

Healing a Violent World: Insights from the Gandhian–Civilisational Tradition

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The world today stands at a point of profound fracture. Cities suffocate under toxic skies; rivers, forests, and farmlands are sacrificed to the hunger of consumption; and across continents, violence — in wars, bombings, and social hatred — has become woven into the ordinary fabric of existence. India is not immune: the air in its cities poisons its children, its economic growth coexists with deepening inequality, and its public life, once animated by ideals of freedom and service, shows signs of exhaustion and division.

These are not isolated catastrophes. They are connected expressions of a deeper disorder — a moral and civilisational dislocation that has severed human life from its ethical and ecological foundations. The contemporary world, as Gandhi foresaw, suffers from a crisis not of means but of meaning. Modern civilisation, in his diagnosis, confuses possession with progress and speed with fulfillment. The instruments of science and power, unmoored from conscience, have turned creative capacity into systems of domination. The violence that erupts in the street or in the soil is but a mirror of this inner estrangement.

To respond to such a condition requires more than reform; it demands renewal — a reorientation of thought, education, and institutional life toward principles of harmony and restraint. Within the framework of the Gandhi Research Foundation, this concept proposes the development of a **civilisational research and action initiative** that re-examines the contemporary crises of violence and ecological collapse through the lenses of Gandhian ethics and India's indigenous knowledge traditions. Its purpose is not to condemn the present, but to recover from within India's own experience the resources of balance and care that can inform a new future.

1. Understanding the Roots of Violence

The prevailing order of thought separates the human from the natural, the individual from the collective, and the moral from the material. The resulting worldview treats life as a contest of competing interests rather than a web of mutual responsibility. Violence thus becomes institutional — embedded in economic models that exploit nature, in education that fosters competition, and in politics that thrives on division.

Gandhi's concept of *swaraj*—self-rule—offers a profound corrective. It calls for mastery not only over political institutions but over one's own desires and impulses. Freedom, in this sense, is inseparable from self-restraint. The violence of our age arises precisely from the loss of this inner sovereignty. A civilisation that cannot regulate its appetites cannot preserve its environment or its humanity.

Dharampal's historical studies, though not cited here directly, remind us that precolonial India sustained complex local systems of ecological management, moral economy, and participatory governance. These were not mere technical arrangements but reflections of an ethical worldview in which the community and the cosmos were interdependent. To revisit such insights is to rediscover not a lost past but a living possibility: that peace and sustainability are grounded in moral order, not material abundance.

2. Directions for Renewal

a. Ethical and Symbolic Awakening

A first step is the cultivation of moral imagination — the capacity to perceive violence in its subtle forms and to resist it through compassion and simplicity. This initiative could promote:

- An annual “**Ahimsa for Our Times**” **declaration**, articulating principles of nonviolence relevant to contemporary politics, economy, and ecology.
- Interfaith and intercultural dialogues that restore *ahimsa* as a shared language of empathy across traditions.
- Public ceremonies of remembrance for victims of violence and of gratitude toward those who protect life — acts of civic ritual that rekindle a sense of sacredness in the public sphere.

These symbolic interventions, while modest, can help re-sacralise the moral space of society and remind us that the healing of the world begins in conscience.

b. Research and Intellectual Engagement

The second dimension is rigorous inquiry into the moral and ecological foundations of civilisation. This initiative envisions:

- A research cluster on “**Civilisational Ecology and Swaraj**”, exploring indigenous modes of self-governance, water and forest management, and the ethical concepts that sustained them.
- An annual seminar on “**The Violence of Modern Knowledge**”, interrogating how technocratic and economic rationalities perpetuate forms of domination and ecological harm.
- Publication and translation efforts to recover the voices of lesser-known practitioners of nonviolence and trusteeship in India’s social history — teachers, artisans, reformers, and local communities whose practices embodied harmony between livelihood and virtue.

Such academic work would bridge ethics, history, and policy — enabling new dialogues between traditional wisdom and contemporary research.

c. Practical Demonstrations and Community Work

Ideas must be tested in life. The initiative therefore proposes **small-scale field laboratories** for peace and sustainability — collaborative spaces in partnership with Gandhian institutions and local communities. These *Gram Shanti Karyashalas* could model:

- Ecological restoration through community participation.
- Revival of traditional crafts and sustainable livelihoods.
- Dialogues and training in nonviolent communication, conflict resolution, and mindful living.

Urban *Ahimsa Collectives* may similarly engage youth and professionals in experiments of ethical economy and conscious citizenship. Regular roundtables among farmers, entrepreneurs,

and educators could explore the practical relevance of *trusteeship* and *swaraj* for contemporary governance and business.

3. A Broader Civilisational Responsibility

India's spiritual and intellectual heritage, if reinterpreted with integrity, carries global significance. In a world where both the earth and human relationships are under assault, India can contribute not by exporting technology or ideology, but by sharing a vision of wholeness — of the unity of the moral, ecological, and social orders.

The Gandhi Research Foundation is well placed to host such a conversation. By convening scholars, activists, and practitioners from India and abroad, it can become a hub for exploring **nonviolence as a universal principle of regeneration**. A future fellowship or research network devoted to this theme could affirm India's role as a moral interlocutor in global debates on peace and sustainability.

At the same time, the initiative must exemplify the values it studies. Its internal functioning should embody *shanti* (peace), *satya* (truth), and *sahajta* (naturalness): fostering collegial decision-making, ecological simplicity, and humility in scholarship. Only by living these principles can research transcend abstraction and become a force of transformation.

4. Towards a Moral Ecology of Civilisation

The crises that afflict our world are, at their core, crises of imagination — failures to see the interdependence of all life. Violence and ecological ruin are not inevitable outcomes of human nature but consequences of alienated knowledge and unrestrained desire. The task before us is to rediscover *restraint as wisdom* and *compassion as intelligence*.

A Gandhian–civilisational response to violence must therefore aim not merely at reforming structures, but at **re-enchanting conscience**. The path of regeneration lies in recovering that integral vision of life which perceives the sacred in the everyday, harmony in diversity, and freedom in self-limitation.

This concept note invites reflection and collaboration toward that end — towards reimagining scholarship as service, economy as trusteeship, and civilisation as care. If the present age is marked by unprecedented violence, it may also hold within it the possibility of unprecedented awakening. To nurture that awakening — through thought, action, and example — is the quiet but urgent calling of our time.