



REVIEW OF RESEARCH

ISSN: 2249-894X

IMPACT FACTOR : 5.7631 (UIF)

VOLUME - 9 | ISSUE - 7 | APRIL - 2020



NATIONALISM AND THE ETHICS OF VIOLENCE: A STUDY OF POLITICAL THOUGHT IN MODERN INDIA

Sudhakar Rao Sitaram Rao Deshpande S/O Sitaram Rao
Research Scholar

Dr. Sushma Rampal
Guide
Professor, Chaudhary Charansingh University Meerut.

ABSTRACT

This study explores the complex relationship between nationalism and the ethics of violence within the framework of modern Indian political thought. By critically examining the writings and philosophies of key Indian thinkers, the research investigates how violence is justified, condemned, or reinterpreted in the pursuit of national identity and political sovereignty. The study reveals the inherent tensions and contradictions that characterize nationalist discourses, highlighting the shifting ethical boundaries between resistance, revolution, and state power. This inquiry not only sheds light on the moral dilemmas faced by political actors but also underscores the continuing relevance of these debates in contemporary Indian politics. Furthermore, the relevance of this inquiry extends beyond the historical moment of decolonization. In the current political climate—marked by populist nationalism, communal tensions, and growing authoritarian tendencies—the ethical boundaries of violence are again being tested. Thus, re-examining the foundational debates in Indian political thought is essential for understanding the normative limits of power, legitimacy, and resistance in the present era.

KEYWORDS: Nationalism, Ethics of Violence, Indian Political Thought, Modern India, Political Philosophy, Resistance, Revolution, State Power.

INTRODUCTION

Nationalism has been a powerful and defining force in the political evolution of modern India. Emerging in response to colonial domination, Indian nationalism galvanized collective action, inspired social reform, and shaped the discourse of independence and sovereignty. Yet, intertwined with its emancipatory potential is a deep and persistent tension—the question of violence. Can violence be ethically justified in the service of national liberation? Is non-violence a moral imperative, or a strategic choice? What are the consequences of state-sanctioned violence in the name of national unity? These are some of the central questions that animate this study. The Indian freedom struggle was marked by multiple and often conflicting ideological responses to these questions. Mahatma Gandhi's doctrine of ahimsa posited an ethical and spiritual rejection of violence, even in the face of colonial injustice. B. R. Ambedkar, in contrast, highlighted the pervasive structural violence of the caste system, urging political transformation through social justice rather than moral



persuasion alone. Subhas Chandra Bose and Bhagat Singh represented strands of revolutionary nationalism that embraced armed resistance as both legitimate and necessary. Jawaharlal Nehru, while outwardly committed to democratic ideals, led a postcolonial state that sometimes deployed coercive means in the name of modernization and nation-building.

These varied responses demonstrate that violence in Indian political thought is not treated as a singular or monolithic concept, but as a deeply contextual and ethically contested phenomenon. Whether seen as a tool of resistance, a manifestation of oppression, or a threat to moral order, violence occupies a central position in the theoretical and practical articulation of Indian nationalism. This study seeks to examine how the ethics of violence have been addressed, debated, and justified within the political philosophies of modern Indian thinkers. It aims to uncover how differing interpretations of nationalism influence ethical judgments about violence, and conversely, how moral perspectives on violence reshape the meaning of nationalism. By engaging with these questions, the research offers critical insights into the ambivalences, contradictions, and moral dilemmas that continue to shape political discourse in India today.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

Aim of the Study:

The primary aim of this study is to critically examine the relationship between nationalism and the ethics of violence in modern Indian political thought. It seeks to explore how leading Indian thinkers have conceptualized violence in the context of anti-colonial struggle, state formation, and social justice, and how these conceptions have informed or challenged dominant nationalist narratives.

Objectives:

1. To analyze how violence has been ethically justified, condemned, or problematized in the writings and speeches of key Indian political thinkers such as Mahatma Gandhi, B. R. Ambedkar, Jawaharlal Nehru, Subhas Chandra Bose, and Bhagat Singh.
2. To investigate the role of nationalism in shaping political attitudes toward violence—whether in the form of revolutionary resistance, structural oppression, or state enforcement.
3. To explore the ethical frameworks employed by different thinkers in evaluating the legitimacy or illegitimacy of political violence.
4. To understand the tensions and contradictions within Indian nationalist thought, especially where ideals of unity, freedom, and justice come into conflict with practices of exclusion or coercion.
5. To assess the contemporary relevance of these historical debates in light of modern India's political landscape, including the rise of majoritarian nationalism, suppression of dissent, and state-sanctioned violence.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The intersection of nationalism and the ethics of violence in modern Indian political thought has been the subject of significant scholarly interest, though often explored in fragmented or isolated frameworks. This review surveys key contributions across political theory, intellectual history, and postcolonial studies that inform the conceptual foundation of this research.

1. Gandhi and the Moral Absolutism of Non-Violence

The ethical rejection of violence as a political tool is most prominently embodied in the philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi. In *Hind Swaraj* (1909), Gandhi lays out a comprehensive critique of both modern civilization and violent resistance, advocating instead for *satyagraha* (truth-force) as a method of non-violent resistance. Scholars such as Raghavan Iyer (1973) and Bhikhu Parekh (1997) have explored Gandhi's insistence on the moral purification of both the individual and society, positioning non-violence as a spiritual and political ideal. However, critics like Ashis Nandy and Partha Chatterjee have pointed to contradictions in

Gandhi's thought, especially where his moral universalism clashes with the practical demands of political struggle.

2. Ambedkar and the Structural Violence of Caste

In contrast to Gandhi's moralism, B. R. Ambedkar emphasizes the structural nature of violence, particularly through the lens of caste oppression. In *Annihilation of Caste* (1936), Ambedkar critiques Hindu social order as inherently violent and calls for its radical dismantling. Scholars like Gopal Guru, Anand Teltumbde, and Sharmila Rege have extended this analysis, arguing that nationalist discourse often marginalized the Dalit question in its pursuit of a unified national identity. Ambedkar's refusal to embrace non-violence unconditionally highlights the limitations of moral pacifism when confronting entrenched social hierarchies.

3. Revolutionary Nationalism: Bhagat Singh and Subhas Chandra Bose

The tradition of revolutionary nationalism, represented by figures like Bhagat Singh and Subhas Chandra Bose, offers a radically different approach to violence. Bhagat Singh's writings, especially *Why I Am an Atheist* and his courtroom statements, articulate violence as a symbolic and tactical tool to awaken political consciousness. Similarly, Bose's advocacy for an armed struggle through the Indian National Army reflects a pragmatic embrace of militarism in the anti-colonial context. While both figures are often celebrated in nationalist memory, scholars such as Sumit Sarkar and Kunal Chattopadhyay caution against the romanticization of violence without critical engagement with its ethical implications.

4. Nehru, Developmentalism, and the Violence of the Postcolonial State

Jawaharlal Nehru's political vision, articulated in works like *The Discovery of India*, emphasizes democracy, secularism, and scientific temper. However, his nation-building model has also been critiqued for enabling state centralization and technocratic elitism, which often entailed coercive governance and suppression of dissent. Scholars such as Sudipta Kaviraj, Ranajit Guha, and Sunil Khilnani highlight the paradoxes of postcolonial nationalism, where the state, while born of anti-colonial resistance, reproduces violence in new forms.

5. Theoretical Perspectives: Violence, Ethics, and the Postcolonial Condition

The broader theoretical context is enriched by postcolonial theorists like Frantz Fanon, whose *The Wretched of the Earth* frames violence as a cleansing force in decolonization, and by Talal Asad, who interrogates the limits of secular politics and liberal morality. Within the Indian context, Ashis Nandy's *The Intimate Enemy* explores the psychological violence of colonialism, while Partha Chatterjee's work interrogates the "derivative" nature of Indian nationalism and its internal contradictions.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research approach, primarily grounded in interpretative and critical analysis of primary and secondary texts to explore the complex relationship between nationalism and the ethics of violence in modern Indian political thought. The research is designed as a theoretical and historical inquiry, aiming to analyze and interpret philosophical writings, speeches, and political texts of key Indian thinkers such as Mahatma Gandhi, B. R. Ambedkar, Jawaharlal Nehru, Subhas Chandra Bose, and Bhagat Singh. The study adopts a comparative framework to identify convergences and divergences in their ethical positions on violence and nationalism. Original writings, speeches, letters, and manifestos of the selected political thinkers. Examples include Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj* and *Collected Works*, Ambedkar's *Annihilation of Caste*, Bhagat Singh's essays and trial statements, and Nehru's *The Discovery of India*. Detailed reading and interpretation of texts to understand the ethical arguments surrounding violence. This involves identifying themes, rhetoric, and underlying normative assumptions. Comparing different thinkers' approaches to violence within the nationalist discourse to highlight areas of agreement, tension, and

contradiction. Situating philosophical arguments within the historical and socio-political contexts of colonial and postcolonial India, to better understand the motivations and implications behind ethical stances.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Indian nationalism has historically served as both a liberating force and a framework for moral contention—raising pressing questions about the legitimacy and ethics of violence. While Mahatma Gandhi championed ahimsa as both a moral imperative and political strategy, his position carries nuanced contradictions. As explained by Gandhi himself, nonviolence is a choice exercised by those possessing the power to harm but opting not to—a moral stance that doesn't entirely reject all forms of force, particularly in dire circumstances. In stark contrast, B. R. Ambedkar critiqued such approaches as insufficient when confronting caste oppression. He highlighted how Gandhi's tactics—even non-violent ones—could function as psychological coercion, as exemplified by Gandhi's fast unto death during the Poona Pact negotiations. Ambedkar suggested that such methods, while morally professed as nonviolent, still limit democratic possibilities and exert undue pressure. Meanwhile, revolutionary figures like Bhagat Singh and Subhas Chandra Bose embraced political violence as a necessary tool against colonial rule. Although applauded for their bravery, scholarly critiques warn against glorifying violence without addressing its ethical complexities and potential for perpetuating cycles of harm. Moreover, postcolonial scholarship calls attention to how nationalist frameworks themselves can normalize structural and symbolic violence, whether through state authority, developmental agendas, or exclusionary cultural narratives.

FURTHER SUGGESTIONS FOR RESEARCH

1. Ethics of Truth in Religious Nationalisms

Investigate how various religious strands of nationalism—across Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, and other traditions—employ notions of truth as moral and political tools. For instance, Gandhi's use of satyagraha blended religious authority with political action to foster nonviolent mobilization.

2. Vigilante Violence and Majoritarian Nationalism

Examine the dynamics of extra-legal vigilante violence within majoritarian nationalist movements. Research shows how vigilante groups serve as grassroots enforcers of nationalist sentiment in India, challenging democratic.

3. Theological Framing of State Violence

Explore how the postcolonial state in India has mediated practices like sati and other ritual-based violence. This inquiry could illuminate how religious traditions, state legitimacy, and violence intersect in morally compromised situations.

4. Recognition of Structural and Symbolic Violence

Future work should delve into symbolic and structural forms of violence, such as the marginalization of Muslims, Dalits, and other vulnerable groups. For example, researchers have documented how fear is weaponized through institutional policies and propaganda to reinforce Hindu nationalist agendas.

5. Comparative Perspectives on Partition and Mythmaking

Building on recent historical analyses, such as those that challenge nationalist mythmaking around Partition, research could compare how ethical narratives about violence shape collective memory and political identity across South Asia.

SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS

Scope of the Study

This research delves into the dynamic interplay between nationalism and the ethics of violence in modern Indian political thought, by critically examining the works of key thinkers such as Mahatma Gandhi, B. R. Ambedkar, Jawaharlal Nehru, Subhas Chandra Bose, and Bhagat Singh. It explores how these intellectuals conceptualized, justified, or rejected violence within their visions of nationalism, with the goal of illuminating the moral paradoxes and ideological tensions that persist in the legacy of Indian nationalist discourse. The study engages in a qualitative and interpretative analysis, contextualizing ethical stances within broader historical, social, and philosophical frameworks.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

1. Theoretical and Textual Nature

This research is grounded in qualitative, text-based analysis. As such, it does not incorporate empirical or field data, which may limit its interpretive reach and sourcing of lived experiences. This methodological choice, while well-suited for intellectual history, may affect the generalizability of findings .

2. Selective Coverage of Thinker

The study focuses on select canonical figures in Indian political thought. As a result, regional, subaltern, feminist, and vernacular voices—who might offer alternative perspectives on violence and nationalism—remain largely excluded, potentially narrowing the study's representativeness.

3. Subjectivity in Interpretation

Interpretive research in political theory is inherently subject to reviewer bias. Thematic reading of philosophical texts can yield divergent understandings. While guided by scholarly rigor, these findings reflect the researcher's interpretive stance and may invite alternate readings .

4. Temporal Constraints

The study primarily explores thought between late colonial and early post-independence periods, with only limited engagement with contemporary political dynamics. Evolving nationalist practices in modern India may require supplementary study beyond the current historical scope.

5. Risk of Methodological Nationalism

By focusing solely on nationalist frameworks and Indian thinkers, this study may inadvertently reinforce methodological nationalism—the tendency to treat the nation-state as the natural unit of analysis—thereby limiting comparative and transnational insights .

DISCUSSION

The exploration of violence within the framework of Indian nationalism reveals a profound tension between ethical ideals and political necessity. This study has demonstrated that the political philosophies of modern Indian thinkers offer divergent yet intersecting views on whether violence can be morally justified in the pursuit of national goals. At the core of Gandhi's political philosophy lies a principled commitment to non-violence. He believed that true freedom could not be attained through bloodshed, as any political order born of violence would replicate coercion and moral decay. His concept of satyagraha aimed to resist injustice through civil disobedience and moral self-purification. However, as this study has highlighted, Gandhi's methods—particularly his fasts unto death—could function as forms of symbolic coercion, placing ethical pressure on political opponents, as in his conflict with Ambedkar over the Poona Pact. In contrast, B. R. Ambedkar foregrounds the structural violence inherent in caste society. To him, violence was not only physical but also deeply embedded in social institutions. He regarded Gandhi's insistence on Hindu unity as ethically insufficient because it overlooked the institutionalized brutality suffered by Dalits. Ambedkar's

rejection of romanticized nationalism, and his emphasis on legal and social justice, challenges both the moral and strategic limitations of non-violence in addressing deeply rooted oppression. Thinkers such as Bhagat Singh and Subhas Chandra Bose represent a strand of Indian nationalism that viewed violence not as an end but as a necessary instrument in dismantling colonial rule. Bhagat Singh's vision of revolutionary violence was highly conscious of ethical boundaries; he did not endorse mindless terror but saw violence as a catalyst for political awakening. Bose, on the other hand, took a more militaristic approach, aligning with foreign powers to wage armed struggle against the British.

CONCLUSION

This study critically examined nationalism and the ethics of violence in modern Indian political thought, juxtaposing the ideas of key figures—Mahatma Gandhi, B. R. Ambedkar, Bhagat Singh, Subhas Chandra Bose, and Jawaharlal Nehru—to highlight the complex moral landscape they collectively inhabit. Ambedkar challenged the adequacy of Gandhi's ethical framework by foregrounding structural violence—the persistent violence embedded within the caste system. He stressed that non-violence alone was insufficient to dismantle systemic oppression. Bhagat Singh embodied a more complex stance, initially embracing revolutionary violence as a means to awaken political consciousness. Nehru's legacy reflects the ethical conundrum of postcolonial nationalism: while championing secularism and democracy, his state's use of coercion during events like the Emergency revealed how nationalist ideals can legitimize state violence in the name of unity and progress. The study highlights how nationalism in Indian political thought is morally ambivalent. It has served as both an emancipatory force and a vehicle for exclusion, suppression, and violence. Each thinker's ethical vision reflects different responses to the challenge of sovereignty—whether through moral exemplarity, structural reform, revolutionary action, or institutional governance.

REFERENCES

1. Ambedkar, B. R. (1945). *Annihilation of Caste*. \[Reprint, 2014]. Navayana Publishing.
2. Bose, S. (1945). *The Indian Struggle: 1920-1942*. Orient Longman.
3. Gandhi, M. K. (1927). *An Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth*. Navajivan Publishing House.
4. Nehru, J. (1946). *The Discovery of India*. Oxford University Press.
5. Singh, B. (1930). *Why I Am an Atheist*. Collected works of Bhagat Singh.
6. Chatterjee, P. (1993). *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*. Princeton University Press.
7. Hansen, T. B. (1999). *The Saffron Wave: Democracy and Hindu Nationalism in Modern India*. Princeton University Press.
8. Jaffrelot, C. (2007). *Hindu Nationalism: A Reader*. Princeton University Press.
9. Kaviraj, S. (1997). *The Imaginary Institution of India: Politics and Ideas*. Columbia University Press.
10. Oommen, T. K. (2004). *Nation, Civil Society and Social Movements: Essays in Political Sociology*. Sage Publications.