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The Gandhian Renaissance

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Abstract:

The Gandhian Renaissance represents a comprehensive movement that reshaped Indian society and politics through the integration of ethics, social reform, and mass participation. At its core lay the principle of moral regeneration, where truth, non-violence, self-discipline, and character-building were emphasized as essential foundations for personal conduct and public life. Gandhi asserted that genuine freedom required self-rule grounded in ethical responsibility, making moral transformation inseparable from political change. This ethical framework extended into social reform initiatives that sought to address entrenched inequalities such as untouchability, gender discrimination, illiteracy, rural poverty, and communal division through conscience-based reform and participatory action. The constructive efforts promoted village upliftment, dignity of labor, basic education, sanitation, and women's involvement as means of nurturing social harmony and collective responsibility. Simultaneously, the movement brought about a profound political awakening by transforming nationalism into a mass-based struggle rooted in non-violent resistance and moral legitimacy. Through strategies of non-cooperation, civil disobedience, and satyagraha, Gandhi mobilized peasants, workers, women, and marginalized communities, redefining political power as moral authority rather than coercion. Leadership was reconceptualized as service and ethical example, fostering discipline and civic participation at the grassroots level. The combined impact of ethical regeneration, social reconstruction, and mass mobilization not only advanced India's freedom struggle but also offered an alternative model of social and political transformation. The enduring significance of the Gandhian Renaissance lies in its demonstration that sustainable change emerges from moral consciousness, collective responsibility, and non-violent action, making its principles relevant to contemporary struggles for justice, equality, and peace.

Keywords: Gandhian Renaissance, Non-violence (Ahimsa), Satyagraha, Social Reform, National Consciousness

Introduction:

The Gandhian Renaissance occupies a distinctive place in the socio-political history of modern India, representing a transformative movement that integrated moral philosophy, social reform, and mass politics into a unified vision of national regeneration. Emerging during a period of intense

colonial domination and social fragmentation, this renaissance sought not merely political freedom but the ethical reconstruction of Indian society. Mahatma Gandhi introduced a new paradigm of leadership and resistance that placed moral values at the center of public life, challenging the prevailing assumptions that political power could be secured through violence, coercion, or elite negotiations alone (Gandhi, 1909). His ideas redefined nationalism as a moral struggle rooted in truth, non-violence, and self-discipline, thereby transforming the freedom movement into an inclusive and participatory process.

At the ethical level, the Gandhian Renaissance emphasized inner transformation as the foundation of external change. Gandhi argued that Swaraj was not simply the transfer of power from British rulers to Indian hands but a state of self-rule achieved through moral restraint, truthfulness, and personal responsibility (Gandhi, 1927). Principles such as Satya and Ahimsa were conceived as universal ethical laws that governed both private conduct and collective political action. This moral framework sought to cultivate character, integrity, and discipline among individuals, asserting that society could not be just unless its members were ethically conscious (Iyer, 1973). In this sense, the Gandhian Renaissance functioned as a moral awakening that challenged materialism, excess consumption, and moral indifference.

The ethical vision of Gandhi found concrete expression in a broad programme of social reform that addressed the deep-rooted inequalities of Indian society. Gandhi believed that political independence would be meaningless if social evils such as untouchability, illiteracy, gender inequality, rural poverty, and communal hatred remained unaddressed (Gandhi, 1940). Social transformation, therefore, became an ethical imperative rather than a secondary objective. Through conscience-based reform and voluntary participation, Gandhi sought to reconstruct society from the grassroots. His campaigns against caste discrimination emphasized dignity, equality, and repentance rather than punishment, redefining reform as a moral obligation shared by all members of society (Gandhi, 1932). Village reconstruction occupied a central place in this social vision, as Gandhi considered villages to be the moral and economic foundation of Indian civilization. Initiatives such as khadi production, sanitation drives, basic education, and cottage industries were designed not only to address material deprivation but also to cultivate discipline, cooperation, and dignity of labour (Gandhi, 1937). Education, in particular, was reconceptualized as a holistic process combining intellectual growth with ethical training and productive work. Women's participation in social and national life further expanded the scope of reform, as Gandhi encouraged their involvement in public action, thereby challenging traditional gender norms while emphasizing moral strength and civic responsibility (Chakrabarty, 2011).

Parallel to social reform, the Gandhian Renaissance brought about an unprecedented political awakening among the Indian masses. Gandhi transformed the nature of Indian nationalism by replacing

elite-led constitutional agitation with mass-based non-violent resistance. Through movements such as non-cooperation, civil disobedience, and satyagraha, he mobilized peasants, workers, women, and marginalized communities, converting them from passive subjects into active participants in the struggle for freedom (Chandra, 1988). Political action was no longer restricted to legislatures or negotiations but became embedded in everyday acts of ethical resistance, refusal, and self-sacrifice. Power, in this new framework, was defined not by force but by moral authority and popular consent (Bondurant, 1958).

The integration of ethics, social reform, and mass politics distinguished the Gandhian Renaissance from earlier nationalist movements and gave it global relevance. Gandhi demonstrated that enduring political change could be achieved through disciplined non-violence and moral legitimacy, influencing movements for civil rights and social justice across the world. His approach challenged the separation of means and ends, asserting that unjust methods could never produce just outcomes. This holistic vision reshaped political culture, emphasizing service-oriented leadership, civic responsibility, and moral accountability (Brown, 1989).

In essence, the Gandhian Renaissance represents a comprehensive model of transformation in which moral regeneration, social reconstruction, and popular political participation were inseparably linked. By grounding the struggle for freedom in ethical principles and collective responsibility, Gandhi not only advanced India's independence but also offered a universal framework for achieving justice, equality, and peace through non-violent means (Iyer, 1973). Its enduring significance lies in its affirmation that sustainable social and political change must originate in moral consciousness and active civic engagement.

Moral and Ethical Regeneration in the Gandhian Renaissance:

The Gandhian Renaissance was fundamentally anchored in the idea of moral and ethical regeneration, which Mahatma Gandhi regarded as the indispensable foundation for meaningful social, political, and national transformation. Gandhi firmly believed that political freedom devoid of moral consciousness would merely lead to the replacement of colonial rulers with indigenous elites, thereby perpetuating injustice and inequality in a new form (Gandhi, 1909). For him, true Swaraj signified self-rule not only in a political sense but, more importantly, in the moral and spiritual life of individuals. This conviction led Gandhi to place ethical reform at the heart of the national movement, arguing that the regeneration of society must begin with the moral awakening of individuals. Central to this ethical vision were the principles of Satya (truth) and Ahimsa (non-violence), which Gandhi did not treat as mere political strategies but as universal moral laws governing human conduct (Gandhi, 1927).

Satya, in Gandhian philosophy, extended far beyond the notion of factual accuracy and encompassed moral integrity, sincerity, and harmony between thought, word, and action. Gandhi viewed truth as an active pursuit that demanded courage, sacrifice, and unwavering commitment to

justice, even in the face of suffering. Similarly, Ahimsa was conceived as a dynamic and positive force rooted in love, compassion, and respect for all forms of life, rather than passive avoidance of physical violence. Gandhi argued that violence corrupts both the oppressor and the oppressed, generating fear and hatred that ultimately undermine moral regeneration (Bondurant, 1958). By advocating non-violence as a way of life, Gandhi sought to cultivate ethical self-restraint and empathy, thereby fostering social harmony and moral maturity.

A key aspect of Gandhian moral regeneration was the emphasis on self-purification and personal discipline. Gandhi believed that individuals must confront and overcome internal weaknesses such as greed, fear, anger, and ego in order to become morally fit to challenge injustice. Practices such as fasting, vows, self-restraint, and introspection were intended to strengthen moral resolve and cultivate inner freedom, which Gandhi considered essential for genuine political and social action (Iyer, 1973). This insistence on moral self-discipline distinguished the Gandhian Renaissance from other political movements, as it placed responsibility for change on the ethical conduct of individuals rather than on external institutions alone.

Simplicity and voluntary restraint occupied a central place in Gandhi's ethical worldview. He regarded excessive material consumption, industrial greed, and unbridled desire as moral failings that deepened social inequality and alienated individuals from their ethical responsibilities (Gandhi, 1957). By advocating a simple lifestyle based on limitation of wants, Gandhi aimed to cultivate humility, solidarity with the poor, and a sense of social justice. Ethical living, in this sense, was not an abstract ideal but a practical commitment reflected in everyday choices. The promotion of khadi and manual labour further reinforced this moral vision by restoring dignity to work and challenging social hierarchies rooted in exploitation.

Truthfulness and character-building were also central to Gandhian moral regeneration. Gandhi maintained that ethical integrity in private life was inseparable from justice in public affairs, and that corrupt means would inevitably lead to corrupt ends. He believed that moral authority derived from personal example was far more powerful than authority imposed through force or fear (Raghavan, 2010). Leadership, therefore, was defined as moral service rather than dominance, requiring humility, sacrifice, and accountability. This ethical approach transformed the nature of politics during the Gandhian Renaissance, redefining power as moral influence rather than coercive control.

Education played a crucial role in Gandhi's vision of moral regeneration. He criticized conventional education for emphasizing intellectual achievement without fostering ethical sensibility, arguing that such education produced skilled individuals lacking moral responsibility (Gandhi, 1937). Through Nai Talim, Gandhi sought to integrate moral values, dignity of labour, and social responsibility into education, thereby nurturing ethical citizens capable of contributing to collective well-being. Moral education, in his view, was essential for sustaining democracy and preventing social

decay.

In essence, moral and ethical regeneration formed the soul of the Gandhian Renaissance, shaping its social reforms, political strategies, and vision of national freedom. By insisting that ethical means were inseparable from ethical ends, Gandhi offered a transformative framework that challenged violence, materialism, and moral indifference. His emphasis on truth, non-violence, simplicity, self-discipline, and character-building laid the ethical groundwork for mass participation in the freedom struggle and fostered a new political culture rooted in conscience and responsibility (Iyer, 1973). The enduring relevance of Gandhian moral philosophy lies in its assertion that lasting social and political transformation can only be achieved through ethical self-transformation, a lesson that continues to resonate in contemporary struggles for justice, peace, and human dignity.

Social Reform and Constructive Programme:

Social reform and the constructive programme constituted the practical dimension of the Gandhian Renaissance, translating Gandhi's moral and ethical philosophy into concrete action aimed at transforming Indian society from within. Gandhi believed that political freedom could not be sustained unless it was accompanied by deep social reform that addressed entrenched inequalities, injustices, and social evils inherited from centuries of hierarchical traditions (Gandhi, 1941). Rather than focusing solely on resistance to colonial rule, Gandhi emphasized constructive work as an equally vital component of the national movement. He argued that the regeneration of society required the active participation of citizens in building alternative social institutions grounded in equality, dignity, and self-reliance.

One of the central concerns of Gandhian social reform was the eradication of untouchability, which he regarded as a moral blot on Hindu society and a fundamental violation of human dignity. Gandhi asserted that social freedom was meaningless as long as large sections of society were denied basic rights and treated as inferior beings (Gandhi, 1932). Through campaigns, personal example, and institutional initiatives, Gandhi worked to integrate the so-called "Harijans" into the social mainstream, emphasizing equality, compassion, and shared responsibility. His efforts sought not only legal reform but also a transformation of social attitudes and moral consciousness, as he believed that genuine reform must emerge from internal change rather than external compulsion.

The constructive programme also placed strong emphasis on village upliftment and rural reconstruction. Gandhi viewed Indian villages as the heart of the nation and believed that their economic and social decay was a direct consequence of colonial exploitation and excessive centralization (Gandhi, 1941). To counter this, he promoted decentralized development based on self-sufficient villages, local industries, and community cooperation. The encouragement of spinning khadi symbolized both economic self-reliance and social solidarity, providing employment to the rural poor while fostering a sense of collective responsibility. Khadi thus became a powerful tool of social reform,

linking economic regeneration with moral discipline and national unity.

Education and social awareness were integral components of the constructive programme. Gandhi criticized prevailing educational systems for alienating individuals from their communities and reinforcing social hierarchies. Through Nai Talim, he envisioned an education rooted in productive work, social service, and ethical values, designed to foster dignity of labour and social equality (Gandhi, 1937). This approach aimed to break caste barriers, promote cooperation, and cultivate socially responsible citizens capable of contributing to national reconstruction. Education, in the Gandhian framework, was thus both a means of empowerment and an instrument of social reform.

The empowerment of women formed another crucial dimension of Gandhian social thought. Gandhi regarded women as moral equals and emphasized their central role in social transformation through non-violence, service, and moral leadership (Forbes, 1998). He encouraged women's participation in constructive activities such as spinning, education, sanitation, and community welfare, thereby challenging traditional gender roles while preserving moral values. This expanded public engagement enabled women to emerge as agents of social reform and national awakening, contributing to the broader goals of equality and justice.

Sanitation, public health, and social hygiene were also prioritized within the constructive programme. Gandhi believed that cleanliness was both a social and moral responsibility, essential for human dignity and collective well-being (Gandhi, 1957). He emphasized the removal of manual scavenging as a degrading practice and sought to instill respect for sanitation work, thereby challenging deeply rooted social prejudices. By linking cleanliness with self-respect and social equality, Gandhi redefined social service as an ethical obligation shared by all citizens.

The Gandhian approach to social reform rejected revolutionary violence and coercive methods, relying instead on persuasion, service, and moral example. Gandhi argued that education, constructive work, and patient social transformation were more enduring than abrupt structural changes imposed from above (Bondurant, 1958). The constructive programme thus represented a long-term strategy for nation-building, fostering unity across class, caste, and gender divisions. It sought to cultivate a participatory social order in which individuals actively contributed to the welfare of the community.

In essence, social reform and the constructive programme were the living expression of the Gandhian Renaissance, bridging the gap between moral ideals and everyday practice. By addressing social inequalities, economic deprivation, and cultural stagnation, Gandhi provided a comprehensive framework for societal renewal grounded in ethical responsibility and collective effort. These initiatives complemented the political struggle for independence by preparing society for self-governance based on justice, equality, and cooperation (Iyer, 1973). The enduring significance of the Gandhian constructive programme lies in its holistic vision of development, demonstrating that true national regeneration requires not only political freedom but also social harmony, moral commitment,

and sustained grassroots engagement.

Political Awakening and Mass Mobilization in the Gandhian Renaissance:

Political awakening and mass mobilization formed one of the most transformative achievements of the Gandhian Renaissance, redefining the nature of political participation in colonial India. Gandhi altered the very meaning of politics by grounding it in moral responsibility, discipline, and non-violent action, thereby converting the freedom struggle from an elite-driven movement into a broad-based popular awakening (Iyer, 1973). He believed that political liberation could not be achieved through violence or elite negotiations alone, but only through the active and conscious participation of the masses, guided by ethical principles such as truth and non-violence. This reorientation of politics placed moral legitimacy above brute force and transformed ordinary individuals into agents of national change.

Before Gandhi's leadership, Indian nationalism was largely confined to educated elites and urban centers. Gandhi's unique contribution lay in bridging the gap between political leadership and the common people, especially peasants, workers, women, and marginalized communities (Chandra et al., 1988). By using simple language, symbols, and methods rooted in everyday life, Gandhi made politics accessible and meaningful to the masses. His insistence on personal discipline, sacrifice, and collective responsibility fostered a sense of ownership among participants, enabling people to view political struggle as a moral duty rather than a distant ideological pursuit. The introduction of Satyagraha as a method of political action marked a fundamental departure from conventional resistance movements. Satyagraha emphasized truth-force and moral courage, demanding self-suffering rather than the infliction of harm on the opponent (Bondurant, 1958). Through this approach, Gandhi sought to awaken the conscience of both the oppressor and the oppressed, transforming political conflict into an ethical dialogue. Mass movements such as Non-Cooperation, Civil Disobedience, and Quit India were not merely campaigns of protest but instruments of moral education that trained participants in discipline, fearlessness, and collective restraint (Gandhi, 1920). These movements instilled political awareness while reinforcing ethical self-control among the masses.

Gandhi's ability to mobilize diverse social groups was a defining feature of this political awakening. Peasants were drawn into struggles against oppressive land revenue systems, while industrial workers were encouraged to assert their rights through non-violent means (Chandra et al., 1988). Women, who had largely been excluded from public political life, emerged as active participants in picketing, spinning, boycotts, and civil disobedience campaigns. Gandhi viewed women's participation not only as a political necessity but also as a moral force capable of elevating the ethical standards of public life (Forbes, 1998). This broad mobilization challenged traditional hierarchies and reshaped the social composition of political activism in India.

Discipline and moral restraint were central to Gandhian mass politics. Gandhi repeatedly

emphasized that mass participation without ethical control could degenerate into chaos and violence, undermining the moral foundations of the movement (Gandhi, 1942). Volunteers were trained to observe non-violence, accept suffering, and obey collective decisions, reinforcing the idea that political freedom required inner self-rule. This emphasis on self-discipline distinguished Gandhian mobilization from purely revolutionary movements and ensured its durability and ethical coherence even under severe repression.

The Gandhian Renaissance also fostered political consciousness at the grassroots level, encouraging local leadership and decentralized participation. Gandhi believed that true democracy required informed and morally responsible citizens capable of self-governance (Iyer, 1973). By promoting village-level organizations, volunteer networks, and constructive political engagement, he laid the groundwork for participatory politics rooted in civic responsibility rather than dependence on authority. Political activism thus became intertwined with social service, creating a holistic model of citizenship.

Another significant achievement of Gandhian mass mobilization was its capacity to sustain unity across religious, regional, and class divisions. Gandhi consistently emphasized communal harmony and inclusive nationalism, warning that internal divisions would weaken the moral strength of the freedom struggle (Gandhi, 1927). Although challenges persisted, his leadership demonstrated that mass politics could aspire toward ethical inclusivity rather than sectarian interests. This moral vision helped legitimize the nationalist movement both domestically and internationally. Internationally, the success of Gandhian mass mobilization offered a new paradigm of political resistance. The demonstration that disciplined non-violence could challenge a powerful imperial state inspired movements for civil rights, anti-colonial struggles, and social justice across the world (Bondurant, 1958). The achievement of political awakening in India thus transcended national boundaries, establishing Gandhian methods as a universal moral force in political action.

In evaluating its achievement, the political awakening and mass mobilization under Gandhi transformed politics from a contest for power into a collective ethical endeavor. By empowering ordinary citizens, fostering moral discipline, and redefining resistance through non-violence, the Gandhian Renaissance laid the foundations for democratic participation and ethical leadership in modern India. This achievement demonstrated that enduring political change is possible when mass action is guided by moral purpose, collective responsibility, and unwavering commitment to truth (Chandra et al., 1988). The legacy of Gandhian mass mobilization continues to serve as a powerful reminder that political freedom derives its strength not from violence or coercion, but from awakened consciences and organized moral will.

Conclusion:

The Gandhian Renaissance represents a profound synthesis of moral philosophy, social reform,

and political action that reshaped the trajectory of modern Indian history. At its foundation lay the conviction that neither political freedom nor social justice could be sustained without moral and ethical regeneration. Gandhi's insistence on truth, non-violence, self-discipline, and character-building redefined the meaning of individual responsibility and collective action, embedding ethics into both private conduct and public life (Iyer, 1973). This ethical emphasis transformed politics from a struggle for power into a disciplined moral endeavor, where means were considered as significant as ends. The Gandhian vision emphasized that lasting transformation must arise from the moral awakening of individuals rather than reliance on force, coercion, or external authority (Bondurant, 1958).

The ethical foundations of the Gandhian Renaissance found practical expression through an extensive programme of social reform and constructive work. Gandhi recognized that political independence would remain hollow if Indian society continued to suffer from caste oppression, gender inequality, illiteracy, rural poverty, and social fragmentation. The constructive programme sought to address these challenges through participatory reform grounded in service, equality, and dignity of labour (Gandhi, 1941). Campaigns against untouchability, promotion of village upliftment, emphasis on basic education, sanitation, and women's involvement reflected a holistic approach to social renewal. These initiatives aimed not merely at institutional change but at reshaping social attitudes and moral consciousness, reinforcing Gandhi's belief that true reform must originate from within society itself (Gandhi, 1937).

Simultaneously, the Gandhian Renaissance produced a remarkable political awakening by drawing vast sections of the population into the freedom struggle. Gandhi's leadership democratized nationalism, transforming it from an elite movement into a mass-based campaign rooted in non-violent resistance and moral legitimacy (Chandra et al., 1988). Through the method of satyagraha, he introduced a distinctive form of political participation that required courage, discipline, and ethical restraint rather than physical aggression. Non-Cooperation, Civil Disobedience, and Quit India were not only struggles against colonial authority but also instruments of political education that cultivated self-control, collective responsibility, and civic consciousness among the masses (Gandhi, 1920). This mobilization empowered peasants, workers, women, and marginalized groups, fundamentally altering the social composition of political activism in India.

The integration of moral regeneration, social reconstruction, and mass mobilization gave the Gandhian Renaissance its unique coherence and enduring strength. Gandhi's emphasis on decentralized participation, village-based reconstruction, and ethical leadership laid the foundations for participatory democracy rooted in moral responsibility rather than institutional coercion (Iyer, 1973). His insistence on communal harmony and inclusive nationalism underscored the belief that internal unity was essential for meaningful freedom. While the movement faced limitations and challenges, its achievement lay in demonstrating that ethical discipline could sustain mass action even

under repression and adversity (Bondurant, 1958).

Beyond its immediate impact on India's freedom struggle, the Gandhian Renaissance offered a global model of non-violent resistance and socially conscious politics. The success of Gandhian methods inspired movements for civil rights, decolonization, and social justice across diverse cultural and political contexts, affirming the universal relevance of moral action in confronting injustice (Chandra et al., 1988). The legacy of the Gandhian Renaissance thus extends beyond national boundaries, illustrating that profound social and political change is possible when ethical principles guide collective action.

The Gandhian Renaissance stands as a comprehensive movement that unified moral regeneration, social reform, and political awakening into a single transformative vision. Its enduring significance lies in its affirmation that freedom is inseparable from responsibility, justice from ethics, and power from moral legitimacy. By harmonizing individual conscience with collective action, the Gandhian Renaissance provided not only a pathway to national liberation but also a lasting framework for addressing social inequality, political conflict, and moral crisis in the modern world (Gandhi, 1941). Its relevance persists as a reminder that sustainable change requires awakened consciences, disciplined action, and an unwavering commitment to truth and human dignity.

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