

## Gandhi, peace, and cohesion

Howard, Veena R.

2022

Howard, V. R. (2022). Gandhi, peace, and cohesion. RSIS Commentaries, 080-22.

<https://hdl.handle.net/10356/162251>

---

Nanyang Technological University

*Downloaded on 27 Feb 2024 08:53:16 SGT*

*RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical and contemporary issues. The authors' views are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced with prior permission from RSIS and due credit to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email to Editor RSIS Commentary at RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg.*

*Towards ICCS 2022*

## **Gandhi, Peace, and Cohesion**

*By Veena R. Howard*

“The law of love — call it attraction, affinity, cohesion, if you like — governs the world.”  
M. K. Gandhi, “The Law of Love”

### **SYNOPSIS**

*In his writings, Mohandas K. Gandhi discussed the principle of Sarvodaya, in which he explained that sustained peace and cohesion can only be built by nonviolent means. Three key aspects at the foundation of Sarvodaya are: human dignity; religious freedom and interreligious harmony; and respect for dissenting opinions, dialogue, and negotiations.*

### **COMMENTARY**

Mohandas K. Gandhi (known widely as Mahatma Gandhi) championed the methods of nonviolence and truth-force to fight against the forces of oppression, racism, and violence. For Gandhi, unified nonviolent struggle encompassed the key to securing sustainable peace. Moreover, he offered valuable insights into building a cohesive society through his principle of Sarvodaya (uplift of all).

### **Gandhi's Constructive Programme**

Gandhi outlines various components for Sarvodaya in his [Constructive Programme](#) — a plan to build a healthy and moral citizenry as well as just and equitable social, economic, and educational systems. Sarvodaya, based on the “law of love,” comprises a comprehensive programme that addresses all aspects of life, from caring for basic necessities, health, sanitation, employment, religion, and moral education, to building sustainable economic and social organisations.

This commentary focuses on three central aspects of Gandhi's principle of Sarvodaya as the essential building blocks for individual, social, and political peace, and cohesion: 1) human dignity; 2) religious freedom and interreligious harmony; and 3) respect for dissenting opinions, dialogue, and negotiations.

## **Human Dignity**

Gandhi's vision of Sarvodaya included a healthy and moral citizenry. In the present day, mistrust of authority, rampant misinformation, and scarcity of access to healthy living conditions have taken a toll on physical, mental, and moral health. Gandhi dedicated himself to developing healthy habits of nutrition, exercise, fresh air, and sanitation, and considered them necessary for individual wellbeing and a strong society.

In 1947, Gandhi emphasized the [importance of dignity of labour and access to healthcare and education](#) for all: "Real wealth does not consist in jewellery and money, but in providing for proper food, clothes, education, and creating healthy conditions of living for every one of us." Gandhi campaigned for access to enough resources for a dignified life and showed the path of sustainable social and economic choices through his ashrama communities. Gandhi advocated for the destitute, for the needs of farmers and labourers, and for labour unions.

Gandhi also witnessed that religious laws, social policies, and political structures have relegated people to humiliating conditions. He was critical of his own faith, Hinduism, because it endorsed the practice of untouchability, which has been compared to slavery.

Notwithstanding their particularities, Gandhi believed that a democratic and just society must rid itself of prejudices that chain people to subservience. He [said](#), "if untouchability lives, Hinduism dies." To create a peaceful and cohesive society, discriminatory positions of a faith that sanction oppression must be rejected and purified. Only days before his assassination in 1948, Gandhi [wrote](#): "Everybody would regard all as equal with oneself and hold them together in the silken net of love . . . We would hold as equal the toiling labourer and the rich capitalist."

## **Religious Freedom and Interreligious Harmony**

Gandhi considered respect for all religions and the freedom to practice one's own religion as hallmarks for attaining inner peace and social and political cohesion. Drawing on Hinduism's pluralistic nature, he advocated for religious diversity and cautioned against disrupting native belief systems and practices through coercive conversion:

"I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the cultures of all the lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any."

This [quote](#) crystallizes his approach to religion, grounded firmly in his own faith, yet fostering profound respect for other religions. This position offers a theoretical and

practical structure for living in multicultural societies, as well as a solution to the modern-day problems of bigotry and xenophobia.

Gandhi personally experienced the positive power of religion, which binds communities together and engenders the virtues of morality and charity. However, he also encountered how religions have historically caused divisions, hatred, and violence.

Because of his conviction that different religions express universal truths, along with his simultaneous concern for adverse effects of sectarianism on the multireligious Indian landscape — including Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Islam, Christianity, Zoroastrianism, and many subsets of different religions — he made “communal harmony” an essential part of his Constructive Programme. Gandhi envisioned a society with diversity without division, and he uniquely advocated for healthy interreligious relationships through what he termed “heart unity.”

### **Respect for Dissenting Voices**

For Gandhi, peace represented a dynamic process: cohesion without compulsion. The goal of peace and cohesion compels all involved people to take dissenting voices seriously. Gandhi learned from Jainism that a comprehensive understanding of reality was impossible; hence, he considered respect for opponents integral to the principle of nonviolence and peacebuilding.

Gandhi realised that respect for opposing opinions, and dialogue over disagreements form essential components for resolving conflicts. In a [1932 interview](#) Gandhi wrote, “The matter, in case of any difference of opinion should be settled amicably by persuasion and negotiation.” Gandhi bestowed dignity on his critics, and often invited them to engage in dialogue.

In a [1942 letter](#) to Afghan leader Abdul Ghaffar Khan, Gandhi wrote: “We have to see and approach the viewpoints of those who differ from us. We have to be patient with them and convince them of their errors and be convinced of our own.” This advice offers guidance in cohesive social networks based on mutual understanding, humility, and openness, especially as we encounter challenging issues in the contemporary world.

In a 2018 *Havana Times* [article](#) commemorating the seventieth anniversary of Gandhi’s assassination, “Gandhi’s Thinking Can be Useful to Cubans,” Osmel Ramirez Alvarez cited this quote by Gandhi:

“Difference of opinion should never mean hostility . . . I do not know two persons in the world who had no difference of opinion . . . I have always attempted to regard those who differ from me with the same affection as I have for my nearest and dearest.”

Gandhi’s words challenge us to consider the methods of dialogue and honest discussions for developing trust among different stakeholders and constituencies.

### **Gandhi’s Model to Peace and Cohesion**

10 June 1945, Thought of the Day, Gandhi [writes](#): “Drops make the ocean, the reason being that there is complete cohesion and co-operation among the drops. The same law applies to human beings.” Gandhi’s Sarvodaya—concern for all, beyond the utilitarian ethic—with the components of religious freedom, religious pluralism, and respect for difference and dialogue, offers ingredients for healthy citizenry and relationships, leading to the goal of peace and cohesion.

---

*Dr. Veena R. Howard is Associate Professor of Asian Religious Traditions in the Department of Philosophy at California State University, Fresno. She teaches and researches Asian religious traditions, Gandhi’s philosophy, animal ethics, Hindu environmental ethics, and gender issues in Indian philosophy. This is part of a series leading up to the International Conference on Cohesive Societies 2022.*

---

**S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU Singapore**  
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798  
T: +65 6790 6982 | E: [rsispublications@ntu.edu.sg](mailto:rsispublications@ntu.edu.sg) | W: [www.rsis.edu.sg](http://www.rsis.edu.sg)