

# Non-Violence in Bharatiya Civilization: Analysing Gandhi's Oceanic Circle and Buddha's Sangha for Social Harmony and Cultural Unity



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## Abstract

*This paper explores the Bharatiya civilizational roots of non-violence through a comparative study of Mahatma Gandhi's idea of the "oceanic circle" and the Buddha's concept of the Sangha. It argues that non-violence in the Indian tradition is not merely a political strategy or moral restraint, but a deep civilizational value based on ahimsa, interdependence, self-discipline, compassion, and social responsibility. The idea of ahimsa originated in ancient Indian religious traditions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism, where it represented non-harm and respect for all living beings. Gandhi revived and modernized this ethical heritage by connecting it with decentralization, self-rule, village autonomy, and non-dominating social order through his concept of the oceanic circle. In this vision, society develops through expanding circles of cooperation centered on the individual rather than through coercive hierarchical structures. Similarly, the Buddha established the Sangha as an ethical and disciplined community whose harmony was directly linked with the welfare and happiness of society. This paper places these ideas within the broader framework of Indian civilizational thought, Gandhian philosophy, Buddhist social ethics, and contemporary debates on unity and cultural fraternity. It argues that Gandhi's decentralized social model and the Buddha's moral discipline together offer a powerful framework for addressing caste conflict, communal mistrust, ideological polarization, and social fragmentation in modern India. The study concludes that these civilizational ideals remain highly relevant for strengthening fraternity, social cohesion, and cultural integration in contemporary Indian society.*

**Keywords:** Ahimsa, Gandhi, Oceanic Circle, Buddha, Sangha, Bharatiya Civilisation, Social Harmony

## Introduction

Non-violence in India is not only a strict rejection of physical violence. It is a wider moral and civilizational idea. It explains the relation between self and others, society and state, unity and diversity. Ahimsa is deeply rooted in Indian religious and philosophical traditions. It means not harming living beings and developing compassion, self-restraint, and responsibility. It is an important value in Jainism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and later

Gandhian thought. This shows that non-violence in India is not a single idea created by one thinker. It is a long civilizational tradition connected with power, duty, suffering, and peaceful coexistence. Two important expressions of this Bharatiya vision of non-violence are Gandhi's Oceanic Circle and Buddha's Sangha. Gandhi's Oceanic Circle rejects a hierarchical society where power is concentrated at the top. Instead, Gandhi imagines society as expanding circles. The individual

stands at the centre, then the village, then the wider community, and finally humanity. Each circle is connected with others through duty, cooperation, self-rule, and moral responsibility. No circle dominates another. This makes the Oceanic Circle a non-violent model of social organization (Boin, 2009).

Similarly, Buddha's Sangha presents an early Indian model of ethical community. The Sangha was based on harmony, compassion, equality, discipline, self-restraint, and collective welfare. It was not only a religious institution but also a moral social order. Members lived with mutual respect and peaceful coexistence. Decisions were often taken through dialogue and consensus, not through force. In early Buddhist teachings, harmony in the Sangha was linked with the welfare and happiness of society. This paper argues that Gandhi's Oceanic Circle and Buddha's Sangha should be read as complementary models of Indian non-violence. Gandhi gives a decentralized social philosophy for modern civic life. Buddha gives the ethical discipline needed to maintain harmony. Together, they offer a useful framework for social harmony and cultural unity in modern India. They support unity without removing diversity, because both are based on moral self-restraint, respect, and non-domination (Bose, 1981).

### **Review of Literature**

The literature on ahimsa and Indian civilizational ethics, Gandhi's non-violence and decentralized polity, Buddhist social ethics and the nature of the Sangha, and modern civilizational interpretations of Indian unity can be viewed as four broad streams of scholarship relevant to this study.

The former stream is related to ahimsa as a concept of civilisation. The reference scholarship has always identified the fact that ahimsa is a mutual ethics code in the great Indian religions. Britannica observes that ahimsa is a doctrine of non-harm that was a core value in Jainism, Hinduism and Buddhism, but which was expounded in the traditions in different ways. The significance of this literature is in the fact that it shows that non-violence has strong roots in the subconti-

ent and cannot be narrowed down to a contemporary political invention. Meanwhile, the broad reference accounts tend to be descriptive. They trace the reach of the concept across the traditions, although they do not necessarily explore how such a typical inheritance of ethics can be transformed into the models of social harmony and national-cultural unity in modern India (Nangia 2025).

The second stream is that of the philosophy of non-violence, self-rule and decentralisation of Gandhi. The writings of Gandhi himself about village self-rule and oceanic circles cannot be replaced. In *The Voice of Truth* and other related collections, Gandhi reacted against the pyramidal form of the political form and proposed the idea of the oceanic circle, where the moral power will be moving inwards and downward instead of being pushed outwards. This aspect of the political thought of Gandhi has been expounded in the secondary scholarship. According to the study and commentary in the literature on Gandhi, Gandhi understood village swaraj to imply a decentralised, non-industrial, non-violent and self-sufficient social order, but not one that is not joined to the larger communities of association. The analysis of the oceanic circles of Gandhi also highlights the fact that his notion is part of his larger critique of the centralised modernity and his attempt to conceptualise peace as a systemic feature of society and not as merely a moral goal (Gandhi 1928).

This Gandhian is full of an abundance of literature, but they often make a hype out of the significance of democracy, progress, anti-colonial struggle or ecological criticism.

The current subject needs to be rather narrowed down: the oceanic circle of Gandhi needs to be tied not merely to the village republicanism or participatory democracy, but to the more ancient Bharatiya civilizational grammar of non-violence and its analogies (i.e., the Buddhist Sangha). The comparative move has been much less well-exploited (Patnaik 2022).

Stream three of the social ethics and functions of the Sangha in Buddhism. There is the Sangha,

which, according to Encyclopaedia Britannica, is the Buddhist monastic order and one of the Threefold Refuge, which denotes its central place in the Buddhist religious life (Das 2024). Early Buddhist scripture goes even further, to specifically relate the harmony in the Sangha to social welfare. Later, in Iti 19: *Samghasamaggisutta*, the Buddha explains that the Sangha is harmonised in the best interest of the people and defines a harmonious Sangha as one where there is no quarrelling, insulting, blocking or forsaking. Similarly, in texts of loving-kindness like the *Metta Sutta*, the ethical life is based upon non-hostility and universal regard. The implications of these sources, however religious in their origin, for social philosophy are beyond question; they demonstrate that disciplined coexistence, concord and moral fellowship are not accidental to Buddhism but lie at the heart of its explanation of collective existence. However, modern scholarship tends to talk of the Sangha as a monastic or a Buddhist doctrine. Not much emphasis is given on the role that the Sangha can play in the way of thinking of social cohesion of plural societies. This leaves space through which there can be a comparison of the oceanic circle of Gandhi (Dhanda 2019).

The fourth stream is the discourse of modern civilisation, consisting of the conservative, or right-wing, versions of Indian togetherness. This literature is not necessarily a single school, but it does tend to have many of the same propositions: that India must be seen as a civilisation, not just a postcolonial state; that social cohesion must be based on local ethical traditions, not imported ideological abstractions; and that cultural cohesion does not necessarily involve uniformity in case it is approached through organic civilizational continuity. (Gandhi 1927).

Combined altogether, the literature shows that the elements of the argument presented in this paper already exist in parts. There are studies of ahimsa, studies of Gandhi, studies of the Sangha and general arguments on whether the Indian civilisation is unified. The only thing missing is an analytical synthesis to juxtapose the oceanic circle of Gandhi and the Sangha of Buddha as

parallel Bharat players of the social order of non-violence.

### Research Gap

The available literature has three main gaps. First, Gandhi's Oceanic Circle is mostly studied as a political idea related to decentralisation, village republics, and local government. Its deeper moral and civilizational link with Ahimsa in Indian tradition is less discussed. Second, the Buddhist Sangha is usually studied as a religious doctrine, monastic discipline, or institution, but its role as a model of non-violent social harmony is not fully explored. Third, very few studies compare Gandhi's Oceanic Circle and Buddha's Sangha together. Such a comparison can help us understand fraternity, social trust, and cultural unity in modern India. This gap is discussed in the given paper as a comparative, civilizational interpretation of these two models and correlating them to the current issues of social harmony and national-cultural cohesion.

### Research Objectives

To explore the sense that the idea of the oceanic circle, as developed by Gandhi and the idea of Sangha developed by Buddha, is based on the Bharatiya civilising cultural idea of non-violence and ethical interdependence.

To look thoroughly into how two frameworks can be redefined into complementary frameworks in improving social harmony and cultural unity in modern India.

### Research Questions

What is the reflection of Bharatiya Civilizational origins of non-violence in the Gandhi oceanic circle and the Buddha Sangha?

How the two concepts can be utilised to add to the current deliberation on the issues of social harmony, fraternity, and cultural cohesion in India.

### Methodology

The qualitative, interpretive and comparative methodology opted for in this paper is qualitative. It is more based on textual and conceptual analysis, and to a lesser extent on empirical field-

work. The first level of analysis is based on the primary sources: the formulation of the oceanic circle and village self-rule by Gandhi himself, and the textual material of early Buddhism on the Sangha and harmony. The second level of involvement takes the secondary literature and reference material on ahimsa, Gandhian politics, Buddhist social ethics and Indian civilisational discourse (Chakrabarty 2015). The approach is comparative in the sense that it puts two radically different frameworks in the discussion. It does not assume that Gandhi and the Buddha are the same, and the political village and the monastic community are similar. Rather, it raises a question of whether they have a common ethical grammar, which can be used to throw some light upon social order in India. It is also normative in the sense that it considers how these concepts could be used to solve modern-day issues like social fragmentation, lack of trust within a community, and the erosion of fraternity. It is not a synthesis of the theology. Instead, it is a redefinition of moral traditions and social conceptions from a civilizational and political perspective.

### **The Civilizational and Bharatiya Civilizational Origins of Non-violence**

The moral ideas of Gandhi and Buddha can be understood through the larger Bharatiya tradition of Ahimsa, self-restraint, compassion, and interdependence. In Indian civilization, Ahimsa is one of the most important values. In simple words, Ahimsa means non-violence or not harming others. But in a deeper sense, it is more than avoiding physical harm. It also means respect for all life, control over one's behaviour, kindness, compassion, and responsibility towards society. Violence harms not only one person; it also damages the moral life of the whole community. So, Ahimsa teaches that peace can be built only when people practise self-control, truthfulness, compassion, and respect for others. This wider meaning of Ahimsa shows that non-violence in India was not limited to one religion, scripture, or political movement. It was present in many Indian traditions, especially Buddhism, Jainism, Hinduism, and later Gandhian thought. It related

to ethics, discipline, food habits, social duty, compassion, and spiritual life. This civilizational background helped Gandhi to make Ahimsa a mass political principle during India's freedom struggle. Similarly, Buddhist thought presented the Sangha as a model of peaceful and harmonious community life. Thus, non-violence can be called a root value of Indian civilization (Gandhi, 1927).

Gandhi's idea of the Oceanic Circle is important for understanding non-violent social order. Gandhi rejected the pyramid model of society because, in such a model, power remains at the top and people at the bottom become weak and dependent. This can create domination, exploitation, and inequality. Instead, Gandhi imagined society as an oceanic circle. In this model, the individual is at the centre, then the village, then the group of villages, and then the wider society. Every unit is connected, but no unit dominates another. The Oceanic Circle is based on dignity, duty, service, and responsibility. It is also connected with Gram Swaraj, or village self-rule. Gandhi wanted villages to be self-reliant, but not isolated. They should be independent in basic needs and interdependent when necessary. Therefore, the Oceanic Circle gives an institutional form to non-violence. It is a theory of social harmony and cultural unity based on cooperation, service, and moral responsibility (Guha, 1918).

### **Buddha Sangha: The Harmony as the Basis for Society**

If Gandhi gives a modern idea of a non-violent society, Buddha gives one of the earliest Indian models of an ethical and peaceful community. In Buddhism, the Sangha has a central place. It is one of the Three Refuges, along with the Buddha and the Dhamma. This shows that community is not a secondary part of Buddhism. It is an important part of the Buddhist path. The Sangha represents a disciplined community where people live together with moral rules, self-control, compassion, and mutual respect. The idea of harmony in the Sangha is very important. Buddhist texts describe a harmonious Sangha as a community where members do not quarrel, insult, block, or abandon one another. This means that

peace in the Sangha is not only an internal rule for monks. It has wider social meaning. When a community lives peacefully, it spreads goodwill and harmony outside the community also. In this way, the Sangha becomes a model of social peace (Pandey, 2021).

The Sangha is based on moral discipline, not on force. It is organized, but its order does not depend on violence or domination. Its unity comes from ethical conduct, shared purpose, discipline, and inner control. This makes the Sangha different from a power-based institution. It shows how people can live together without aggression, humiliation, or exploitation. Buddha's teaching of loving-kindness also gives emotional strength to this model. Rules alone cannot create lasting peace. For true peace, people must reduce hatred, anger, contempt, and ill will from their minds. Therefore, the Sangha combines outer organization with inner moral training. Of course, the Sangha does not represent the whole society directly. It is mainly a religious and ethical community. But as a model, it gives important lessons for society. It shows that unity can be created through harmony, discipline, respect, and common purpose. It also shows that authority should be limited by morality, not used for domination. In this way, Buddha's Sangha offers a useful model for peaceful social life beyond the monastery (Kornfield 1993).

### **Reinterpretation of Buddha and Gandhi**

Gandhi and the Sangha of Buddha are based on divergent historical sites and seek divergent immediate goals, even though they are similar in possessing a common moral grammar. They both rebuff in a domination based on order. The pyramid of politics, the scriptural eulogy of the Buddha, the life of living in the same harmonious community, there is no quarrelling, insulting, or excluding the community. Both put self-discipline above coercion. The nation of Gandhi has to comprise of the morally responsible and responsible individuals and the village; the Sangha needs to have the members trained on restraint and concord. The two also perceive unity to be relational, as contrasted to mechanical. The circles of

Gandhi are broad without trampling upon their component; the Sangha does not end fellowship, but individual ethical endeavours (Pandey, 2021). Their variations are also favourable. Gandhi works more along the line of the society, polity, and reconstruction; the Buddha begins with the ethical community that is oriented towards the goal of liberation. Gandhi is very political and social, and the Buddha is essentially ethical and spiritual, but with social implications. Gandhi brings to us a macro-social imagination of non-violent order. The Buddha provides us with a micro-ethical and institutional explanation of the way of how concord is possible. These structures are complementary to each other when they are read together. Gandhi elaborates his point on how the plural society could be organised in a non-dominating manner. The Buddha explains the habits and virtues that should be there regarding any such arrangement to hold. Gandhi provides order, while Buddha provides discipline. Gandhi gives connecting circles, Buddha- harmony in the community. The collective wisdom is that there is no society in which it is socially harmonious without ethical restraint, and no institutional and community pressures that can be created to help a society achieve ethical restraint. This synthesis is particularly important to the current India since it is not disintegrating the plurality into abstract universalism or coercive sameness to cultural unity. It recognises diversity, and at the same time, it demands that diversity has to be united by a force of one similar ethic. In the argument in this paper, the ethic is nonviolent interdependence (Mohapatra 2020).

### **Cultural Unity and Social Harmony in Contemporary India**

The ideas of Gandhi and Buddha can be understood through the wider Indian civilizational view of unity and non-violence. This view says that India is not only a modern nation formed by the Constitution in 1950. India is also an old civilization with a long history of shared moral and cultural values. From this view, Gandhi and Buddha are not only individual reformers. They are part of a continuous Indian tradition that

gives importance to Ahimsa, self-control, duty, harmony, and moral discipline. Gandhi's idea of the Oceanic Circle can be seen as an Indian model of unity from below. Gandhi did not support a pyramid-like society where power stays at the top and ordinary people remain weak at the bottom. Instead, he imagined society as circles. In this model, the individual, village, community, nation, and world are connected with one another. No part dominates another part. Every person and community has dignity, duty, and responsibility. So, the Oceanic Circle becomes a non-violent model of social order (Husain 2024).

Similarly, Buddha's Sangha can be understood not only as a religious institution, but also as a model of peaceful community life. The Sangha was based on self-control, moral conduct, equality, mutual respect, and harmony. It shows that peace cannot be created only by laws and rules. Peace also needs inner discipline, good habits, respectful speech, and shared moral values. This civilizational view is useful because law can control behaviour, but law alone cannot create trust. Trust comes from moral values, cultural memory, mutual respect, and social responsibility. Gandhi and Buddha both show that real unity must grow from inside society. It cannot be forced from above. However, cultural unity should not mean uniformity. India has many religions, languages, castes, regions, and traditions. If unity becomes domination or exclusion, it goes against both Gandhi and Buddha. Therefore, the best idea of Indian unity is one that accepts cultural rootedness and also respects plurality. In modern India, their ideas remain useful for reducing conflict and building harmony through Ahimsa, dialogue, service, self-control, and mutual respect (Bapat 2019).

### Findings

**Non-violence is a civilizational value :** Non-violence in Indian thought is not only the absence of physical violence. It includes self-control, compassion, truth, respect, service, and responsibility.

**Gandhi and Buddha complete each other:** Gandhi gives a social and political model of non-violence through the Oceanic Circle. Buddha gives

a moral and community-based model through the Sangha.

**Unity should not mean uniformity:** Both Gandhi and Buddha support unity, but not through force or domination. Their ideas support unity with diversity.

**Peace begins with the individual but grows into society:** Buddha focuses on inner peace and moral discipline. Gandhi connects personal morality with social and political change.

**Their ideas are relevant for modern India:** In a society facing caste conflict, communal tension, political division, and social distrust, Gandhi and Buddha offer a peaceful model based on dialogue, harmony, and moral responsibility.

### Conclusion

The comparative study of Gandhi and Buddha shows that non-violence in Indian thought is not only a moral value or political method. It is a deeper civilizational idea. In the Bharatiya tradition, non-violence is connected with the individual, community, and social order. At the personal level, it teaches control over ego, anger, greed, hatred, and violent behaviour. At the community level, it promotes harmony, service, compassion, mutual respect, and peaceful living. At the social level, it supports institutions that do not create domination, exploitation, or inequality.

Gandhi's Oceanic Circle and Buddha's Sangha complete each other. Gandhi's Oceanic Circle gives a model of decentralized society. In this model, the individual, village, community, nation, and world are connected through responsibility and interdependence. However, without discipline, harmony, and inner peace, decentralization may become local conflict. Buddha's Sangha gives a model of moral community based on self-control, equality, harmony, and non-aggression. But without Gandhi's social and political vision, Sangha-like morality may remain limited to small communities.

Together, Gandhi and Buddha help us connect constitutional values with civilizational memory. The Constitution speaks about fraternity, dignity, unity, and integrity. Gandhi and Buddha deepen

these values by showing that unity needs moral practice and non-violent social structures. Gandhi teaches that diversity can be organized through interdependence, not hierarchy. Buddha teaches that community can be preserved through restraint, harmony, and respectful conduct.

In contemporary India, their ideas reject both fragmentation and forced uniformity. Social harmony needs more than tolerance, and cultural unity needs more than state power. It needs a shared moral foundation. Gandhi's Oceanic Circle and Buddha's Sangha provide that foundation.

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