, beyond its political context, implies self-mastery and moral autonomy. In the age of climate change, *swarāj* invites individuals and nations alike to govern their ecological impulses, to replace unrestrained growth with sufficiency, and to recognize interdependence as a form of strength (Parekh, 1989).

1. Why Gandhi, Why Now?

The climate crisis intensifies a paradox that Gandhi recognized a century ago: technological prowess can coexist with moral diminishment. In *Hind Swaraj* (1909), Gandhi condemned “civilization” as an engine of restless desire, a social order normalizing the endless expansion of wants while outsourcing costs to the powerless and to nature. What appears today as planetary-scale risk—rising temperatures, biodiversity loss, and cascading social precarity—translates that insight into the idiom of Earth-system science. If Gandhi's critique once looked naive to developmentalist eyes, the Anthropocene renders it newly legible.

Reassessing Gandhian non-violence for climate ethics requires two moves. First, we must broaden the definition of violence to include the slow, distributed harms of emission-intensive economies: floods, droughts, heat deaths, and the forced displacement of those least responsible. Second,

SKBU JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY

PEER REVIEWED

we must recover the constructive dimension of *ahimsā*—not merely the refusal to harm but the active cultivation of truthful relations among humans and between human communities and the more-than-human world. This article develops these moves across theory, praxis, and policy, arguing that a critical-Gandhian framework can orient ethical action without idealizing the past or ignoring entrenched hierarchies.

2. From *Ahimsā* to *Satyāgraha*: The Architecture of Gandhian Ethics:

Gandhi's concept of non-violence (*ahimsā*) cannot be reduced to a moral sentiment or a political tactic; it is an entire architecture of interlocking ideas that together form an ethical worldview. Each component—*ahimsā*, *satya*, *swarāj*, *aparigraha*, trusteeship, and *sarvodaya*—acts as a pillar supporting his larger vision of moral civilization. These ideas, though rooted in ancient Indian philosophy, gain fresh relevance in the age of ecological degradation and climate change.

2.1 *Ahimsā* (Non-Violence)

For Gandhi, *ahimsā* is not merely the absence of physical violence but a universal principle of compassion, grounded in the belief that all beings are interconnected in a web of moral kinship (Gandhi, 1957). It demands restraint in thought, word, and deed—an inner discipline that rejects hatred and aggression as means to any end. Unlike passive pacifism, *ahimsā* is an active moral force that seeks to transform the adversary rather than destroy them (Bondurant, 1958). In the context of the climate crisis, this principle translates into a refusal to participate in systems that exploit nature for profit. Every act of overconsumption or ecological destruction becomes a form of violence against the planet's living fabric. Thus, *ahimsā* evolves from a spiritual ideal into an ecological ethic—one that requires humanity to live within limits, honoring the sanctity of all life.

2.2 *Satya* (Truth) and *Satyāgraha* (Holding to Truth)

Truth (*satya*), for Gandhi, was the ultimate reality—ever-approached but never fully possessed (Parekh, 1989). His method of *satyāgraha*, literally “holding fast to truth,” called for moral courage expressed through non-violent resistance and self-suffering. In Gandhi's view, the pursuit of truth was inseparable from the means employed to achieve it; honest ends required honest methods (Gandhi, 1909). Translating this to climate politics, *satyāgraha* demands transparency about ecological harms, accountability for corporate and governmental emissions, and moral courage to expose systemic injustice. As environmental scholars argue, truth-telling in climate activism—through data, protest, and testimony—becomes a modern form of *satyāgraha* (Nixon, 2011). It is through this disciplined commitment to truth that individuals and societies can begin to dismantle the structures of denial and deception that sustain ecological collapse.

SKBU JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY
PEER REVIEWED

2.3 *Swarāj* (Self-Rule) and *Swadeshi* (Local Obligation)

Gandhi's notion of *swarāj*—often translated as “self-rule”—was never confined to political independence from colonial rule. It meant ethical self-governance, the mastery of desire, and the cultivation of autonomy guided by conscience (Bilgrami, 2014). In tandem with *swadeshi*, the principle of local responsibility, *swarāj* calls for deep attention to one's immediate environment and community (Parekh, 1989). Ecologically, this translates into strengthening local economies, reducing dependence on global supply chains, and valuing indigenous ecological knowledge. Gandhi's call for local production and decentralized living thus prefigures today's sustainability movements advocating food sovereignty, community-based resource management, and participatory governance. The essence of *swarāj* lies in recognizing that freedom is meaningless without ecological self-restraint and social responsibility.

3. Rethinking Violence: From Interpersonal Harm to Structural and Ecological Injury

The climate crisis demands a profound expansion of how we define and understand violence. For Gandhi, *ahimsā* was primarily an ethical and political discipline—resisting harm between individuals and communities through compassion and truth. Yet, the modern ecological condition reveals new forms of violence that Gandhi intuited but never fully theorized: harms without direct perpetrators, dispersed over time, space, and species. These include the slow poisoning of air and water, the displacement of vulnerable populations, and the systematic erosion of ecosystems. Johan Galtung's concept of “structural violence,” defined as social arrangements that “harm individuals by preventing them from meeting their basic needs,” offers a crucial framework for understanding this broader moral horizon (Galtung, 1969).

3.1 Temporal Test (Intergenerational Truth)

The temporal test asks whether our actions impose risks and suffering on future generations who cannot consent or resist. This principle aligns with Gandhi's insistence on *satya* (truth) as a moral responsibility that extends beyond immediate outcomes. For Gandhi, truthfulness required awareness of the full consequences of one's actions (Gandhi, 1957). In climate ethics, this translates into the duty to recognize the long-term impact of emissions, deforestation, and industrialization on unborn generations. Philosophers such as Henry Shue argue that intergenerational justice is central to climate responsibility, since “those who benefit most from fossil fuels are least likely to bear the costs” (Shue, 2014). Thus, the temporal test extends *ahimsā* into time, making non-violence a form of honesty toward the future. To live truthfully is to live sustainably—to ensure that progress today does not become suffering tomorrow.

SKBU JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY

PEER REVIEWED

3.2 Spatial Test (Global Justice)

The spatial test examines how the benefits and harms of modern civilization are geographically distributed. Gandhi's ideal of *sarvodaya*—the welfare of all—insists that moral action cannot privilege one community's comfort at the expense of another's survival (Gandhi, 1941). In the globalized economy, however, affluent nations often outsource pollution, waste, and extractive industries to poorer regions while retaining the advantages of consumption. Sunita Narain and Anil Agarwal's classic report, *Global Warming in an Unequal World* (1991), exposed this imbalance by demonstrating how industrialized nations disproportionately contribute to emissions yet impose adaptation burdens on the Global South. Gandhi's *swadeshi* principle, emphasizing local responsibility and self-restraint, provides a moral counterpoint to this injustice (Parekh, 1989). Under the spatial test, climate ethics demands that developed nations practice ecological trusteeship, ensuring that global prosperity does not translate into localized suffering—a truly Gandhian extension of fairness across space.

3.3 Species Test (More-than-Human Consideration)

The species test challenges anthropocentrism—the human-centered worldview that treats nature as a mere resource. Gandhi's compassion was not limited to humanity; he viewed all living beings as expressions of the same divine truth (*satya*) and emphasized vegetarianism, animal care, and reverence for life (Gandhi, 1909). In this sense, his *ahimsā* resonates with the “deep ecology” of Arne Næss, which recognizes the intrinsic value of all species beyond their instrumental use (Næss, 1973). Modern ecological philosophy echoes Gandhi's insight that domination over nature mirrors domination among humans. To violate the planet's biodiversity is, therefore, a moral contradiction of non-violence. The species test asks: do our technologies, industries, and agricultural practices respect the dignity of non-human life? By extending *ahimsā* to all sentient and ecological forms, this test redefines ethics as interspecies solidarity—a vital antidote to the ecological alienation of industrial modernity.

4. The Moral Psychology of Consumption: Sufficiency against the Infinite Appetite

Gandhi's ethical philosophy was, at its heart, a moral psychology—a diagnosis of human desire and its discontents. His observation that “Earth provides enough to satisfy every man's need but not every man's greed” (Gandhi, 1947, cited in Guha, 2006) captures the tension between necessity and excess that defines modern consumer society. What Gandhi intuited as moral imbalance, climate science now confirms through carbon metrics: the biosphere's capacity to absorb emissions is finite, and yet our appetites are infinite. If the global carbon budget represents nature's moral limit, then the pressing ethical question becomes—how much is enough? Gandhi's answer lay not in renunciation but in sufficiency, in aligning one's desires with the needs of all beings. His critique of consumption anticipated today's debates on sustainable living, ecological economics, and post-growth ethics.

SKBU JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY

PEER REVIEWED

4.1 Desire, Display, and the Status Economy

Modern consumption extends far beyond the satisfaction of material needs; it has become a language of identity and prestige. Thorstein Veblen described this as “conspicuous consumption,” where individuals display wealth to gain social validation—a phenomenon that Gandhi, without using the term, recognized as a moral trap (Veblen, 1899). Gandhi saw the pursuit of luxury as a self-perpetuating cycle of desire, where “each new want creates another,” leading to moral emptiness and social inequality (Gandhi, 1909). His response was *brahmacharya*, a discipline of self-mastery extending beyond celibacy to include moderation in consumption and restraint in desire (Bondurant, 1958).

4.2 Non-Possession and the Carbon Self

For Gandhi, *aparigraha* (non-possession) was not the rejection of material comfort but a disciplined awareness of attachment. He defined it as “owning nothing that one does not really need” (Gandhi, 1957). This ethical stance, when reframed through climate science, can be understood as the creation of a “carbon self”—a morally conscious identity aware of its ecological footprint. As Gandhi believed that “to live simply is to live fully,” *aparigraha* offers a psychological method for curbing consumption without coercion (Parekh, 1989).

Applied to contemporary environmental practice, *aparigraha* translates into four concrete habits. First, carbon literacy—awareness of one’s emissions through lifestyle and travel choices. Second, adherence to a “first do no harm” principle: minimizing avoidable high-impact behaviors such as frequent flying or fast fashion (Raworth, 2017). Third, participation in community compacts—collective pledges to share resources, promote repair networks, and reduce waste. Fourth, trusteeship in action—redirecting personal surplus toward common goods, such as local renewable energy projects or climate adaptation funds. In this way, Gandhi’s non-possession becomes not an ascetic withdrawal but an ethical recalibration of modern life around sufficiency, fairness, and responsibility.

4.3 Diet, *Ahimsā*, and Planetary Health

Gandhi’s lifelong experiments in diet were moral and ecological laboratories. In *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, he detailed how dietary restraint was a means of spiritual purification and compassion toward all living beings (Gandhi, 1957). His vegetarianism was rooted not in dogma but in the principle of *ahimsā*—to minimize harm to life wherever possible. Translating this ethic to the climate context, food choices become moral decisions: high-emission diets dominated by meat and processed foods represent a form of ecological violence when sustainable alternatives exist (Nixon, 2011).

5. Non-Violent Power: Civil Resistance in Climate Politics:

Gandhi’s enduring contribution to political ethics was his redefinition of power—not as domination, but as moral force (*satyāgraha*). He demonstrated that organized non-cooperation could dismantle

SKBU JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY

PEER REVIEWED

oppressive systems without reproducing cycles of cruelty or vengeance. This ethical insight has profound implications for the climate crisis, which, at its core, is also a struggle over power—between human greed and planetary limits, between economic elites and ecological justice.

5.1 *Satyāgraha* as Public Reason

In Gandhi's philosophy, *satyāgraha*—the “holding onto truth”—was both a moral discipline and a public method for achieving justice. It rested on *satya* (truth) and *ahimsā* (non-violence), demanding transparency, dialogue, and ethical self-restraint (Bondurant, 1958). Applied to the climate crisis, climate *satyāgraha* entails the rigorous truth-telling necessary to expose environmental harm and systemic denial. This includes making emissions data public, revealing the beneficiaries of fossil-fuel rents, and openly accounting for transition costs affecting workers and communities (Schlosberg & Collins, 2014).

5.2 Self-Suffering and the Ethics of Disruption

Gandhi's civil disobedience was rooted in the willingness to bear suffering for a just cause. He believed that enduring pain without retaliation transforms protest into moral testimony (Gandhi, 1920; Bondurant, 1958). However, he also imposed clear ethical limits on disruption: protest must never endanger others, destroy property wantonly, or rely on coercion. Applying this to climate activism, the ethics of *tapasya* (self-suffering) can guide movements like *Extinction Rebellion* or *Fridays for Future* toward responsible, disciplined action.

5.3 Precedents and Lessons from Indian Environmentalism

India's environmental history offers powerful illustrations of Gandhian civil resistance adapted to ecological struggles. The Chipko Movement (1973–1981), where Himalayan villagers hugged trees to prevent logging, epitomized *ahimsā* in action: protection through embrace rather than force (Guha, 1989). Similarly, the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA), led by Medha Patkar and others, used fasts, *padyātras* (foot marches), and non-violent occupations to resist displacement from dam projects (Baviskar, 1995). Both movements drew inspiration from Gandhi's methods—appealing to conscience through moral witness rather than confrontation.

5.4 The Global Frame

In the international context, the Gandhian ethic of non-violence acquires additional complexity. Climate mobilizations in the Global North—such as *Just Stop Oil* or *End Fossil*—often engage in acts of disruption aimed at media visibility. While these are legitimate expressions of urgency, a Gandhian framework would emphasize redirecting such protest energy toward systemic policy change—binding carbon pricing, fossil fuel non-proliferation treaties, and ethical divestment (Raworth, 2017).

Gandhi's principle of trusteeship extends this moral obligation across borders. High-emission nations, having reaped the benefits of industrialization, bear a fiduciary duty to assist the Global South in

SKBU JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY

PEER REVIEWED

adaptation and energy transitions (Rajamani, 2006). True *climate satyāgraha* in the North, therefore, involves acknowledging historical responsibility and advocating reparative justice. As Akeel Bilgrami (2014) notes, Gandhi's ethics of means and ends compels consistency: one cannot seek climate justice while perpetuating global inequality.

6. Trusteeship for a Just Transition: From Charity to Obligation:

Gandhi's principle of trusteeship emerged as a moral response to the inequalities of wealth and power in industrial society. Contrary to popular caricature, it was not a call for passive philanthropy but a radical redefinition of property as a social trust. In Gandhi's view, wealth was not an individual's absolute possession but a resource held in stewardship for the welfare of all (Gandhi, 1941). This notion directly challenges the modern capitalist ethos of ownership and accumulation. In the context of the climate crisis, trusteeship acquires a renewed ethical urgency: it provides a bridge between moral responsibility and economic accountability. The concept now extends beyond individuals to include corporations, states, and communities—each entrusted with specific duties toward ecological justice and social repair.

6.1 Corporate Trusteeship and Carbon Accountability

In the modern global economy, corporations are among the most powerful agents of both ecological harm and potential reform. Gandhi's idea of trusteeship provides a moral and legal template for corporate accountability. He believed that those with wealth and power must act as custodians, not exploiters, of public welfare (Gandhi, 1941). Translating this into climate ethics, if shareholders and executives profit from industries that externalize carbon costs, they inherit a fiduciary duty to remediate those harms.

Contemporary frameworks such as the “polluter pays principle” and producer responsibility laws reflect this Gandhian insight. Corporate trusteeship supports mandatory disclosure of Scope 1–3 emissions, legal liability for greenwashing or misleading sustainability claims, and binding transition plans toward decarbonization (Ramasastry, 2015). It also justifies the inclusion of “sunset clauses”—policies requiring the managed phase-out of fossil-fuel assets while securing alternative livelihoods for affected workers (Raworth, 2017).

6.2 National Trusteeship and Global Equity

At the international level, trusteeship redefines the moral foundations of climate justice. Gandhi's vision of global interdependence resonates with the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities (CBDR) in international environmental law, which holds that nations with greater historical emissions and technological capacity must bear a larger share of the burden for mitigation and

SKBU JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY

PEER REVIEWED

adaptation (Rajamani, 2006). Under a Gandhian lens, such obligations are not acts of generosity but repayments of ecological debt—a moral duty to restore balance between the Global North and South. For Gandhi, moral legitimacy rested on service, not dominance. Translating this to global governance, the industrialized North becomes a trustee of global ecological stability, obligated to finance green transitions, transfer technology, and support vulnerable nations confronting climate impacts (Agarwal & Narain, 1991). This reframing dissolves the false binary between charity and justice: financial flows for adaptation are no longer “aid” but the rightful return of stolen ecological capacity.

6.3 Community Trusteeship and Energy Democracy

While corporate and state trusteeship address macro-level structures, Gandhi’s deepest faith lay in the moral capacities of local communities. His *panchayat raj* ideal envisioned decentralized governance, where moral power flowed upward from self-reliant villages rather than downward from centralized institutions (Gandhi, 1946). In the context of climate transitions, this principle translates into community trusteeship—collective stewardship of resources such as water, forests, and energy. Elinor Ostrom’s theory of polycentric governance reinforces Gandhi’s insight that complex global challenges are best managed through multiple centers of initiative rather than a single hierarchy (Ostrom, 2010). Community energy cooperatives, commons-based water management systems, and urban repair economies embody this vision. For instance, local renewable energy projects—such as solar microgrids or wind cooperatives—demonstrate how collective ownership fosters both efficiency and accountability (Raworth, 2017).

7. Technology, Scale, and the Gandhian Critique—Revisited:

Gandhi’s critique of industrial modernity has often been misunderstood as a blanket rejection of technology. In *Hind Swaraj* (1909), he condemned machines not because he opposed innovation per se, but because he feared the moral and social distortions that accompanied industrial civilization—dehumanization, economic exploitation, and the erosion of community life (Gandhi, 1909). His concern was ethical, not technophobic. He viewed large-scale mechanization as a system that alienated individuals from meaningful labor and centralized power in the hands of a few. Yet today, in the era of the climate crisis, technology is both the problem and the potential solution. Decarbonization requires massive infrastructural transformation—renewable grids, carbon sequestration, electric mobility, and digital coordination. The question is not whether technology is necessary, but what kind of technology aligns with Gandhian ethics.

7.1 Ends and Means

For Gandhi, the ethical quality of an action could never be separated from its method. “They say that means are after all means. I would say that means are after all everything,” he wrote in *Young India*

SKBU JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY

PEER REVIEWED

(1924), emphasizing that unjust means corrupt even the noblest ends (Gandhi, 1957). In technological terms, this implies that tools cannot be morally neutral; they shape the social and environmental contexts they inhabit. Thus, a technology that achieves decarbonization but entrenches surveillance capitalism, labor exploitation, or resource colonialism fails Gandhi's ethical test.

7.2 Appropriate Scale and Modularity

E. F. Schumacher's *Small Is Beautiful* (1973), directly influenced by Gandhian philosophy, captured the essence of Gandhi's skepticism toward gigantism. Gandhi did not oppose machines themselves but warned against "brittle monocultures"—systems so large and complex that they undermine resilience and human autonomy (Schumacher, 1973). In the context of climate stabilization, this insight translates into the need for technological diversity and modularity. The climate analogue of Gandhian scale is not a return to pre-industrial simplicity but a portfolio approach that combines the strengths of both large and small systems.

For instance, continental renewable grids can coexist with micro-grids that empower local communities. Similarly, large-scale wind farms can be paired with community-owned solar cooperatives, and high-tech storage systems can be complemented by low-tech efficiency improvements (Ostrom, 2010). Such modular design ensures redundancy—so that failure in one system does not collapse the whole—and equity, by distributing both risks and benefits more evenly. Gandhi's idea of *swarāj* (self-rule) finds ecological expression here: technological sovereignty at multiple scales, where local actors retain agency while contributing to national and global goals.

7.3 Innovation within Limits

Gandhi's realism distinguished him from both romantic traditionalists and blind modernists. While he distrusted industrial excess, he never idolized poverty or rejected scientific advancement. Instead, he urged for "innovation under moral constraint"—technological progress guided by ethical reflection. For Gandhi, the measure of innovation was not novelty but necessity: "Science must not be divorced from humanity; it must have a soul" (Gandhi, 1947).

The Moral Ecology of Technology:

Revisiting Gandhi's technological critique reveals not an anti-modern stance, but a plea for moral imagination. His insights anticipate today's debates on automation, artificial intelligence, and renewable energy justice. The real challenge, Gandhi might argue, is not to choose between progress and restraint, but to design progress that embodies restraint. In the age of climate crisis, technological ethics must therefore move beyond efficiency to compassion—ensuring that the quest for carbon neutrality does not deepen social inequality or ecological alienation.

SKBU JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY

PEER REVIEWED

As Schumacher (1973) affirmed, “The aim ought to be to obtain the maximum of well-being with the minimum of consumption.” Gandhi’s legacy offers precisely this wisdom: innovation within limits, abundance within simplicity, and technology as a servant of life rather than its master.

8. Caste, Gender, and the Limits of Classical Gandhianism

A truly transformative climate ethic for India cannot rest on moral idealism alone; it must confront the structural hierarchies of caste and gender that define who suffers, who speaks, and who decides in the face of ecological crisis. Classical Gandhian philosophy—while visionary in its emphasis on non-violence, simplicity, and trusteeship—often assumed a moral universality that obscured deep social inequalities. Gandhi’s concern for the “last person” (*antyodaya*) was radical in intent, yet his romanticization of the village and moral appeal to upper-caste reformers left the architecture of caste and patriarchy largely intact (Ambedkar, 1936; Nandy, 1983). As a result, any contemporary Gandhian ethic must be critically expanded—what scholars call Critical Gandhianism—to include Ambedkarite social justice, feminist ecology, and plural religious ethics. Only by integrating these perspectives can non-violence become not just an individual virtue but a collective liberation from social and ecological violence.

8.1 Ambedkarite Critique and Climate Justice

B. R. Ambedkar’s *Annihilation of Caste* (1936) remains the most powerful indictment of the social hierarchies Gandhi sought to morally reform rather than dismantle. Ambedkar described caste as a “system of graded inequality,” sustained by religion, economy, and culture (Ambedkar, 1936). Gandhi’s defense of varna dharma as a form of social division of labor, though reinterpreted ethically, failed to confront the violent exclusions embedded within caste (Omvedt, 2004).

In the context of climate justice, this critique gains renewed urgency. Romanticizing the self-sufficient village—as some environmentalists inspired by Gandhi do—risks overlooking how such “harmonies” often rest on caste-based exploitation of labor and land. As Dalit scholars like Anand Teltumbde (2018) argue, ecological ideals without social equality replicate local tyrannies. A critical-Gandhian climate ethic must therefore replace customary morality with constitutional morality (Ambedkar’s term)—anchored in equality, liberty, and fraternity.

This vision demands concrete structural reforms: redistribution of land and water resources, energy democracy that empowers marginalized castes, and inclusion of Dalit and Adivasi voices in environmental governance. Only by dismantling the caste-based ownership of natural resources can Gandhi’s vision of *sarvodaya*—the welfare of all—be realized in material, not merely moral, terms. Thus, Ambedkarite thought radicalizes Gandhi’s ethics by giving it institutional and egalitarian grounding within the realities of postcolonial India.

SKBU JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY

PEER REVIEWED

8.2 Gendered Labor and Care Ecologies

Women, especially those in rural and marginalized communities, remain the unseen backbone of India's ecological economy. They perform the bulk of unpaid and underpaid labor in water collection, food production, and caregiving—all of which intensify under climate stress (Agarwal, 2010). Gandhi often invoked women as symbols of patience, moral strength, and non-violence, but his framework largely confined them within a moralized domestic sphere (Kishwar, 1986). A feminist re-reading of Gandhian constructive work (*sarvodaya*) must therefore recode these roles, recognizing women not as passive caregivers but as active agents of sustainability and political change.

Ecofeminist thinkers like Vandana Shiva (1988) and Bina Agarwal (2010) have shown that women's knowledge of seeds, soil, and water management is indispensable to biodiversity conservation. A critical-Gandhian ethic must thus valorize and redistribute care work—ensuring that environmental policies secure land tenure for women farmers, equal wages, and representation in decision-making bodies. Gandhi's emphasis on constructive work can be revived through care ecologies—community initiatives that sustain both people and planet.

For example, women-led collectives in India's Deccan Development Society or the Chipko Movement exemplify how gendered labor, when politically empowered, becomes an engine of ecological justice (Agarwal, 2010; Guha, 1989). Hence, integrating feminist insights transforms Gandhian ethics from a moral doctrine of restraint into a politics of redistribution—where *ahimsā* means not only “do no harm,” but also “undo inequality.”

8.3 Plural Religiosities without Majoritarian Symbols

Gandhi's religiosity was profoundly inclusive in its intention but culturally embedded in Hindu idioms. His invocation of *Ramrajya*—the ideal moral polity—was meant as an ethical metaphor rather than a sectarian goal (Parekh, 1989). However, in today's India, where environmental rhetoric often slips into religious majoritarianism, invoking such symbols risks alienating minorities and reinforcing exclusion. For a climate ethic to be truly Gandhian in spirit yet plural in form, it must translate core values—truth (*satya*), non-violence (*ahimsā*), and compassion (*karuṇā*)—into secular, interfaith, and intercultural languages (Bilgrami, 2014).

A plural religiosity, inspired by Gandhi but not bound by any single tradition, can mobilize moral energy across communities. Islamic stewardship (*khalīfah*), Buddhist compassion (*karuṇā*), Christian care for creation, and Indigenous spiritualities all converge on the Gandhian ideal of ecological harmony (Chakrabarty, 2021). By creating a shared ethical vocabulary, climate movements can transcend sectarian divisions and resist the co-option of “green” politics by majoritarian ideologies.

SKBU JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY

PEER REVIEWED

Objections and Replies:

Reassessing Gandhian non-violence for the climate crisis inevitably invites several criticisms—ranging from the charge of impractical idealism to the accusation of socio-political conservatism. Yet, when examined through a critical and contextual lens, these objections illuminate rather than weaken the contemporary relevance of Gandhi’s ethical framework. By integrating modern theories of justice, institutional design, and intersectional critique, Gandhian ethics can evolve into a robust and operational paradigm for sustainable transformation.

Objection 1: Gandhian Ethics Is Too Demanding; Sufficiency Cannot Scale in Consumer Democracies Critics often argue that Gandhi’s advocacy of voluntary simplicity and self-restraint is utopian and incompatible with the consumer-driven structures of modern democracies. In an era where growth and desire are institutionalized, the demand for sufficiency appears impractical. However, as scholars of ecological economics emphasize, “all ethics become demanding under planetary limits” (Raworth, 2017). The real question is not whether limits exist but how they are distributed—whether imposed by ecological collapse or chosen through equitable policy.

Gandhi’s notion of voluntary sufficiency, when contextualized within frameworks like Kate Raworth’s Doughnut Economics and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC, 2023) carbon budget model, becomes an instrument of distributive justice rather than ascetic moralism. Institutionalizing fair-share carbon budgets, repair economies, and sufficiency-based consumption norms transforms personal ethics into collective policy. In this sense, Gandhian restraint is more democratic than the involuntary austerity that follows ecological breakdown. Gandhi’s vision of *swarāj*—ethical self-rule—offers the psychological foundation for this transition, aligning freedom with responsibility rather than excess (Gandhi, 1909; Bilgrami, 2014).

Objection 2: Trusteeship Relies on the Virtue of the Wealthy Another persistent critique is that Gandhi’s principle of trusteeship depends excessively on moral goodwill, making it unsuitable for enforcing accountability in capitalist economies. Gandhi’s belief that the wealthy could voluntarily act as stewards of social welfare is often seen as naive or paternalistic (Parekh, 1989). However, modern jurisprudence and corporate governance provide tools for juridifying virtue—translating moral obligations into enforceable laws.

Contemporary corporate responsibility frameworks such as fiduciary duty, ESG accountability, and producer liability operationalize the spirit of trusteeship (Ramasastry, 2015). Legal instruments like mandatory emissions disclosures, liability for greenwashing, and transition planning requirements institutionalize Gandhi’s moral imperative without depending on personal benevolence. Thus, trusteeship evolves from an ethical aspiration into a regulatory architecture of justice. In this

SKBU JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY

PEER REVIEWED

reformulation, Gandhi's personalism complements rather than contradicts modern environmental law—reminding policymakers that legal norms must be animated by moral conscience to retain legitimacy (Gandhi, 1941).

Toward a Critical-Gandhian Climate Ethic:

A climate ethic commensurate with the planetary crisis must transcend technocratic adjustments and market corrections. It must interrogate the deeper moral and psychological foundations of modern civilization—our relationship to desire, power, and community. As Dipesh Chakrabarty (2021) reminds us, the Anthropocene has collapsed the boundary between the historical and the planetary: humanity has become a geological agent, yet remains divided by inequality. Gandhi, though writing in a different epoch, offers the moral and political resources to navigate this dual condition. His ethics teaches us how to speak of limits without nihilism, of power without cruelty, and of community without parochialism. This synthesis can be understood through six interlocking principles that integrate Gandhian insights with contemporary ecological ethics.

1. Truthfulness about Harm

At the heart of Gandhi's *satya* (truth) lies a moral obligation to confront the consequences of one's actions. In the climate context, this translates into rigorous carbon accounting, transparent acknowledgment of trade-offs, and prioritizing the voices of the most affected (IPCC, 2023; Schlosberg & Collins, 2014). Gandhi's insistence that "truth is God" (Gandhi, 1957) demands epistemic honesty—rejecting denialism, selective reporting, and corporate obfuscation. To "hold to truth" (*satyāgraha*) today means telling the full story of environmental harm, from fossil-fuel extraction to unequal adaptation burdens. Truthfulness thus becomes the foundation of planetary ethics, ensuring that moral clarity precedes technological innovation.

2. Non-Violent Means

For Gandhi, non-violence was not merely abstention from harm but a method of action grounded in moral self-restraint and courage (Bondurant, 1958). A critical-Gandhian climate ethic extends this to public activism: legality where possible, conscientious civil disobedience where necessary, and the self-discipline to avoid cruelty. As Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan (2011) demonstrate, non-violent movements are empirically more effective than violent ones in achieving durable political change. This evidence vindicates Gandhi's intuition that moral power amplifies strategic success. Yet, in a globalized media age, *ahimsā* must evolve into digital and ecological forms—protesting misinformation, surveillance capitalism, and resource violence through peaceful yet disruptive civic action.

SKBU JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY

PEER REVIEWED

3. Sufficiency as Freedom

Modern liberalism equates freedom with accumulation; Gandhi inverted this equation, defining freedom as the mastery of desire. His call for *aparigraha* (non-possession) and “voluntary poverty” now reads as a precursor to degrowth and post-carbon economics (Raworth, 2017; Hickel, 2020). In this light, sufficiency becomes liberation—the freedom to live well without exploitation or waste. Policy-wise, this ethic manifests as sufficiency-based procurement, circular economies, and fair-share consumption standards. Culturally, it represents a re-education of desire: learning to find joy in moderation rather than excess. As Gandhi argued, “Civilization is that mode of conduct which points out to man the path of duty” (Gandhi, 1909)—a statement that today defines the essence of ecological citizenship.

4. Trusteeship as Justice

Gandhi’s concept of trusteeship—that wealth confers fiduciary obligations—offers a moral and legal framework for climate reparations and corporate accountability. In contemporary adaptation, obligations must be proportional to power and benefit, codified through binding law and financed at scale (Ramasastry, 2015). The trustee becomes a juridical category: shareholders, states, and high-emission industries bear responsibility for ecological repair. This shifts the discourse from charity to justice. Gandhi’s dictum that “all wealth belongs to the community” (Gandhi, 1941) anticipates modern debates on global redistribution and carbon finance. By embedding trusteeship into law—through climate funds, transparency mandates, and ESG governance—we transform moral aspiration into enforceable equity.

5. Polycentric Reconstruction

Gandhi’s *swarāj* (self-rule) and panchayat raj ideals envisioned decentralized moral governance. Reinterpreted for the climate age, this becomes polycentric reconstruction—a multi-scalar system where power and initiative are distributed across local, regional, and global nodes (Ostrom, 2010). Such structures prevent both authoritarian overreach and bureaucratic inertia, allowing adaptation strategies to reflect local cultures and ecosystems. *Ahimsā* here functions institutionally: by preventing domination, it fosters cooperation and mutual accountability. As Raworth (2017) and Ostrom (2010) argue, resilience arises not from central control but from diversity and participation. Polycentric reconstruction thus embodies Gandhian democracy—ethical, deliberative, and ecologically adaptive.

6. Intersectional Vigilance

Finally, a critical Gandhian ethic must confront what Gandhi could not fully transcend—caste, patriarchy, and religious majoritarianism. Without intersectional vigilance, the rhetoric of “green harmony” risks concealing social violence (Ambedkar, 1936; Agarwal, 2010). Environmental policies that ignore caste hierarchies or gendered labor merely reproduce injustice in sustainable disguise. Hence,

SKBU JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY

PEER REVIEWED

caste, gender, and indigenous rights must serve as non-negotiable ethical constraints in every “green” initiative. This perspective extends Gandhi’s *sarvodaya* (welfare of all) through Ambedkarite constitutionalism and feminist ecology, ensuring that sustainability and equality remain inseparable.

Conclusion:

As the planet confronts the cascading crises of climate change—rising seas, mass displacement, and ecological grief—Gandhi’s philosophy returns not as nostalgia, but as necessity. His vision of *ahimsā*, *satyāgraha*, *aparigraha*, and trusteeship offers humanity a language for ethical reconstruction in an age that has lost moral proportion. Yet the Gandhi we need today is not the saint of passive suffering, but the radical architect of moral courage—the thinker who understood that enduring transformation begins with the discipline of truth, compassion, and restraint. The Critical-Gandhian Climate Ethic articulated through this essay reclaims Gandhi for a world that is simultaneously more fragile and more interconnected than his own. It invites us to balance reason with reverence, policy with empathy, and progress with humility. It insists that climate justice is not merely a technical matter of emissions, but a profound question of how we inhabit the Earth together—how we share, repair, and rebuild without violence to people or planet. To live non-violently in the twenty-first century is to recognize interdependence as destiny. It is to understand that the violence we inflict upon the atmosphere mirrors the inequalities we sustain among ourselves. Gandhian non-violence, when critically renewed through Ambedkarite equality, feminist care, and ecological solidarity, becomes a planetary ethic—one that replaces domination with stewardship and despair with disciplined hope. In this light, Gandhi’s dream of *swarāj*—self-rule through self-restraint—becomes a metaphor for the human condition under planetary limits. Our survival depends not on conquest, but on cooperation; not on accumulation, but on sufficiency. The Earth, as Gandhi foresaw, provides enough for everyone’s need, though never for everyone’s greed. If that truth guides us, non-violence will no longer be a relic of history, but the foundation of a livable future—a future where humanity learns, at last, to live lightly, truthfully, and justly upon the Earth.

References:

1. Agarwal, B. (2010). *Gender and green governance: The political economy of women’s presence within and beyond community forestry*. Oxford University Press.
2. Agarwal, A., & Narain, S. (1991). *Global warming in an unequal world*. Centre for Science and Environment.
1. Ambedkar, B. R. (1936). *Annihilation of caste*. Bombay: The Indian Press.
2. Baviskar, A. (1995). *In the belly of the river: Tribal conflicts over development in the Narmada Valley*. Oxford University Press.

SKBU JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY
PEER REVIEWED

3. Bilgrami, A. (2014). *Gandhi's integrity. In Secularism, identity, and enchantment.* Harvard University Press.
4. Bondurant, J. V. (1958). *Conquest of violence: The Gandhian philosophy of conflict.* Princeton University Press.
5. Chakrabarty, D. (2021). *The climate of history in a planetary age.* University of Chicago Press.
6. Chenoweth, E., & Stephan, M. (2011). *Why civil resistance works: The strategic logic of nonviolent conflict.* Columbia University Press.
7. Galtung, J. (1969). Violence, peace, and peace research. *Journal of Peace Research*, 6(3), 167–191.
8. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002234336900600301>
9. Gandhi, M. K. (1909). *Hind Swaraj.* Navajivan Publishing House.
10. Gandhi, M. K. (1920). *Young India* [Collected writings]. Navajivan.
11. Gandhi, M. K. (1941). *Constructive programme: Its meaning and place.* Navajivan Publishing House.
12. Gandhi, M. K. (1946, July 26). Panchayati Raj or true democracy. *Harijan*.
13. Gandhi, M. K. (1957). *An autobiography: The story of my experiments with truth.* Navajivan Publishing House.
14. Guha, R. (1989). *The unquiet woods: Ecological change and peasant resistance in the Himalaya.* University of California Press.
15. Guha, R. (2006). *How much should a person consume? Environmentalism in India and the United States.* University of California Press.
16. Hickel, J. (2020). *Less is more: How degrowth will save the world.* Penguin.
17. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). (2023). *AR6 synthesis report: Climate change 2023.* IPCC Secretariat. <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6-syr/>
18. Kishwar, M. (1986). Gandhi on women. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 21(40), 1691–1702.
19. Næss, A. (1973). The shallow and the deep, long-range ecology movement. *Inquiry*, 16(1–4), 95–100. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00201747308601682>
20. Nandy, A. (1983). *The intimate enemy: Loss and recovery of self under colonialism.* Oxford University Press.
21. Nixon, R. (2011). *Slow violence and the environmentalism of the poor.* Harvard University Press.
22. Omvedt, G. (2004). *Ambedkar: Towards an enlightened India.* Penguin Books.

SKBU JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY

PEER REVIEWED

23. Ostrom, E. (2010). Polycentric systems for coping with collective action and global environmental change. *Global Environmental Change*, 20(4), 550–557.
24. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2010.07.004>
25. Parekh, B. (1989). *Gandhi's political philosophy: A critical examination*. University of Notre Dame Press.
26. Rajamani, L. (2006). *Differential treatment in international environmental law*. Oxford University Press.
27. Ramasastry, A. (2015). Corporate social responsibility, human rights, and the law. *Seattle University Law Review*, 38(2), 913–936.
28. Raworth, K. (2017). *Doughnut economics: Seven ways to think like a 21st-century economist*. Random House.
29. Rockström, J., & Willett, W. (2018). Planetary health diet: Feeding the world within environmental limits. *The Lancet Planetary Health*, 2(1), 1–12.
30. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2542-5196\(18\)30005-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2542-5196(18)30005-3)
31. Schlosberg, D., & Collins, L. B. (2014). From environmental to climate justice: Climate change and the discourse of environmental justice. *WIREs Climate Change*, 5(3), 359–374.
32. <https://doi.org/10.1002/wcc.275>
33. Schumacher, E. F. (1973). *Small is beautiful: Economics as if people mattered*. Blond & Briggs.
34. Schor, J. (2010). *Plenitude: The new economics of true wealth*. Penguin Press.
35. Shiva, V. (1988). *Staying alive: Women, ecology and development*. Zed Books.
36. Shue, H. (2014). *Climate justice: Vulnerability and protection*. Oxford University Press.
37. Teltumbde, A. (2018). *Republic of caste: Thinking equality in the time of neoliberal Hindutva*. Navayana.
38. Veblen, T. (1899). *The theory of the leisure class*. Macmillan.
39. Zuboff, S. (2019). *The age of surveillance capitalism: The fight for a human future at the new frontier of power*. PublicAffairs.