

The Overlooked Revolution: Gandhi's Constructive Program and Nonviolent Resistance

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Introduction

Gandhi's nonviolent resistance was a monumental force that galvanized the Indian masses on an unparalleled scale. Numerous scholars and public figures alike have lauded its moral righteousness¹⁰⁵ and its remarkable capacity to unite disparate factions within Indian society.¹⁰⁶ However, the prevailing discourse surrounding Gandhi's *satyagraha*, often limited to its nonviolent protest aspect, fails to acknowledge the multifaceted components that propelled and sustained this remarkable movement. Consequently, the crucial and frequently overlooked role of Gandhi's constructive program emerges as a paramount factor worthy of profound examination and appreciation.

The constructive program was an attempt "to begin building a new social order even as the old one still exists," with decentralized cooperatives "functioning independently of the state and other institutions of the old order."¹⁰⁷ Gandhi's plan for the constructive program included several interrelated activities: the promotion of *khadi* (hand-woven cloth), the growth of village cottage industries like soap and paper production, and improved personal and public

hygiene.¹⁰⁸ This program significantly increased connectivity with the masses and fostered greater participation in events like the *satyagrahas*. It is widely interpreted, however, as a philanthropic and altruistic effort that does not filter into the political realms of nonviolent resistance.¹⁰⁹ In this paper, I challenge popular historiography that overlooks the relevance of the constructive program in Gandhi's strategies for mass mobilization for nonviolent resistance. To do so, I evaluate the role of constructive work as a political tool and argue that understanding its deployment is key to understanding the *satyagrahas*.

Historiography

Nationalist-Marxist historians like Bipin Chandra identify Gandhi's nonviolent resistance as a "struggle-truce-struggle" phenomenon. In this mode of resistance, "phases of vigorous extra-legal mass movements" were combined with phases of "truce."¹¹⁰ During this "truce," the movement paused and regenerated itself through mass programs of constructive work to launch another phase of "struggle" at a higher level. The movement would thus keep growing and strengthening itself in an upward-spiraling circle till victory was achieved.¹¹¹

While numerous scholars have contributed to dissecting this nature of Gandhian mass mobilization, they have tended

¹⁰⁵ Martin Luther King, "My Pilgrimage to Nonviolence," in *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr., January 1957 - December 1958* (Berkeley (Calif.): University of California Press, 2000), <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/my-pilgrimage-nonviolence>.

¹⁰⁶ Judith M. Brown, *Gandhi: Prisoner of Hope* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 162.

¹⁰⁷ Gene Sharp, *Gandhi as a Political Strategist: With Essays on Ethics and Politics* (New Delhi: Gandhi Media Centre, 1999), 81.

¹⁰⁸ Sharp, *Gandhi as a Political Strategist*, 82-83.

¹⁰⁹ Anthony Parel, *Gandhi's Philosophy and the Quest for Harmony* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 62.

¹¹⁰ Bipin Chandra et al., *India's Struggle for Independence, 1857-1947* (Delhi: Penguin, 2003), 313.

¹¹¹ Sucheta Mahajan, *Independence and Partition: The Erosion of Colonial Power in India* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2000), 70-71.

to present the constructive program in a manner that undermines its significance in the border narrative of nonviolent resistance. For instance, although Gene Sharp, a prominent scholar and political theorist known for his extensive research on nonviolent resistance, dwells on the philosophy of Gandhi's constructive work, he does not describe its consequences on mass mobilization and how it worked in practice. Moreover, he situates constructive work in the context of a preexisting nonviolent struggle, claiming that it is a way to "proceed, accompany and follow nonviolent action."¹¹² This casts the constructive program in solely a supporting role and undermines its relevance in generating a fresh non-violent struggle on its own.¹¹³

While Anthony Parel, a scholar and author who has extensively studied Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy of nonviolence, dwells on Gandhi's nonviolent philosophy and the *satyagraha*, he characterizes the constructive program in ways that undermine its role in mass mobilization for nonviolent resistance. By referring to the program as "particularly suited to the the work of NGOs,"¹¹⁴ Parel distinguishes constructive work from the deliberate agendas of the state. Doing so portrays constructive work as philanthropic, apolitical, and divorced from the strategic planning that accompanies nonviolent resistance.

Although Allwyn Tellis, a researcher who specifically focuses on Gandhi's constructive program, focuses directly on the constructive program, he interprets it as integral to Gandhi's nationalist movement but not as nonviolent action. Tellis examines the constructive program as a body of discourse and highlights the symbolism behind Gandhi's constructive program, including the usage of symbols like salt and *khadi*.¹¹⁵ While Tellis is

right to identify the nationalist symbolism of Gandhi's constructive program, relegating it as 'discourse' undermines its significance in nonviolent resistance.

By considering the gaps in current literature, it becomes evident that the constructive program plays a significant role as a deliberate strategy for mass mobilization within Gandhi's comprehensive concept of nonviolent resistance. One can argue that constructive work is not merely a passive endeavor but a potent political tool in itself. To truly grasp the essence of *satyagrahas* during periods of 'struggle,' it is crucial to understand how constructive work was implemented during periods of 'truce.' In light of this understanding, a challenge is presented to the prevailing scholarly interpretations that compartmentalize *satyagraha* and constructive work into separate categories. Instead, this paper proposes a more holistic perspective, emphasizing their interconnectedness and considering them as mutually reinforcing elements that contribute to the creation of an environment conducive to resistance.

The Politics of Constructive Work

Gandhi's constructive work is often portrayed as non-political by positioning him against the Indian National Congress and its leaders. For example, his retirement from the Congress in 1934 is interpreted as a growing dislike for the party's affairs and a desire to distance his constructive work from its politics.¹¹⁶ However, these conclusions are not historically tenable, and scholars like Bindu Mathews have highlighted Gandhi's attempts at dispelling myths on the antagonistic relationship between the constructive program and the Congress.¹¹⁷

¹¹² Sharp, *Gandhi as a Political Strategist*, 85.

¹¹³ Sharp, *Gandhi as a Political Strategist*, 77-86.

¹¹⁴ Parel, *Gandhi's Philosophy and the Quest for Harmony*, 62.

¹¹⁵ Allwyn Tellis, "Mahatma Gandhi's Constructive Programme: Building a New India" (dissertation, 2006), 8.

¹¹⁶ "When Gandhiji Resigned from the Congress," New Delhi Times, March 28, 2022, <https://www.newdelhitimes.com/when-gandhiji-resigned-from-the-congress/>.

¹¹⁷ Bindu Mathew, "Mahatma Gandhi's Constructive Program: Some Reflections," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 73 (2012): pp. 597-606.

In light of this, it is essential to recognize Gandhi's constructive program as a politically motivated strategy aimed at mobilizing the masses for nonviolent resistance. Building upon Matthews' assertions regarding the convergence of the Indian National Congress's general policies and Gandhi's constructive work,¹¹⁸ it becomes apparent that their efforts were mutually beneficial and frequently intertwined. Consequently, it is imperative to acknowledge the inherently political nature of Gandhi's constructive work and its profound significance in the larger context of his transformative vision.

Congress and the Politicization of Constructive Work

In a 1937 speech at a public meeting, Gandhi quelled suspicions of separation from the Congress by stating, "But do we (Seva Sangh members) not want to be the representatives of the millions as well? And it is the Congress which is pledged to be the voice of the suffering millions. How, then, can there be any opposition between us and the Congress?"¹¹⁹ By representing the constructive program as part of the Congress's agendas of connecting with the masses, Gandhi immediately draws attention to its political nature.

Here, it is crucial to highlight the location of Gandhi's remarks— the Gandhi Seva Sangh. Since the Sangh was legally independent of the Congress's jurisdiction,¹²⁰ he could have easily expressed discontentment with the party sans any political or organizational constraints. The fact that he still chose to emphasize the connectivity of the constructive program with the Congress indicates their coalitionary characteristics.

On another occasion, Gandhi insisted that constructive work organizations like the All India Spinners Association (AISA) were

"created by the Congress."¹²¹ This provision allowed him to "conduct my experiments without being fettered by the vicissitudes of a policy to which a wholly democratic body like the Congress is always liable."¹²² Here, he clarifies his separation from the Congress— it was not the result of a contentious relationship but due to the party's broader political strategy to effectively implement constructive programs.

Mutually Beneficial 'Compartments'

Furthermore, Gandhi rejected the notion of separate, "watertight compartments,"¹²³ emphasizing the interconnected and mutually beneficial nature of the Indian National Congress's political activities and his constructive program. He believed in a holistic approach that integrated both dimensions, recognizing their symbiotic relationship and shared political strategy for mass mobilization and nonviolent resistance. The Congress unexpectedly winning 159 of 217 seats in the Madras elections of 1937 is the best example of this scenario.¹²⁴ John Erskine, then governor of the Madras Presidency, attributed the victory to the Congress's organization and volunteers— who had spread into virtually every village through Gandhi's constructive program.¹²⁵ Here, it is important to highlight that Gandhi realized the paucity of connectivity between the masses and their leaders and utilized his constructive work to minimize this gap.¹²⁶ The constructive program, therefore, facilitated a broader connection of the Congress party with its electorate and allowed them to launch more effective campaigns than the other parties contesting elections.

¹²¹ *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol 70. (New Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Govt. of India, 1989), 425.

¹²² *Ibid.*

¹²³ *Ibid.*

¹²⁴ Christopher Baker, "The Congress at the 1937 Elections in Madras," *Modern Asian Studies* 10, no. 4 (1976): pp. 557-589, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0026749x00014967>, 1.

¹²⁵ Baker, "The Congress at the 1937 Elections in Madras," 557-589.

¹²⁶ *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol 15, 161.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹²⁰ Prabodha Kumar Rath, "Gandhi Seva Sangha and Berboi," *Orissa Review*, 2011, pp. 41-44, 44.

On a more national level, villages whose residents directly benefited from constructive work in sanitation, *khadi* spinning, and education showed increased commitment and loyalty to the Congress. Speaking to this point in 1939, Krishnalal Shridharani, a former follower of Gandhi's, wrote that agricultural workers who gained extra income through the AISA recognized the efforts of Gandhi and the Congress in improving their lives.¹²⁷ Thus, they eagerly received any information regarding *satyagrahas* and nationalist activities from the AISA's "depots".¹²⁸

Constructive Work: Gandhi's Intentions and Strategic Outcomes

While scholars like Peter Ackermann and Jack Duvall have acknowledged the relevance of constructive work in Gandhi's vision of nonviolent resistance, they have assigned it a supporting role—claiming Gandhi never envisioned it as “an end in itself.”¹²⁹ This argument is limited because Gandhi continuously emphasized the importance of the constructive program, stating, “the constructive programme is the truthful and nonviolent way of winning complete Independence.”¹³⁰ Therefore, it is important to note a distinction between constructive work's intention and outcome. It is primarily in its consequences and implementation that constructive work took on the additional role of supporting mass mobilizations like the *satyagraha*.

To truly grasp the essence of Gandhian mass mobilization, particularly the pivotal 'struggle' component of *satyagraha*, a comprehensive understanding of the periods of apparent 'truce' marked by the constructive

program becomes indispensable. Exploring the constructive work carried out during these phases sheds light on the profound importance of ashrams and *vidyapiths* in actively pursuing *swaraj* (freedom) ideals and fostering counter-cultural practices. Moreover, an examination of their strategic role as reservoirs of mass political support during *satyagrahas* further illuminates their significance. It is noteworthy that the constructive program's impact often veered from its original intentions, suggesting that its supportive role was not exclusive, but rather supplementary in nature.

Ashrams, Countercultural Spaces, Reservoir Programs

In the *ashrams*, Gandhi and his co-residents sought to create a counter-world: a physical space where the inhabitants engaged in acts of self-control and communal labor for spiritual and social liberation.¹³¹ By mandating that the *ashram* residents carry out daily chores together, Gandhi aimed to dismantle societal barriers and foster a sense of equality and solidarity across distinctions of caste, class, gender, nationality, race, and religion. Gandhi also insisted that residents practice *swaraj* and *ahimsa* (nonviolence) at all times.¹³² This instilled the moral discipline necessary for their communal life together in the pursuit of the nonviolent resistance against the British.

The ashrams played a pivotal role in Gandhi's constructive program, evolving into *Satyagrahis'* camps where people's energy was channeled into nonviolent channels.¹³³ Gandhi recognized their political potential, utilizing the ashram residents as a reliable, mentally prepared, and physically adept reserve of supporters.¹³⁴ While not initially intended as laboratories for *satyagraha*, Gandhi mobilized the ashrams strategically, realizing their political

¹²⁷ Krishnalal Jethalal Shridharani, *War without Violence: Sociology of Gandhi's Satyagraha* (New York, 1939), <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.36471/page/n1/mode/2up?q=When+literature+and+information+regarding+the+nationalist>, 148.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

¹²⁹ Peter Ackerman, and Jack Duvall, *A Force More Powerful: A Century of Nonviolent Conflict* (New York, NY: Palgrave, 2000), 72.

¹³⁰ Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, *Constructive Programme* (The Navajivan Trust, 1945), 1.

¹³¹ Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, *Ashram Observance in Action* (Ahmedabad, Gujarat: Navajivan Publishing House, 1955),

<http://www.gandhiashramsevagram.org/ashram-observances/index.php>, 23-27.

¹³² *Ibid.*

¹³³ Shridharani, *War without Violence*, 150.

¹³⁴ *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol 48, 348.

capacity and effectively deploying them in support of the movement. Their discipline and commitment became valuable tools in his pragmatic approach to nonviolent resistance, enabling individuals to undergo training, adopt the necessary mindset, and contribute to the larger goals of the movement.

This is best reflected in Gandhi preferring to recruit his fellow marchers for the *satyagraha* from his *ashram* over depending exclusively upon volunteers from the Congress.¹³⁵ This can be attributed to some Congress members' skepticism¹³⁶ about Gandhi's nonviolent resistance, as opposed to the ashram residents who were unequivocally devoted to Gandhi's mission.¹³⁷ Consequently, Gandhi recruited marchers from the *ashram*, where he could rely on bonds forged from trust and discipline. In fact, the first seventy-two marchers in the Salt *Satyagraha* were all from Gandhi's *Sabarmati Ashram*.¹³⁸

Vidyapiths, Education and Volunteer Training

In higher education, Gandhi inspired the establishment of several *vidyapiths* (indigenous secondary education institutions). The Gujarat *vidyapith*, started in 1920, was a model to counter the educational institutions inspired by Macaulay's Minute and the aim to create a class of 'interpreter' anglicized Indian elites.¹³⁹ Gandhi's goal, therefore, was to train Indians to serve India in an education system that "synthesi[z]ed the different cultures that

have come to stay in India (and) that have influenced Indian life."¹⁴⁰

Given this, it is interesting to note that Gujarat *vidyapith* essentially suspended its literary activities for boys over 15, who were expected to support Gandhi during his *satyagrahas*.¹⁴¹ In fact, Gandhi himself commended the *vidyapith* for administering fifteen-day emergency training camps to prepare the boys for joining the resistance and collating data from the villages he was to visit.¹⁴² It is assumed that Gandhi then used the data to tailor his speeches to the location.¹⁴³ Overall, Gandhi praised the promptitude of the Gujarat *vidyapith* and recommended other institutions to "copy the example."¹⁴⁴

It is intriguing that the *vidyapiths* were used to recruit and train volunteers for the *satyagraha* instead of focusing on imparting a comprehensive formal education. Post suspending literary activities over the age of 15, the *vidyapiths* were educating students for fewer years compared to the British schools they intended to counter.¹⁴⁵ Indicating, therefore, that Gandhi's *vidyapiths* took more of an interest in mobilizing the masses than in educating them. Additionally, that 40 students were already conducting "field work"¹⁴⁶ before the "emergency training program" for more volunteers indicates that volunteer training had been a long-term scheme—eventually resulting in students leaving their studies to accompany Gandhi for months.

At the same time, considering the context in which Gandhi commended the

¹³⁵ Dennis Dalton, *Mahatma Gandhi: Nonviolent Power in Action* (New York, New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 175-176.

¹³⁶ Saurabh Bajpai, "Tripuri Crisis: Narrative of the Political Confrontation between Gandhi and Subhas," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 68 (2007): pp. 875-882.

¹³⁷ Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, *Bapus Letters to Mira* (1924-1948) (Ahmedabad: Navajivan, 1949), 98.

¹³⁸ *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol 48, 416.

¹³⁹ Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, *Towards New Education*, ed. Bharatan Kumarappa (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Pub. House, 1955), https://www.mkgandhi.org/towrds_edu/towrds_edu.htm, 76-77.

¹⁴⁰ Gandhi, *Towards New Education*, 76.

¹⁴¹ *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol 48, 462-463.

¹⁴² *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol 48, 391-393.

¹⁴³ Dalton, *Nonviolent Power in Action*, 175.

¹⁴⁴ *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol 48, 462-463.

¹⁴⁵ P. J. Hartog et al., "Interim Report of the Indian Statutory Commission Review of Growth of Education in British India." (1929).

The document indicates that the age group for primary education is 6-11 years (see section IV, pg V). Since middle and high school take up 6 or 7 years combined, the average age of the graduating student is estimated to be 17 or 18 (see section I, pg IX).

¹⁴⁶ *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol 48, 462-463.

Gujarat *vidyapith*, there is an argument to be made that he overstretched the utility of the *vidyapiths*. Gandhi was addressing his comments to justify the *vidyapiths*' benefits against claims that money spent on them "has been so much waste."¹⁴⁷ Given this situation, he could have exaggerated praise of the Gujarat *vidyapith* to strengthen his stance. However, even within the framework of this argument, the suspension of literary activities and existence of training programs and volunteers from the Gujarat *vidyapith* portray it as an incubator for Gandhi's followers and supporters.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the value and purpose of Gandhi's constructive work in his strategies for mass mobilization cannot be overstated. Its importance is often overshadowed by the undue emphasis on satyagraha, which portrays the constructive program as non-political and disconnected from the broader framework of Gandhi's nonviolent resistance. However, such an evaluation is unjust, as the constructive program served as a strategic and political tool that effectively increased participation in Gandhi's satyagrahas and bolstered the national movement.

Moving forward, it is crucial to transcend the notion of rigid compartments when examining Gandhi's strategies of mass mobilization. As demonstrated throughout this

paper, the success of Gandhi's nonviolent resistance can be attributed to the interconnectedness between the constructive program, satyagrahas, and the political agendas of the Indian National Congress. These three components frequently overlapped and mutually benefited from each other, creating an environment of resistance that was conducive to mass mobilization.

While this paper has primarily focused on the role and significance of the constructive program in mass mobilization, future research can delve further into exploring the evolution of this environment of resistance. Additionally, investigating Gandhi's unique role as a mediator between the constructive program, satyagrahas, and political agendas would be valuable. This is especially relevant as India has not witnessed mass mobilization on the scale achieved by Gandhi following his assassination, making it essential to understand and learn from his strategies in today's context. By comprehensively studying the interplay of these components, we can gain valuable insights into the enduring legacy of Gandhi's mass mobilization and its relevance in contemporary times.

¹⁴⁷ *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol 48, 462-463.