

# Satyagraha: A Southern Strategy?

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**(i) I have proofread the paper for spelling and grammar before submission.**

**(ii) I have used citations when needed and have not used any unfair means to write this paper.**

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In April 1963, Martin Luther King Jr., a central figure throughout the Civil Rights Movement, wrote a letter expressing his views on a variety of topics, including Jim Crow, systemic racism, the state of the union,<sup>1</sup> and the Civil Rights Movement. Despite being one of, if not the most important, men leading the fight against racial injustice, King found himself with plenty of time on his hands. Just four days earlier, on Good Friday, he had been arrested in Birmingham, Alabama, while participating in a non-violent protest. He was in Birmingham jail for eight days before he was bailed out by the United Auto Workers Union (Shales 2020). It was during his stay in prison that he wrote this letter, a letter which would have a profound impact not just on the Civil Rights Movement, but also on Western perceptions of non-violence and protest. Just less than twenty years ago, British troops evacuated their colony in the subcontinent, partitioning it into several countries. Though much of this can be attributed to a collective effort in the Free India Movement, Mahatma Gandhi emerged, similarly to MLK, as one of the key figures of the decolonization effort. Today, both Gandhi and Dr. King and their respective movements are viewed as core examples of non-violent, civil resistance. But are the two movements similar? I will argue that the ideas of Gandhi's satyagraha are largely applicable to the Civil Rights Movement. I will argue this on two grounds. First, parallels from Gandhi made their way into MLK's moral framework and political advocacy, indicating that Satyagraha had a strong political influence on the Civil Rights Movement. Second, the argument will shift slightly away from Satyagraha itself and look more into MLK and Gandhi's broader ideological goals. In this case, both MLK and Gandhi sought to broadly convince the oppressive class to reform, rather than overpower them. But first, I would like to cover both advocates and the relevant parts of their worldviews.

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<sup>1</sup>Union here refers to the Continental United States. Fragmentation within the country, especially on racial issues, was generally tied along "North vs. South" lines. In the case of the Civil Rights Movement, the main fragmentation is over a Jim Crow South and an integrated North.

that the ideas of Gandhi's satyagraha are largely applicable to the Civil Rights Movement. I will argue this on two grounds. First, parallels from Gandhi made their way into MLK's moral framework and political advocacy, indicating that Satyagraha had a strong political influence on the Civil Rights Movement. Second, the argument will shift slightly away from Satyagraha itself and look more into MLK and Gandhi's broader ideological goals. In this case, both MLK and Gandhi sought to broadly convince the oppressive class to reform, rather than overpower them. But first, I would like to cover both advocates and the relevant parts of their worldviews.

## II. Satyagraha, Truth, God, and Non-Violence

Gandhi defines Satyagraha as both a spiritual and moral framework which pushes for the truth. "Satyagraha is literally holding on to Truth," he says, "Truth is soul or spirit. It is, therefore, known as soul-force" (Gandhi 2012, 7). His idea of reaching this truth is through non-violence. Satyagraha also requires a great capacity for human suffering, which would explain why Gandhi was also inspired by the likes of Henry Thoreau, who was arrested by the state of Massachusetts for not paying into a governmental system that upheld slavery and caused the Mexican-American War. Thoreau claimed morality in defying the state when morality necessitated it. "Under a government which imprisons any [over unjust laws]" he argues, "the true place for a just man is also prison" (Thoreau 1849, 370). Gandhi reflects something similar to this, claiming that satyagraha is the "indication of truth by infliction on [...] one's self" (Gandhi 2012, 10).

The practice of Satyagraha is also universal. It can be something which can be practiced both individually and at a communal level, in a domestic or political environment, by men, women, and children alike (Gandhi 2012, 21). This universality does two things: first, it allows for a mass movement to take root, especially in cases such as decolonial struggles like that in India. Second, it is structured so that a given struggle does not need every member

to commit to Satyagraha for it to be successful. Rather, even if a small number of people were to “dedicate themselves to the task of becoming the most perfect Satyagrahis they are capable of becoming, they would not only have served themselves [...] they would also have served humanity at large” (Gandhi 2012, 22). This is especially important considering the very demanding nature of the four “vows” of Satyagraha.

Gandhi emphasizes that Satyagraha is not a passive, but an active force. There are four ‘vows’ of satyagraha: (i) Truth, (ii) Non-Violence, (iii) Chastity, (iv) non-possession. Truth and non-violence are particularly important to this conversation. They are inseparable from each other, so much so that they are “two sides of the same coin” (Gandhi 2012, 28). Since Truth operates as a sort of metaphysical identity,<sup>2</sup> Gandhi makes a divine connection between truth and non-violence. In fusing Truth with God and proceeding to claim that this can only be achieved through non-violence, Gandhi makes a connection between the three concepts. As such, this claim dually acts as a means to an end and a moralistic, quasi-religious framework. Even more interestingly, his approach to truth specifically acts outside of the body, most notably when he says “it is impossible for us to realize perfect truth so long as we are imprisoned in this mortal frame” (Gandhi 2012, 27). This indicates that the perfect practice of satyagraha is not feasible in the real world. I make this argument because Gandhi is forcing the reader to grapple with a philosophical concept which is so difficult to achieve that it holds no perfect example he can draw from.

Rather, what this indicates is that Satyagraha cannot be practiced perfectly, but rather as a spectrum; people who participate in the movement should look up to the “perfect satyagrahi” as the leader of a movement, while trying their best to meet as many of the demands of the four different vows as possible. This is important for two reasons. First, it encourages entry to the movement by lowering the bar of entry dramatically, and also gives protestors another goal to work towards. The former is especially important both because Gandhi wants and believes Satyagraha could be practiced by the masses; meanwhile, the

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<sup>2</sup>It is claimed by Gandhi that truth is both a god and a transcendent lifestyle (Gandhi 2012, 27-28).

latter serves as a continuously moving wheel which encourages more ‘truthful’ behaviour. Second, this claim is important when talking about the Civil Rights Movement. As will be discussed shortly, the movement was fundamentally different from the Quit India Movement, and as such, Satyagraha would not be applicable if the bar of entry through the vows was too high.

### III. MLK

Much of MLK’s worldview can be summarized by the many letters and speeches he delivered. We can get a clear understanding of what Dr. King desired both in terms of means and in ends. While MLK wanted to achieve political rights and social integration for African Americans, he did so while fitting his advocacy into the framework of the Constitution as best as he could.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, the racial struggle that MLK is fighting for exists in the Northern States, so this end does not require a revolution, since the preexisting American political structure has already addressed this issue outside of the ten Deep South states.<sup>4</sup> Dr. King clearly supports not only the ideals of the Constitution and the American project. For example, his ardent support for “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” principles which he believes are being eroded as a product of Jim Crow Laws, the very laws preventing African Americans from getting an income or owning property (King Jr. 1967).

MLK’s love for the Constitution goes beyond just the means used to achieve an end, but also the end itself, as he seeks an integrated American society, not one of Black dominance. He wants “all of God’s children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, [to] be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual: Free at last” (King Jr. 1963). MLK’s support for the principles of America would make sense for this end. Dr. King desires a world where Americans are judged based on “the

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<sup>3</sup>This also in large part leaves out the possibility of a revolutionary spirit, at least in the same way that Malcolm X pushes for.

<sup>4</sup>This is not to say that segregation did not exist in certain forms in the North or outside of the South. These forms of segregation, however, were de facto due to preexisting and ongoing social, economic, and political conditions. The uniqueness in the Jim Crow states was the fact that they had Jim Crow Laws.

content of their character” (King Jr. 1963). This left an interesting position for the white moderate. MLK demonstrates disappointment with the support the movement has received from the white moderate. MLK here demonstrates much more support for their potential rehabilitation. He sees them as a cowardly group, “more devoted to ‘order’ than to justice” (M. L. King Jr., “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” April 16, 1963, 5).

Overall, however, MLK demonstrates a greater affinity for the American Constitution and the ideas of American democracy and its major documents, such as the Constitution. Seeing the social, economic, and political rights granted to African Americans in the North, he grounded much of his advocacy to replicate those rights in the South. As his main positions here are made clearer, I will present that the similarities between MLK and Gandhi are apparent. While the first, and clearest, would be their shared interest in non-violence, it also shows itself in the deep interconnectedness between the two movements as a product of the ideological overlaps between Dr. King and Gandhi.

## **IV. Satyagraha – A Southern Strategy?**

By looking at the major overlaps between Dr. King and Gandhi, I am arguing that Gandhi’s Satyagraha would be in line with the Civil Rights Movement. The first is the impact that Gandhi had on MLK and his worldview. King consistently praised Gandhi as a critical figure in shaping his political advocacy, going as far as to say Gandhi was “the guiding light of [the Civil Rights Movement’s] technique of non-violent social change” (King Jr. 1959, 84). MLK was not alone in this, as early observers of the Civil Rights Movement were quick to take from Gandhi’s teachings, such as calling for bus boycotts during the Indian independence campaign in 1921-1922 (Ackerman and Du Vall 2001, 306). The two do, however, diverge in one respect, and it is the commitment to non-violence. As mentioned earlier, Gandhi views Satyagraha as not just a moralistic framework, but also a metaphysical one, acting in place as a partial religious argument. This element of non-violence is separate from

MLK's approach, as there are two existing grounded focal points for his worldview: (i) the Constitution. Dr King's affinity for the Constitution allows for the circumnavigation of a metaphysical justification, as there is already an existing "truth," and it is the ideas of Jefferson's life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness. This is a point that can be chalked up to the differing intentions of the two movements. The Free India Movement sought to defang the British in the subcontinent, establishing a new political system to take its place. This is not what the Civil Rights Movement had desired; rather, looking to extrapolate the rights Northern blacks had towards those in Dixieland. As such, an approach that massively relies on Satyagraha would be less likely in America. This is not to take away from their ideological overlaps, but the importance of the four vows is less relevant here. <sup>5</sup>

Still, the history of the United States has proven that the upholders of slavery and Jim Crow did not rely on the Constitution as a moral framework, or at the very least had what is now an incorrect interpretation of the document. To reach out to this group, a second foundation allows Dr. King to push his movement – Christianity. Besides the fact that he was himself a Reverend, MLK also believed that his faith was directly in line with his movement. In fact, he believed that his faith required him to be in support of his movement, even going out to say, "I have longed to hear [white church leaders] declare: 'Follow this decree because integration is morally right and because the Negro is your brother'" (M. L. King Jr., "Letter from Birmingham Jail," April 16, 1963, 9). What this should indicate to us is not that MLK had a separate approach to political advocacy, but rather taking inspiration from Gandhi while morphing the specifics to fit the American context.

Second, both Gandhi and MLK sought to reform oppression, rather than outright compel those who partook in it. MLK makes it clear that his goal is integration with white Americans, not Black supremacy, which he made clear in I Have a Dream. Gandhi similarly believes this. For example, he refers to soldiers of the Third Reich as "robots" who could easily convince them to put their arms down. "No man can be turned into a permanent

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<sup>5</sup>Committing to an unofficial hypothetical, I would struggle to imagine that MLK would take moral value away from one of his followers or himself if they had engaged in sex or property ownership.

machine. Immediately the dead weight of authority is lifted from his head, he begins to function normally” (Gandhi 1940b). Even while he is at war – a war which would result in the collapse of his country and his suicide – Gandhi writes to Adolf Hitler in a consolatory tone, referring to him as a “friend,” even treating him as a human with moral autonomy (Gandhi 1940a). In conclusion, both MLK and Gandhi are attempting to peacefully reform their political rivals rather than demonstrate the antagonism that would come from desiring their eradication. For MLK, it was a white oppressor class; for Gandhi, it was British imperialism, but in this case, it can also be seen in his response to Nazism.

## V. Conclusion

This essay has looked at the political positions of Martin Luther King Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi. It attempted to look at the ideological overlaps and differences between the two prominent civil rights advocates. I first summarized the positions of the two advocates. Gandhi’s Satyagraha provides the reader with a moral framework for how to practice non-violence while demonstrating its importance. After this, the essay looked at MLK’s positions during the civil rights movement, most notably his hopes for an equitable future for both white and black Americans. By using Gandhi’s philosophy as a moral framework and Dr. King’s advocacy, I have argued that the two align on their respective approaches to a large degree. I have demonstrated this on two grounds. The first is that MLK and the Civil Rights movement were inspired by Gandhi. There was still a divergence, however, as the four vows were not necessarily as relevant to MLK as they were to Gandhi. Rather, Dr. King sought an Americanized version of Satyagraha, one where the primary moral framework was based on the Constitution and on Christianity rather than a divine figure that derived from truth. On the second, both Martin Luther King and Gandhi attempted to reform their opponents rather than decisively crush them. As was demonstrated by MLK’s intention to join hands with American Whites, and Gandhi’s conversations on Nazism and the nature of submitting

to authority, we can look to both these advocates as wanting to empower their respective groups while also working to maintain a good living standard for the oppressed class.

From everyone from Socrates to MLK, we have seen countless forms of non-violence take root in every corner of the globe. Many of these campaigns and their advocates all provide new philosophies to the practice and have shaped it in their own light and strategies. But as presented in this paper, it should not be understood that these thinkers do not share a great deal in common. We should not forget that while they have their own solutions in their cases, they still inspire each other to reach a desired end. “It is clear to me that the next stage of the movement is to become international,” MLK said in 1967 (King Jr. 1967). Dr. King himself was not strictly a product of the United States, as the works of Gandhi influenced his own movement, despite it being vastly different. And, to be sure, MLK will inspire countless more campaigns in the future. In conflict studies, the idea of diasporic communities impacting domestic political ideas has been noted and documented (Marten 2006, 67). Looking ahead, we may also start to see more ideas shift between nations, with movements inspiring one another, especially with the increasing influence of social media, allowing people to navigate around government censorship and spread ideas miraculously faster (Tufekci 2020, xxii). But at the very least, since the 60s, this is also the case in the field of non-violence, as presented with Gandhi and Dr. King.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Professor, I am writing this footnote to say thank you not just for a fantastic course, but for the experiences I’ve gotten in your classes for the last year and a half. I have really enjoyed being your student, and I wish all the best in your future plans. Also, let’s please keep in touch!

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