Towards Advocating a 'Tradition Approach' to Gandhian Nuclear Ethics

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Ever since the onset of the Atomic Age, nuclear weapons have captured the global imagination. The 'Nuclear Sword of Damocles' loomed large during the Cold War, manifested in the nuclear arms race between the United States and the Soviet Union. The end of the Cold War has led to significant shifts within the nuclear arena, including the increasing prominence of non-state actors. However, as the war in Ukraine unfolds, nuclear weapons have come under spotlight again. This nuclear spotlight necessitates a re-examination of the debates around nuclear ethics. Nuclear ethics is an interdisciplinary domain of inquiry at the interface of international relations, law, theology, philosophy, and ethics. Against the backdrop of increasing demands for an inclusive, non-western IR, the realm of nuclear ethics has also increasingly sought to theorize Global South normatively. However, it is hardly surprising that Gandhian nuclear ethics have not received any serious scholarly consideration even as Gandhi and his philosophy are routinely invoked in the nuclear landscape both in India and abroad.

There is no doubt that 'Gandhi' has been associated with 'anti-nuclear'. This analogy can be best exemplified in claims like, 'if Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr were alive today, they would be part of ICAN' (Larson 2017). Another such example could be the curious internet meme sensation of 'Nuclear Gandhi', which portrays Gandhi as a highly aggressive character spewing obviously incorrect quotes advocating nuclear warfare. The irony of Gandhi's character in the above illustration presents a deep-seated ambiguity about Gandhi and Nukes—we could never imagine Gandhi to be advocating for nuclear weapons. Against this backdrop, this article seeks to critically re-examine the prevalent narratives of Gandhian ethics vis-à-vis the nuclear question. Following a brief review of the intersection of Gandhi and nuclear ethics, I identify the two stands of thought that either characterises Gandhian perspective as that of a devout Hindu or as that of a pacifist anti-nuclear ethos. I contend that such representations are highly reductive in nature, by highlighting a more nuanced and multifarious associations between Gandhi, Gandhism and the nuclear question in the Indian context. I argue that the lens of a 'Gandhian ethico-political tradition' is a more fruitful approach towards capturing the sheer depth of these figurations. My article concludes by outlining some pointers for a future research agenda in this direction.

Gandhi and the Nuclear Ethics: An Overview

Despite the existing debates on nuclear ethics, the Cold War era has been overwhelmed with a focus on the 'original sins' of 'stability, predictability and order', which have marginalized the ethical and normative questions in IR (Ray 1999, 1368). The post-Cold War era presented a unique set of global challenges that led to a spate in normative theorizing and ethics-based scholarship in IR, including attempts to foreground the ethical assumptions and foundations of nuclear politics (Burke et al. 2016, 64). As Thomas Doyle (2016) notes, the primary contestations in nuclear ethics occur between the utilitarian deterrence position and the anti-nuclear politics of civil society and non-nuclear states, which is overtly and covertly informed by moral cosmopolitanism.

However, as hinted earlier, substantial normative theorizing from the Global South has remained limited. An important exception to the trend is Stephen Lee and Sohail Hashmi's 2004 edited work*Ethics and Weapons of Mass Destruction*, which provides a comparative study of various philosophical and theological perspectives of WMDs. While this was indeed a pivotal intervention nearly two decades ago, there has been a general lack of

adequate scholarly progress since. Moreso, it is hardly surprising that there has been a lack of sustained engagement of Gandhian ethical perspectives on nuclear weapons, despite the looming ideational presence of Gandhi in the nuclear thinking. A survey of the existing engagements of Gandhian ethics vis-a-vis 'the nuclear' points us to two universalisings of Gandhian perspectives, which are distinct yet interrelated conceptions. The first conception projects Gandhi as a pacifist and thereby Gandhian nuclear ethics as a subset of the broader anti-nuclear pacifism. The second constructs Gandhian ethics as a non-violent variant (or even pole) of Hindu ethics.

While acknowledging the wide array of complex and multilayered positions on pacifism, I refer to Mathias Thaler's (2019) dualistic use of the term. Thaler notes that pacifism first corresponds to 'non-violentism', which signifies a systematic renunciation of non-violence. Then, Thaler notes, pacifism also denotes an opposition to warism, including 'the institution of war and the wider political, cultural, social, and economic system that entrenches war making' (Thaler 2019, 1004). The pacifist framing of Gandhi could be outlined as follows: Gandhi (and Gandhism) is opposed to nuclear weapons because of his faith in peace and non-violence. This position does not merely oppose nuclear weapons, but also presents a firm refusal of warfare, and a commitment to a 'cooperative social conduct' (Cady 1989, 19). Therefore, Gandhi is claimed to be a pacifist, who endorses a 'culture of peace' and embrace holistic transformation of society (Gunasekharan and Dhanasekharan 1999, 265; Panda 1989, 26-27). These pacifist representations have also found expression in formulations such as 'Gandhian World Order' (Yadav 2005).

The second school of thought on Gandhian nuclear ethics pertains to his Hindu beliefs as a purveyor of Gandhian nuclear position. Hindu 'anti-militarism' (refer to: Ray 2012) is opposed to nuclear weapons primarily on Kantian deontological and religious grounds, especially through a close reading of *Bhagavad Gita.* Gandhi provides a revolutionary interpretation of the Gita by arguing that the Kaurava-Pandava warfare alluded to in the *Gita (*and the epic *Mahabharata*)was more symbolic than corporeal. It signifies an eternal duel or a 'moral battle that goes on in the heart of man – between the forces of good and evil' (Pruthi and Chathurvedi 2009, 71). Gandhi argues that the *Gita* teaches us *Anasakti* or renunciation. He further notes that it should not be translated as non-action, rather as 'giving up of the fruits of action' or simply selflessness (Pruthi and Chathurvedi 2009, 72). Since violence is rooted in selfishness, Gandhi argued that a selfless man has to practice non-violence. In essence, these ideals form the basis of the political ascetic tradition of Gandhi (Pruthi and Chathurvedi 2009, 72). However, at an international arena, these ideas invariably translate to an anti–militaristic ethos, advocating abolition of armed forces and disdain reification of nuclear weapons (Lee 2004, 487).

Despite differences in their underlying rationale, what unites the two figurations is their staunch opposition to nuclear warfare. As highlighted earlier, it has almost become common-sensical to view Gandhi and Gandhism as antithetical to nuclear weapons. Scholarly analyses of the Indian nuclear landscape are no different, with Gandhi often being symbolized as the anti-nuclear pole of India. However, the 'pacific' and the 'Hindu' readings of Gandhian nuclear ethics seem simplistic and often do not address the ambivalence of Gandhi and Gandhism. Therefore, I seek to complicate these characterizations in the Indian context and advocate a 'tradition approach' in the following section.

Towards a 'Tradition Approach' to Gandhian Ethics

Gandhi's rejection of nuclear weapons was unequivocal. Gandhi's revulsion towards nuclear bombs as the most diabolical use of science and his conviction that *ahimsa* (non-violence) was the sole antidote even against the atom bomb is well documented (Gandhi 1946, 335). However, there is a certain ambivalence on Gandhi's position on nuclear power plants. Gandhi writes, 'that atomic energy… may be utilized by scientists for humanitarian purposes is undoubtedly within the realm of possibility… An incendiary uses fire for his destructive and nefarious purpose, a housewife makes daily use of it in preparing nourishing food for mankind' (Gandhi 1998).

India's nuclear adventurism after the death of Gandhi is well documented. This has culminated in two nuclear tests in 1972 and 1998 as well as the expansion of nuclear power plants across the country (The Economic Times. 2021). India as a nuclear weapon state has created a dynamic space of contestation with myriad pro-and anti-nuclear positions. Gandhi has figured in these debates as an imagined or mythic Gandhi (Latham 1998, 136). Put differently, Gandhism negotiated with 'the nuclear' in myriad diverse, colourful and contradictory ways.

There is no denying that pacifism was a major manifestation of Gandhism in India. In fact, Gandhian organizations such as 'Sampoorna Kranti Vidyalaya' (in the Eighties) and 'People's Movement Against Nuclear Energy' (PMANE) have constituted a major opposition to nuclear power in India. National Alliance of People's Movements (NAPM), a Gandhian umbrella organization that represents the local social movements from across India, has characterized 'the nuclear tests as a radical break in the otherwise pacifist course of Indian national history' (Roy 2009, 115). Similarly, PMANE had resorted to a pragmatic pacifist position, including the use of a wide repertoire of Gandhian methods of protests such as hunger strikes, petitions, election boycott, candlelight processions, human chains, and jal satyagrahas.

However, Gandhian pacifist strands of opposition to nuclearization were complemented and animated by arguments on national history and ideology (Roy 2009, 119). Firstly, Gandhi was often inextricably linked to the moral exceptionalism of India in the international arena and its moral decadence which ensued as a result of nuclear weapons. This had led Narayan Desai (2001), a prominent Gandhian, to proclaim the death of Gandhi in his poem 'Goodbye Gandhi'. Another intriguing line of postcolonial critique links the seductive power of nuclear bombs legitimized by the colonial condition, to the meat offered to disrupt a Gandhian ethos of vegetarianism (Kothari and Milan 2001). A third economic line of critique claims nuclear bombs to be violative of the Gandhian economic talisman of swadeshi: 'Recall the face of the poorest and most helpless person… and ask yourself if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him?' (Reddy 2001, 459). Several iterations of this line of argumentation have focused on the opportunity costs of nuclear weapons in terms of poverty alleviation and social welfare programs in India (Roy 2009, 118-119).

While there certainly were Gandhian Hindu anti-nuclear ethical positions, they were not merely based on deontological scriptural grounds exemplified in the dominant narratives. They were constituted in relation to, or as different from, other conceptions in Hinduism. Since the 1998 nuclear tests were carried out under the auspices of the right-wing ruling party of India, the BJP, a prominent line of critique highlighted the link between *Hindutva*, the ideological foundation of BJP (which derives its influence from Savarkar, and the parent organization RSS, both of whom were alleged to be linked to the assassination of Gandhi), and the nuclear bomb. This is typified in statements: 'The BJP-led government brandishes its close affinity with the paranoid, hate-filled world view of Gandhi's assassins as it moves to stamp out all that remains of Gandhi's vision of peace and non-violence' (South Asian Magazine 2001, 451). Some claim that this has resulted in the murder of 'Gandhi twice: his body in 1948, and his legacy 50 years later' (Ahmad 2001, 30). Gandhian activist Nirmala Deshpande has noted that the nuclear bomb signified the end of Gandhian 'secularism', a far more inclusive conception of Hinduism as opposed to the exclusivist character of Hindutva (Das 2005, 7).

While the existing formulations of Gandhian positions unanimously reject nuclear weapons, an intriguing strand of pro-nuclear Gandhian positions have emerged, especially within Indian government and its security apparatus. A major plank of the Gandhian resistance to the British was self-reliance (*Swadeshi*), which would later form a major component of India's strategic perception of itself (Latham 1998). It is indeed striking that the then Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee directly invoked Gandhian self-reliance to legitimize the nuclear tests of 1998. Establishment of Department of Atomic Energy (DAE), India's foremost atomic energy agency, culmination of nuclear power plants and the nuclear tests were all traced to the Gandhian insistence on self-reliance. Another ingenious pro-nuclear manifestation of Gandhism is the *Satyagraha approach* propounded by the three retired military officials, Eric A. Vas, Keshav S. Pendse, and Anil A. Athale. They argue:

> There are many Indians . . . who would want India to be totally at the mercy of the Big Five, is an uncomfortable fact that one has to live with. Partly these Indians take shelter behind the Gandhian concept of nonviolence, deliberately distorting the Mahatma's legacy. Gandhi advocated *satyagraha* from a position of strength and moral conviction and not fear of "economic sanctions" as some of the present day "followers" of his want (Young 2004, 289).

They draw from Gandhi's assertion that violence is favourable to fear, thus providing a Gandhian justification for the development of nuclear weapons and technology. Interestingly, they draw on the Gandhian economic notion of trusteeship vis-à-vis land ownership in India to argue that nuclear weapon states should provide protection for non-nuclear weapons (Young, 2004). Thus, Gandhi was portrayed as a legitimiser of the nuclear bomb.

Since there exist myriad of Gandhi's in Indian nuclear debates, I have sought to complicate the uncritical incorporation of Gandhian nuclear ethics under the rubric of pacifism or Hindu traditions. Even as there are prominent strands of pacifist and Hindu anti-nuclear ethical positions which draw from Gandhi, they are coloured and complemented by a range of positions linked to religion, colonialism, economy and even vegetarianism. Going further, this section even critically interrogates the assumption that a Gandhian position is necessarily anti-nuclear. Given that the famed Indian nuclear tests themselves were carried out invoking Gandhian principles, the notion of nuclear Gandhi does not appear very hilarious or incredulous. The Gandhian negotiation with 'the nuclear' thus incorporates a cacophony of voices, from the pro-nuclear to the anti-nuclear continuum, integrating a wide range of concerns. It is an ambivalent and constantly shifting terrain, always open to further possible interpretation. Drawing from Bhabha, it is a space of hybridity 'in which cultural meanings and identities always contain the traces of other meanings and identities' (Aschroft et al. 2013, 53-54).

In this context, I argue that the rubric 'tradition' could be a more useful framework to capture the diversity of the Gandhi-nuclear interconnections. To put it differently, rather than to frame Gandhi as a Hindu or pacifist position in nuclear ethics, it is more productive to ask the question, 'How does a Gandhian ethical tradition respond to nuclear weapons?' What, then, constitutes a tradition? A tradition refers to a coherent set of ideas and normative propositions on the world. It involves an authoritative presence of a continuously transmitted past, often grounded in the heritage of a founding moment, episode, or political figure (Nardin and Mapel 1992, 6; Hazareesingh and Nabulsi 2008, 153). Operating through a distinct set of formal/informal institutions, traditions become an active site for theorizing of an individual's ideas, often characterized by intense disagreements and contestations (Hazeerasingh and Nabulsi 2008, 168-169).

A Gandhian tradition, therefore, spans both Gandhi's individual ideas and Gandhism – the legacy and myriad configurations of his ideas especially after his death (Jahanbegloo 2013, 92, 98). It involves a highly diverse range of contested positions which employ various configurations of Gandhian precepts (or the unique lexicon of Gandhi's thought and his distinct lexicon) (Chakrabarthy and Pandey 2009, 43; Mallavarapu 2014, 259). With regards to the nuclear context, the framework of a tradition adequately captures the vibrancy of the above articulations and enables one to appreciate the contingencies of space and time as well as the active contexts in which these debates occur. Relatedly, they also enable us to appreciate the identities of a broad range of actors from states and military hawks to activists and associations who constantly 'shape (and constrain) the deployment' of Gandhian discourses (Hazareesingh and Nabulsi 2008, 154). Finally, it prompts us to unearth the critical interconnections between intellectual theorizing and political activism in the generation of a wide range of ethical positions. To sum up, the approach of tradition offers a more useful way of looking at Gandhian nuclear ethics rather than through the narrow strands of Hinduism and pacifism.

By Way of Conclusion

This article has argued that the Gandhian perspectives on nuclear ethics are predominantly understood to constitute an anti-nuclear position, either under the rubric of pacifism or through Hindu ethics. I have complicated these simplistic Gandhian anti-nuclear representations by arguing that it is more fruitful to think of Gandhian nuclear ethics as a tradition in itself. Using the Indian nuclear landscape as a case, I have argued that the Gandhian tradition constitutes a whole array of complex and multivalent responses to the nuclear question. Although this approach is new, I believe there are three potential future directions of research. Firstly, while the article has confined itself to Indian nuclear landscape, there is still scope for scholars to study the 'global Gandhi' and the 'trans-Indian' experience of his methods. Gandhi has been (and continues to be) frequently invoked in the anti-nuclear struggles across the globe often in conjunction with a wide range of global epistemologies and philosophical positions (Juergensmeyer 2021; Jahanbegloo 2021). As Sean Scalmer (2011, 5) has put it 'Gandhism' was a history not just of individuals and nations, but of connections, campaigns, and international flows. It is necessary to explore these interconnections better to explore (and expand) the tradition even further.

Secondly, there needs to expand the scope of Gandhian nuclear ethics beyond nuclear weapons. While I have touched upon some of the Gandhist perspectives briefly (and Gandhi's personal reflections) on civil nuclear energy, a broader exposition of Gandhian perspectives on civil nuclear energy and power plants is admittedly required

(Peoples 2016). Finally, drawing from Hazareesingh and Nabulsi's reminder (2008, 154), a tradition approach necessitates a scholar to move beyond the standard texts by cultural and political elites, and towards other manifestations of Gandhi in popular politics through pamphlets, manifestos, funereal orations, songs, poetry, graffiti, film, and electronic media. 'Gandhi' as a phrase has been deployed, paraphrased, quoted and parodied in innumerable nuclear contexts. A tradition approach, at the very least, can enable us to make sense of the various articulations of nuclear Gandhi spanning 'Gandhi', 'Gandhism' and even 'Propagandhi' (Mohan and Dwivedi 2018, 8).

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