

# Gandhian Philosophy and Indian Festivals: A Pathway to Social Harmony

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.91200102>

Received: 12 November 2025; Accepted: 19 November 2025; Published: 01 January 2026

## ABSTRACT

In this article, the Indian festivals are reconfigured to form political-ethical spaces where the collective effervescence may either cement solidarity of pluralist or re-focused into competitive religiosity, conspicuous consumption and exclusion. Reconciling Durkheimian sociology of liminality with the Gandhian theory of moral politics, it further develops a model of Festo Sarvodaya where the energy of the festival is normatively regulated by Satya and Ahimsa and is actually implemented in the Constructive Programme. It starts by defining the ontological parameters of a Gandhian festival before dissenting to present day festival political economy via Swadeshi and Trusteeship with regard to collective ecological and social perniciousness of spectacle marketization. Three case lenses: Deepavali, Eid-ul-Fi, and Raksha Bandhan flash mob action examples in the forms of redistribution and low-carbon ritual redesign, interfaith service based on zakat and shared labour, and civic covenants redesigning protection into reciprocal dignity. According to the article, the key in transforming recurring celebrations into schools of democracy, habituation to self-limitation, fraternity, and care towards the last can be achieved through festival governance, inclusive budgeting and joint public service. It ends with a plan of an empirical agenda of testing these assertions in an ethnographic manner at localities. Ideally, it uses Gandhi as a model and thus is not able to reflect regional and caste differentiation.

**Keywords:** Festive Sarvodaya; Gandhian ethics; Indian festivals; interfaith praxis; social harmony

## INTRODUCTION

The sociological importance of Indian festivals is not new and has been acknowledged as a tool of bonding the society together and expressing or defining the identity. The celebrations are traditionally considered to be the liminal spaces, which suspend standard social hierarchies, and theorizing functions of these celebrations, in turn, are the drivers of social cohesion (Sen, 2023). But, as recent research shows, the situation is paradoxical, and nowadays festivals in the contemporary India are more and more turned into the locations of competitive religiosity, conspicuous consumption and exclusionary politics than integrating solidarity (Sen, 2023). Although the commodification and politicization of such events have been part of the literature being thoroughly mapped (Jain, 2023), there is a significant scholarly gap in studies that can offer one of the corrective methodologies regarding the process of reclaiming the civic potential of the festive through the prism of indigenous ethical framework, in this case, the Gandhian philosophy.

It is this gap that is filled by this paper through the interrogation of the intersection of Gandhian political ethics and the sociology of celebration. It assumes that Indian festivals, with the help of the Gandhian Gandhi relation of Swaraj (self-rule), of Constructive Programme, leave behind their conventional learnt functions of cyclical cultural disjuncture and assume critical functions as democratic sustaining ethnical technologies. When the festive paradigm is switched to performative consumption onto Antyodaya (welfare of the last) and Sarva Dharma Samabhav (equal respect to all religions), the study maintains that such festivals could serve as critical nodes of operationalizing Sarvodaya (welfare of all) which will consequently produce a strong line of defence to social harmony that will lack the wrath of communal polarization.

The analysis then goes on to lay the ontological background of a Satya and Ahimsa based Gandhian festival (Bilgrami, 2002). It thereafter criticizes the politics economy of contemporary celebrations by the aspects of

Swadeshi and Trusteeship. Lastly, the paper proposes how certain festival practices can be re-arranged into the tools of interfaith praxis and social justice focusing on Deepavali, Eid-ul-Fitr and Raksha Bandhan, which leads to the creation of a model of Festive Sarvodaya.

### **Theoretical Framework: The Festival as Ethical Praxis**

This analysis uses two-lens paradigm through which the sociology of collective effervescence is integrated with the Gandhian moral political theory to examine Indian festivals as the possible tools of democratic sustenance. Festivals, sociologically, act as kind of liminal spaces to selectively hold at bay normal social hierarchies, such that an opportunity to be in a condition of collective effervescence arises, which Durkheim describes as a state of severe shared emotional activation, which can strengthen social solidarity (Durkheim, 1912/1995). Sen (2023) goes further in the Indian case and proposes that festivals are not cultural dislocations in the sense but rather a political space where the politics of belonging is discussed. Nevertheless, when absent of an ethical ground, this effervescence tends to degenerate to a stage of competitive religiosity with the collective energy used to ostracize and not integrate (Sen, 2023). Therefore, although the sociological aspect clarifies the ways in which festivals create the social energy, the manner in which such energy is channelled to make a pluralistic democracy persistence is not prescriptive.

Gandhian thought comes in to save this sociological arrangement by bringing in the element of an ethical agency into the festive area. The festival to Gandhi disavows the concept of the festival as a location of play or consumption. Rather, he redefines popular celebration to Sadhana (disciplined spiritual practice) with the goal of stimulating the welfare of all (Sarvodaya). According to Bilgrami (2002), he views this as a form of Gandhian integrity, where political and social activities such as festivities, all need to be smooth sailing in line with moral needs of Satya (truth) and Ahimsa (non-violence). This paper is a proposal of a framework of Festive Sarvodaya by combining these two; perspectives. According to this model, collective effervescence that is created in festivals (the sociological resource) needs to be directed over the Constructive Programme (the Gandhian mechanism) to result in social harmony (the democratic outcome). A ritual object (offerings, decorations) is substituted in the framework by the human being (the Daridranarayan or the poor) whose validity of a festival is determined by its usefulness to the lowest caste. Doing so using Ahimsa as a social measure, the framework reinvents the communal gathering as an interfaith experiment (Gianolla, 2020), in which the festival turns out to be an experimental way of testing abstract ideals of national unity in the face of the actualities of inter-dining and mutual assistance and common toil. This paradigm, therefore, provides an analytical perspective on festivals as schools of democracy, in which, micro-practices of harmony, which are exercised during celebrations, would nurture the macro-virtues that make the nation-state a non-violent state.

### **Hermeneutics of Harmony: Syncretic Traditions and the Gandhian Interfaith Praxis**

The Gandhian re-constitution of the festival is not just the milieu of simple toleration, but an enhanced hermeneutics of harmony. Gandhi believed that interfaith understanding cannot merely mean passive coexistence but it needed active intercultural democratic discourse (Gianolla, 2020). Under this system, festivals no longer have the effect of being solely denominational or being an experiment amongst the religions; the abstract principle of Sarva Dharma Samabhav (equability of all religions) is put to the test in the open arena.

The most important part of this praxis is the conversion of religious ritual into civic responsibility by Gandhi. His prayer sessions (Prarthana Sabha) every day that incorporated Gita, Quran and Bible texts were a "meta-festival" - pattern of the public gathering where scriptures of various kinds were not just read but rather re-read by the prism of Satya (Jordens, 1998). Promoting Hindus to join the charitable act of Eid and Muslims to honour the cow protectionism spirit of fellow citizens (without imposing this act into law), Gandhi tried to substitute the communal bastion type of celebration with the syncretic bridge one. By doing so, he said that a person could not worship their own religion devotionally without having a reverent study of the religious views of others (Gandhi, 1958).

Nevertheless, this form of syncretism is not an innocent one. In the absence of the moral restraint of Ahimsa, they can even cause the opposite effect, which is competitive religiosity driven by the purportedly benevolent intent of sharing festivals, instead of communion where people congregate in urban areas, Sen (2023) notes. The

danger is in the in appropriation as opposed to appreciation. The Gandhian alternative to this is positive work-communal work (cleaning the streets, spinning or community work at a festival) and here instead of emphasizing on the difference in doctrine, the emphasis will be on common labour (Bilgrami, 2002). The festival, therefore, is effective as a legit social institution when it is an effective programme of communal integration, but not as a staged reaction of sectarian domination.

### **The Critique of Festive Violence: Ritual, Exclusion, and the Gandhian Corrective**

The fundamental assumption of Gandhi was critical engagement with Indian religion and was based on merciless persecution of empty ritualism that separated practice and ethical content. He contended that, religious observance of any kind, both festival and fast, was not valid without developing Satyagraha (truth-force) or benefiting the suffering. Jordens (1998) explains this by mentioning that religion was not a categorical label to Gandhi but a moral search (Sadhana). Therefore, structural violence employed by festivals to achieve ritual purity as a social exclusion device was criticized by Gandhi, who chose the untouchables (Harijans) as his major target. He said notoriously that, it is a sin to make temple to a small number of people and to deny others (Gandhi, 1972), that mean that the exclusivity of the festival spaces was a kind of spiritual violence that would ruin the purpose of the festival itself.

This criticism goes as far as the symbolic violence of performative excess. This kind of waste on processions and noise was not only cultural zeal as seen by Gandhi but was morally wrong since he believed in Aparigraha (non-possession) in a society where resources were scarce. He claimed that the still small voice of reason was usually muffled by the loudness of the cacophony of modern festivals by comparing it to noise (Kaur, 2020). Analytical interpretation indicates that Gandhi interpreted such extravagance as a side-show to the Constructive Programme the actual nation-building.

Moreover, Gandhi opposed animal sacrifice in such festivals as Dussehra or Kali Puja not only in terms of biological non-violence but also in terms of destroying the theological foundation of violence per se. He had claimed that offering bloodshed as a propitiatory to deities was a fetish that strengthened the culture of domination. When this Gandhian criticism is put into action within the framework of this study, one will discover that most of the modern festival practices which are characterized by the use of exclusionary boundaries, competitive showmanship, and ecological unconsciousness are a step backwards in the concept of ethical celebration and results in the sabotage of the social harmony that these festivals are supposed to be praising.

### **The Political Economy of Festivity: Swadeshi, Trusteeship, and the Critique of Consumerism**

The Indian contemporary festival has grown increasingly to a scene of consumption with the sacred itself in many cases taking second fiddle to the spectacular. One of the forms in which a Gandhian criticism of this "political economy of celebration" starts is with the concept of Swadeshi defined by Gandhi not as an economic boycott, but rather as a spiritual need to give service to a neighbour who is nearest (Jordens, 1998). Swadeshi, in the case of festivals, is a kind of moral compass opposing the onslaught of imported, mass-produced paraphernalia of the festivals. The replacement of locally produced earthen lamps (diyas) with electrical lamps means not just a change of aesthetic values but also the decline of the local economy and the forceful cutting of the connection between the consumer and the craftsman.

The infringement of Trusteeship adds to this economic alienation. Gandhi believed that excess wealth should be the community property, and it should be utilized to benefit the society. Festive Redistribution as an alternative concept is an effective corrective to apply to festivals. In lieu of conspicuous waste on fireworks and feasts, which tend to widen the disparity between the classes, Gandhi enforced a Poor Man Diwali, where the light of the festival is determined by how many disadvantaged members of the population will benefit (Antyodaya). This is in line with the analysis of appeared in Pathak (2019) of ecological trusteeship, implying that a real Gandhian festival is the one which does not leave a significant carbon footprint, and environmental degradation is described as a kind of violence against nature (Himsa).

Nonetheless, ethical consumption in festivals is a complicated eventuality. According to Sen (2023), the process of commercialization of piety is now firmly rooted in the social logic of festivals, the status of which is indicated

by the cost. A Gandhian intervention in this case needs to be careful, it does not call the halt of the celebration but rather re-oriented. Festivals will regain their functions as generators of sustainable social harmony, not of ecological and economic inequality, by substituting the rituals of the market with the rituals of labour (Yajna).

### **Applying the Gandhian Framework: Festival Case Lenses**

#### **Case Lens I: Deepavali as Economic Satyagraha and Ecological Responsibility**

Deepavali, which is also known as the festival of lights is a tradition that is used to represent the victory of light over darkness and knowledge over ignorance. But in modern practice, the symbolism tends to be dwarfed by the conspicuous consumption and the destruction of the environment. Research records that the combustion of the firecrackers at Diwali results in over 550  $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$  (more than 5 times higher than usual) PM10 and PM2.5 emissions, which cause severe respiratory distress in urban residents (Saxena et al., 2022). This is a twofold sin, ecological violence (Himsa) to nature and social violence to the poor who suffer the greatest health penalty due to air pollution.

A strategy of re-orientation is the concept of the Poor Man's Diwali by Gandhi. He encouraged the real Diwali light to shine in the houses of the Daridranarayan (God in the form of poor) by distributing the economic among the poor instead of the pyrotechnics (Gandhi, 2005). This goes in line with the analysis of Kapoor (2025) of ritual revision towards sustainability where festivals are reinvented as a Swadeshi consumption experience in terms of buying earthen lamp and khadi products made in villages to boost the economy of the village. Gandhian model therefore turns Deepavali into a place of competitive luminosity into a venue of economic Satyagraha where every consumer decision will turn into an ethical opposition to market capitalism.

#### **Case Lens II: Eid-ul-Fitr and the Constructive Programme for Interfaith Unity**

The end of fasting during Ramadan is the Eid-ul-Fitr, which is inherently associated with Zakat (charitable giving) and the feast with others. Gandhi did not see Eid as a Muslim festival but rather a national festival which provided Hindus with a chance to observe the Sarva Dharma Samabhav by simply taking part in it (Jordens, 1998). When encouraging Hindu involvement in the Eid charity, he did not practice cultural appropriation but a calculated entry to the Constructive Programme which was the creation of Hindu-Muslim unity by serving together instead of coercion by law.

Nevertheless, the modern danger is the politicization of such festivals. According to Sen (2023), small-town India festivals have become spaces of spatial domination as loudspeakers and processions assert their territorial rights. Here, the example of Gandhi such as the voluntary accommodation, in which Muslims do not slaughter cows near Hindu communities due to their sympathy, and Hindu people attend Eid feasts can be seen as an alternative to forced secularism. The Gandhian re-orientation stresses on interfaith service (Seva) as the value of a successful Eid, not the splendour of the feast, but the degree of Bhaichara (brotherhood) it enhances.

#### **Case Lens III: Raksha Bandhan as a Civic Covenant of Non-Violence**

Raksha Bandhan, the birth day of sisters, is a day of tying protective threads (Rakhi) on the wrists of the brothers, and is a symbol of promise of protection. Although it has always been a family ceremony, the festival gained political importance during the anti-partition movement of 1905 when Rabindranath Tagore tied Hindus and Muslims with Rakhi. Gandhi went even further and re-imagined the Rakhi as a civic covenant of Ahimsa or the vow of non-violence to every member of society who needed protection (Gianolla, 2020).

The modern problem lies in the possible strengthening of patriarchal relations provided by the festival, according to which the concept of protection means female passivity. Gandhian feminist re-orientation will turn Raksha Bandhan into a promise to protect the dignity of each other, with both sexes pledging their commitment to protecting one another. This turns the festival into a public assertion of constitutional brotherhood, which is in keeping with the Gandhian conception of festivals as schools of democracy in which micro-practices of care generate the macro-ethic of Sarvodaya.



## DISCUSSION

### Festivals as Laboratories of Civic and Ethical Learning

The analysis indicates that, in the context of Indian festivals, civic virtues, religious pluralism and institutional ethics are rehearsed and challenged during the same time. Gandhian perspective on civic education in such places emphasizes less on formal education, and more on conditioning citizens to self-limitation, reciprocity and responsibility in common places. By making festival committees focus on sourcing of Swadeshi, making their budgets transparent, and involving the marginalized groups, they are also educating that streets, soundscapes, and the public funds are a shared trust and not partisan spectacle. On the other hand, when celebrations are being dominated by competitive display, noise and patronage politics, then they normalize a vision of citizenship that is concerned with entitlement and domination instead of stewardship.

Interreligious discourse in the realm of festival also takes a rather functional form. Religious groups can also practice a Gandhian concept of Sarva Dharma Samabhav as a common service, not just a rhetorical tolerance, through joint cleanliness drives, joint charity, joint security or logistics. These are the practices which contribute to re-writing the religious other as partner in the defence of the vulnerable and the environment. However, they are still vulnerable in terms of being taken by local structures; without the focus on power and representation, the interfaith coordination is likely to turn into tokenism or mobilization that may be used to cover up the structural exclusions that have existed.

The key that bridges these micro-practices towards the wider area of public ethics is local governance. Gandhian precepts can be transformed into institutional standards that would be predictable, through municipal laws of processional paths, sounds, environmental protection and enforcement that is publicly fair across neighbourhoods. In this regard, festivals would be repeated examinations of whether the public authorities would use the calendar of festivals as a chance to exemplify fairness, responsibility, and care to the most vulnerable, namely, the poor, non-human life, and future generations.

There are obvious limitations to this discussion. Theoretically, it operates with a perfect-typical Gandhi and a generalized idea of what Indian festivals are, unable to indicate the entire regional, sectarian, and caste-specific variety of practice. It is based methodologically on normative, textual argument, not ethnographic or quantitative arguments so its assertions about the actual learning, negotiating, and resisting by citizens in festive situations are hypothetical and need to be empirically tested in specific local situations.

## CONCLUSION

### Towards a Festive Sarvodaya and the Institutionalization of Social Harmony

This paper has shown that Indian festivals when re-expressed in terms of Gandhian ethical categories have a latent potential to serve as tools of social cohesion and not as platforms of competitive religiosity or exclusionary politics. The analysis shows that festivals can be schools of democracy, in which abstract ideals of pluralism, non-violence, and economic justice are put to practical use through the principles of Swadeshi, Trusteeship, and Sarvodaya by making Satya and Ahimsa the ontological measures of festal validity and by redefining festivals, in other words, as schools of democracy.

The Deepavali, Eid-ul-Fitr and Raksha Bandhan case lenses demonstrate that Gandhian re-orientation does not mean giving up tradition but it is the ethical re-enlivening of the tradition. Redistributing the economy, serving across religions and covenants to the civic become viable solutions to changing festivals as a consumption event into a site of positive activity. The Festive Sarvodaya model is therefore the view that social harmony is an act and not a passive thing and that social harmony is maintained through disciplined collective effort.

The implicit implication of this is that future studies need to conduct ethnographic research on those communities that have tried such Gandhian festival reforms, the impact of local governance in entrenching such norms, and how digital platforms could facilitate or disrupt solidarity in festivals. Also, it could be useful to compare it with

other postcolonial democracies to determine whether the Gandhian framework has the portable value to address the tension between the celebration of culture and civic virtues in the pluralists societies.

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