

ECHOES OF VASUDHAIVA KUṬUMBĀKAM IN GANDHI'S AHIMŚĀ

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Abstract: This article examines Gandhian notion of *ahimśā* as an embodiment of *vasudhaiva kuṭumbakam* - the world as one family. To foster friendship and unity among people from diverse cultures and faiths, *ahimśā* is presented as a living embodiment of love, compassion, and empathy. The notion of a universal family is to be rooted in *ahimśā*, a guiding principle that promotes individual conduct linked with collective well-being and highlights the interconnectedness of all living beings. The article also briefly explores how these principles apply to the modern global ethos, emphasizing the need to shift from an individualistic perspective to a more communitarian one. This approach to global family encourages everyone to honour and preserve the dignity of all animate beings. By integrating non-violent means and practices, the realization of *vasudhaiva kuṭumbakam* becomes a viable alternative for addressing contemporary issues of social justice and achieving lasting peace for humanity.

Keywords: *Ahimśā*, *Vasudhaiva Kuṭumbakam*, Interconnectedness, Family, Gandhi, Unity, Universal Brotherhood.

1. Introduction

Indian philosophy, far from being purely speculative, is fundamentally a way of life, deeply pragmatic in its outlook. This practical orientation is clearly reflected in the concepts of *ahimśā* (non-violence) and *vasudhaiva kuṭumbakam* (the world as one family). *Ahimśā* is regarded as a divine virtue, guiding individuals

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to refrain from causing harm to others, and by extension, to themselves. From the Vedic period to contemporary India, both philosophers and scholars have embraced *ahimsā* as either a moral duty to be observed or a spiritual ideal to be attained. This principle rests on the belief that all living beings are imbued with divine spiritual energy, the source of wholeness and well-being for all. Therefore, to harm another being is essentially to harm oneself.

The principle of non-violence is not unfamiliar to the Indian mind; however, Gandhi is revered as the father of non-violence because he elevated it to an unprecedented level, turning it into a way of life. He is often credited as the first in human history to extend the principle of non-violence from the individual level to the social and political arenas (Kripalani viii). While Gandhi drew his metaphysical understanding of non-violence from Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist traditions, his psychological and ethical approach was uniquely his own. For Gandhi, non-violence was not merely a moral guideline nor a political strategy, but a natural goal towards which all human beings are inclined to move. He believed that non-violence, when successfully practiced at home, could become an unstoppable force for positive change in society and the state. Gandhi saw truth (*satya*) and non-violence (*ahimsā*) as the two fundamental principles that should govern not just Indian society, but all of humanity.

This principle of *ahimsā* is embodied in the *Upaniṣadic* teaching of *vasudhaiva kuṭumbakam* which highlights the divine presence in every living being. This philosophy is especially relevant today, as it emphasizes the unity and interconnectedness of all humanity, transcending boundaries of race, religion, and nationality. It promotes peace, encourages respect for diversity, fosters a sense of global responsibility, and supports sustainability. By expressing the ultimate philosophy of oneness, *vasudhaiva kuṭumbakam* advocates for a tolerant and universal brotherhood, challenging the divisive 'we and they' mentality.

2. Historical Significance of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*

The ancient Indian wisdom - *vasudhaiva kuṭumbakam* - comes from

Sanskrit and is composed of three parts:

Vasudhā (वसुध्वा) – Earth or world. It signifies the entire planet or all of creation.

Eva (एव) – Indeed or truly. This word emphasizes certainty, affirming the concept being expressed.

Kuṭumbakam (कुटुम्बकम्) – Family. It denotes the idea of a close-knit unit, typically referring to one's household or extended family.

Thus, *vasudhaiva kuṭumbakam* translates to "The world is truly one family," emphasizing the idea of global unity, interconnectedness and universal belonging. It expresses the ideal that all living beings on Earth, including humans, animals, and nature, are part of a single, interconnected family. This universal vision originates from the ancient Indian text, the *Mahā Upaniṣad*, part of the *Viṣṇu Upaniṣads*, which follow Lord Viṣṇu or Nārāyaṇa as the Supreme Being. In this text, we find the verse:

*ayam bandhurayam nēti gaṇanām laghuchetsām /
udāracharitānām tu vasudhaiva kuṭumbakam // (Mahā Upaniṣad 6.71)*
{The distinction 'this person is mine, and that one is not' is made only by the narrow-minded. For those of noble character, the whole world is one family}.

The concept stems from a spiritual understanding, emphasizing that entire humanity is interconnected through a single life force, which forms the foundation of a broader social philosophy. The idea of *vasudhaiva kuṭumbakam* is keenly related to the *Īśa Upaniṣadic* dictums.

*īśā vāsyamidam sarvaṁ yatkiñca jagatyām jagat /
tena tyaktena bhūñjīthā mā ḡrdhaḥ kasyasviddhanam // (Īśa Upaniṣad vs.1)*

{Everything that is in motion in this creation is inhabited by the creator. With that sense of renunciation, relish everything. Do not covet, the wealth of others, for whose wealth can it truly be?}.

Further, we read,

*yastu sarvāṇi bhūtānyātmanyevānupaśyati /
sarvabhūteṣu cātmanam tato na vijugupsate // (Īśa Upaniṣad vs.6)*

{He who sees all beings and forms in the Self, he alone really sees; he also sees the Self in all beings and forms, therefore,

he feels no hatred towards anyone}.

If we read the commentary of this verse written by Śaṅkarācārya, we notice that the passage provides an insight into the viewpoint of a spiritual seeker. The seeker perceives all beings as manifestations of a universal consciousness. The seeker acknowledges that there is no inherent distinction between their own self and the selves of others, recognizing that the *ātman* (the true self) is identical in all beings. This realization fosters a sense of unity and interconnectedness with the entire cosmos. The seeker regards the unconditioned state of the *ātman* as the animating life force behind all existence, spanning from the unmanifested to the unchanging (Śaṅkarācārya, 19–20). As a result, there is no inclination to reject or feel repulsion towards any aspect of creation, as everything is seen as an expression of the same divine essence.

Many similar thoughts can be found in various other sources, such as the *Pañchatantra*, the *Hitopadeṣa*, a certain compendium of Chāṇakya and Bhāṛtrihari and in certain recensions of Vikrama-charita, and in the works of the great Kāshmir poet Udbhaṭa Bhaṭṭa. In *Pañchatantra* and *Hitopadeṣa* we read,

*ayaṃ nijah paro veti gaṇanā laḡhucetasām /
udāracaritānām tu vasudhaiva kuṭumbakam //* (*Pañchatantra*, 5.3.37.
and *Hitopadeṣa*, 1.3.71)

{Those with petty minds account thus: ‘this (one) is mine’ or ‘that (one) is his.’ But for the ones with a noble heart, the whole world itself is a family}.

The *Pañchatantra* and *Hitopadeṣa* use animal characters in their stories to convey messages that vary from one anecdote to another but carry deeper meanings. These tales often signify the concept of *vasudhaiva kuṭumbakam*, which speaks not only of social harmony and peace but also of a larger truth: the entire world operates like a family, governed by certain values and principles. However, upon closer examination, many of these texts can be seen as political treatises. It’s also important to understand that *vasudhaiva kuṭumbakam* does not argue for uniformity; even within a family, individuals are different. The *Kauravas* and *Pandavas* belonged to the same family but were not identical, just as *devas*

and *asuras* shared a common family bond yet were distinct.

Similar theme that highlights fundamental harmony among various spiritual traditions is found in the Vedic text which speaks of *ekam sad viprā bahudhā vadanti*: The Truth is one, the wise call it by many names. During the Vedic era, other religions did not exist, yet within Hinduism itself, there were diverse paths leading to the same ultimate objective. Hinduism has never been a monolithic religion; one could worship a *nirguṇa Brahman*, a formless God, much like other religions do, or a *saguṇa Brahman*, a God with form. In *saguṇa Brahman*, individuals have the freedom to select any form they desire, as each of these forms represents a symbol of divine strength and authority. Whether one identifies as a *Śaiva bhakta*, a *Vaiṣṇava*, or a *Śakta*, one has the liberty to worship any combination that resonates with one’s beliefs. According to *Vedānta* tradition, all these diverse paths ultimately lead to the same goal, much like rivers from various sources eventually flow into the same vast ocean. Similarly, different religions, sects, cultures, customs, and civilizations may emerge independently but eventually converge in the One. The historical context of *vasudhaiva kuṭumbakam* has also been shaped by India's interactions with other cultures over time. As India engaged in trade and cultural exchange with different civilizations, the idea of a global family gained prominence, promoting values of tolerance and coexistence.

3. Cultural Significance

The idea of the world as one family - *vasudhaiva kuṭumbakam* - has resonated across various ancient indigenous spiritual traditions worldwide. For instance, the Lakota phrase *Mitákuye Oyás'in*, meaning ‘we are all related’ (Feather, 19–20), highlights the interconnectedness of all living beings, suggesting that every person, animal and element of nature is part of a larger family. Similarly, the African concept of *Ubuntu* - ‘I exist because you exist’ (Vervliet, 20), promotes a sense of community and shared responsibility, encouraging individuals to act in ways that uplift and support one another. Major world religions, too, have expressed similar principles over the past 2,000 to 3,000 years.

Christianity advocates the Golden Rule (Matthew 7:12), urging people to treat others as they themselves would like to be treated. Islam emphasizes *tawheed* (Quran 2:163), the unity and oneness of God, and the interconnectedness of all beings. Buddhism uses the concept of Indra's net (Cleary, 20) to symbolize the interdependence of all life. Moreover, ancient Tamil *Sangam* literature, such as the *Purananuru*, which consists of 400 verses composed by over 150 poets, includes the phrase *yathum oore yavarum kelir* (Sahoo and Dash, 136), which means 'every place is my hometown; everyone is my kin.'* This expression, dating back to 100 BCE, reflects the profound idea that all places and people are interconnected. As cultures interact and exchange ideas, the principles inherent in *vasudhaiva kuṭumbakam* foster a deeper appreciation for diversity, encouraging dialogue and collaboration. These principles enhance global understanding by promoting shared knowledge and practices.

4. *Vasudhaiva Kuṭumbakam* and Ecology

The worship of plants and trees is considered a sacred obligation for humans in the religious and cultural traditions in India. These living beings, along with nature, generously provide us with essential resources such as food, shelter, water, and air, enabling our survival. We owe a great debt to nature, and it is mandatory for us to safeguard and conserve nature's precious gifts. The renowned *Bhumisūktam* hymn from the *Atharvaveda* (12.1.15: *Tvaṁ bibharṣiḥ doipadaḥ tvaṁ catuṣpadaḥ*) displays the environmental awareness of the Vedic seers. *Bhumisūktam* emphasizes the significance of our mother earth, *bhumi* or *pṛthvi*. She is referred to as *Vasudhā*, symbolizing her role as the repository of all wealth. Additionally, she is known as *Hiraṇyavakṣa*, signifying her association with gold, *Nivashini*, as she serves as the dwelling place for the entire world, and *Viśvambharā*, representing the universe through her existence. Thus, the earth is not solely meant for the enjoyment of human beings, but also for the well-being of

* The phrase is attributed to the great Indian poet Kaniyan Pungundranar, who lived 3,000 years ago.

all other creatures, including bipeds, insects and various other life forms. Further, the concept of *lokasamgraha* in *Bhagavadgītā* reflects the principle of *vasudhaiva kuṭumbakam*. Etymologically, *lokasamgraha* (लोकसंग्रह) is derived from *loka* and *samgraha*. *Loka* (लोक) signifies world, universe or people, referring to all living beings and society at large, *samgraha* (संग्रह) means to protect, hold together, preserve and regulate. The social aspect of *dharma* is the duty of every individual to protect and maintain the harmony, peace and order in the world. As it is written in the *Bhagavadgītā*,

*karmaṇaiva hi sansiddhim āsthitā janakādayaḥ/
loka-saṅgraham evāpi sampāśhyaṅ kartum arhasi//* (*Bhagavadgītā*, 3.20)
{Janak and others attained perfection verily by action only; even with a view of protecting the masses you should perform actions}.

The philosophy of *lokasamgraha* advocates ethical and ecological responsibility towards all forms of life, promoting kindness and compassion not only among humans but also towards animals and nature. This perspective encourages respect for nature and the recognition of the rights of non-human entities, promoting a holistic approach to environmental ethics that values the divine *mantra* of ecology.

5. Unity of Existence

Building on this, *vasudhaiva kuṭumbakam* can indeed be seen as India’s contribution to the notion of ‘world peace’. This principle is rooted in the prayer *Lokaḥ samastāḥ sukhino bhavantu* – ‘May everyone, in the whole world, be happy.’ It embodies the concept of universal brotherhood that is supposed to be practiced by people of all ages, recognizing the dignity of all living creatures, not just humans. Immanuel Kant explores a related concept in his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, referring to the idea of the ‘autonomy of the self’ (Kant, 120). However, Kant’s perspective is limited to human beings and does not extend to other creatures. In contrast, *vasudhaiva kuṭumbakam* encompasses the entire planet and highlights the dignity of all species- both living and non-living beings, and reflects a broader perspective on universal interconnectedness. While some might argue that moral

principles apply only to humans, it is important to acknowledge that human actions affect all other creatures. Therefore, we have a moral obligation to consider the well-being of all beings, recognizing that our impact extends beyond just human society.

The shift towards individualism has, indeed, had profound impacts on society and the environment, often fostering a 'me and only me' approach that can be harmful. Embracing the principle of *vasudhaiva kuṭūmbakam* can counteract this by promoting an 'I and we' approach. This *vasudhaiva kuṭūmbakam* model can help us eradicate many misunderstandings and bring about reconciliation and fraternity especially during crises such as pandemics or political turmoil. As rational beings, we have the innate capacity to unite in both mind and spirit, coming together as one global family. *Ahiṃsā*, or non-violence, can be a powerful weapon in this process, helping us to live in harmony with one another and work towards the goal of wellbeing of all.

6. Fundamental Beliefs of Gandhi's *Ahiṃsā*

Ahiṃsā or non-violence has been part of Indian tradition and culture from the very beginning. The *Upaniṣads* base the idea of *ahiṃsā* on the doctrine of the unity and oneness of all life (Prasad, 31). The fundamental belief of Jainism is non-violence. For example, in *Acarangasūtras* it is said that *ahiṃsā* is pure and eternal *dharma* (Muni, 204). In this tradition, *ahiṃsā* is not restricted to human beings alone; in fact, it embraces the whole universe. *Ahiṃsā* is a central concept in Gandhi's philosophy. According to Gandhi, *ahiṃsā* is a way of life that involves refraining from any action that could cause harm to oneself or others, whether through physical violence, verbal abuse, or even negative thoughts. He practiced and promoted non-violent resistance as a means of social and political change, which he called *satyāgraha* (holding firm to truth).

I therefore corrected it to '*satyāgraha*.' Truth (*satya*) implies love, and firmness (*āgraha*) engenders and therefore serves as a synonym for force. I thus began to call the Indian movement '*satyagraha*', that is to say, the Force which is born of Truth and Love or non-violence, and gave up the use of the phrase 'passive resistance' ... (Gandhi, *Satyāgraha in South Africa* 92).

In *satyāgraha* there is not even the remotest idea of injuring the opponent. Thus, *satyāgraha* was a way of activating the soul-force. Gandhi believed that *ahimsā* was the key to achieving a peaceful and just society and that it could be used to resist oppression and injustice without resorting to violence.

Gandhi asserts that non-violence originates from soul-force (*ātmabal*), while violence stems from body-force (*śarirbal*). He employs various terms to depict the attributes of soul-force: love-force (*prembal*), truth-force (*satyabal*), compassion-force (*dayābal*), suffering-force (*tapbal*) and justice-force (*nitibal*). The soul can only manifest these inherent forces when the mind can exert control over itself and the emotions. Ultimately, the efficacy of the nonviolent ethic relies on the condition of the soul, the mind and the emotions - in essence, on self-governance (Gandhi lvi). With conflicts at every level, whether at the individual level, family level, society level, inter-state level, or global level, Gandhi's *ahimsā* has to be a significant pillar of what we think and do. To make the whole world a family, non-violence is a powerful weapon. It not only binds other human beings but also offers solutions to many personal, social and global problems.

For Gandhi, *ahimsā* was not just a passive form of resistance, but an active force that required strength, courage and discipline (Gandhi, *Satyāgraha in South Africa* 95). *Ahimsā* cannot be mechanical; it has to evolve from within. It cannot be measured by others.

It is not for us to sit in judgement over anyone, so long as we notice a single fault in ourselves and wish our friends not to forsake us in spite of such a fault. Being myself full of blemishes and therefore in need of the charity of fellow beings, I have learned not to judge anyone harshly and to make allowance for defects that I might detect.” (Gandhi, *Harijan* 47)

Gandhi believed that it was possible to transform even the most violent oppressors through the power of non-violence and that *ahimsā* was the only way to create lasting peace in the world. He distinguished between the negative and positive meanings of non-violence. In its negative form, *ahimsā* means not injuring any living being by body, mind and speech (Gandhi, *Young India* 12th November 1925). In its positive form, non-violence means love,

the greatest charity (Gandhi, *Young India* 3rd April 1924). According to him, love is the energy that cleanses one's inner life and uplifts him, and as such, it encompasses such noble feelings as benevolence, compassion, forgiveness, tolerance, generosity, kindness and sympathy. To him non-violence is intrinsic to all human beings, whereas violence is adventitious in nature and prompted by an external condition (Gandhi, *Young India* 24th June 1926). Thus, Gandhi's concept of non-violence has both theoretical and practical aspects.

Gandhi's attempt to establish a perfect structure for the society which is devoid of violence, exploitation, discrimination, and oppression can be captured in a single term, '*sarvodaya*.' It signifies the well-being of all individuals. Gandhi's principle of *sarvodaya* originated from his reading of Ruskin's book *Unto This Last* (Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj and Other Writings* xli). The ideal of *sarvodaya* is implied in the word itself: '*sarva*' means 'all,' and '*udaya*' means 'uplift.' The key to this uplift for Gandhi is dedicated service to humanity. *Sarvodaya* is based on love (a positive aspect of *ahimsā*), and it proceeds on the faith that a *Sarvodayi* will also be prepared for the maximum amount of possible self-sacrifice for the good of others. According to Gandhi, sacrifice is an indispensable companion to love. That is why he says: "The test of love is *tapasyā* and *tapasyā* is self-suffering" (Gandhi, *Young India* 12th June 1922). The ultimate goal of any social or political endeavour should solely be the betterment of all individuals.

Sarvodaya is also based on the essential unity behind everything. *Sarvodaya* is a strong ideology for the prevention of socio-economic ills in society. It is based on *Vedāntic* concept of spiritual unity of existence. This is in the life of an individual and in social life. He clearly says: "I believe in *Advaita*. I believe in the essential unity of man, and for that matter of all that lies" (Gandhi, *Young India* 4th December 1924). *Sarvodaya* is built upon the principles of truth and non-violence. It aims at adopting self-sacrifice for the sake of others.

The upliftment of the downtrodden was Gandhi's main concern and this he wanted to convey through his concept of

sarvodaya, which in turn was achieved through non-violent means. Gandhi believed that man was the best fruit on the tree of evolution. He had a profound love for all the basic human values; ‘everyone is my friend’ was the spirit that prompted Gandhi to fight for the establishment of human dignity. According to Gandhi, *ahimsā* was not just about abstaining from physical violence but also about resisting injustice in all its forms, including economic exploitation, discrimination and environmental destruction. He encouraged people to use nonviolent tactics such as civil disobedience, boycotts and peaceful protests to challenge oppressive systems and bring about social change. Thus, *ahimsā* remained as a foundational principle for Gandhi and played a central role in developing his philosophy of nonviolent resistance, which inspired movements for civil rights, social justice and peace around the world.

7. *Ahimsā* as a Foundation for *Vasudhaiva Kuṭumbakam*

The principles of *ahimsā* and *vasudhaiva kuṭumbakam* are interrelated but distinct. *Ahimsā* is more personal and subjective, focusing on non-violence in thoughts, words, and actions, while *vasudhaiva kuṭumbakam* is objective, advocating global unity and collective responsibility. *Ahimsā* encourages individuals to cultivate compassion and peaceful resolutions in daily life, while *vasudhaiva kuṭumbakam* envisions a world of interconnectedness, transcending ideological and cultural boundaries.

Gandhi’s *ahimsā* aligns with the vision of *vasudhaiva kuṭumbakam* by offering a path to dissolve hostility and foster mutual respect. When individuals practice non-violence, they contribute to a global society united by compassion, inclusivity, and respect for diversity. *Ahimsā* also promotes social justice and acknowledges the dignity of all beings, helping to bridge cultural, religious, and ideological divisions. This, in turn, nurtures a sense of global interdependence.

In today’s world, combining *ahimsā* with *vasudhaiva kuṭumbakam* offers a powerful ethical framework for addressing global challenges. This philosophy promotes dialogue, reconciliation, and cooperation, presenting an alternative to

ideologies of division and discord. It encourages sustainable solutions in personal, political and environmental contexts, fostering peaceful coexistence. By practicing *ahimsā*, individuals and societies contribute to the realization of *vasudhaiva kuṭumbakam*, creating a more compassionate and unified world.

8. Conclusion

In the *Yajurveda*, there is a beautiful prayer that extends peace to the entire universe and beyond:

Om dyauh śāntir antarikṣagum śāntiḥ pṛthvī śāntir āpaḥ śāntir ośadhayaḥ śāntiḥ / vanaspatayaḥ śāntir viśve devāḥ śāntir brahma śāntiḥ sarvagum śāntiḥ śāntir eva śāntiḥ sā mā śāntir edhi// om śāntiḥ śāntiḥ śāntiḥ //
(*Yajurveda*, 36.17)

{May the sky be peaceful; May the atmosphere be peaceful; May the earth be peaceful; May waters be peaceful; May the herbs be peaceful; May all plants be peaceful; May all the devas be peaceful; May the creator of the Universe be peaceful; May all be peaceful}.

The emphasis is on the correlation between external and internal peace. By treating all living entities with equality and cultivating a compassionate heart towards all, we can create a happier, more tranquil world. The connection between *ahimsā* and *vasudhaiva kuṭumbakam* is deeply influenced by the notion of divinity. By identifying the divine essence in all living forms, individuals are inspired to practise *ahimsā* and foster a sense of *vasudhaiva kuṭumbakam*. These principles remind us that we belong to a global family, sharing the responsibility to care for each other and the Earth we all inhabit. Moreover, they remind us that our actions have far-reaching consequences, urging a mindful and ethical approach in how we interact with others and the world at large.

The echoes of *vasudhaiva kuṭumbakam* within the practice of *ahimsā* promote unity and togetherness without discrimination, reinforcing the belief that when we recognize the same consciousness in every person, we will perceive the world as one family. India has long been a country that embraces the principle of unity in diversity. It is a home to various religions such as Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Islam and Christianity,

each flourishing in its own unique way. Within Hinduism alone, there are different creeds like Vaiṣṇavism, Śaivism, and Śaktism, showcasing the diverse nature of our spirituality. The vastness and variety of India make it similar to the planet in itself. Every living being on this planet desires to live and no one wishes to perish. Therefore, it is our collective responsibility to refrain from causing harm or destruction to any other living being. Gandhi’s principle of *ahimsā* lays the foundation for a more compassionate, inclusive, and sustainable world, reinforcing the interconnectedness of all beings. His deep commitment to non-violence shows it as the only path to creating a world that truly embodies the ideal of *vasudhaiva kuṭumbakam*.

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