

# **Cultures of Peace in India: Local visions, global values and possibilities for social change**

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## **Introduction**

*Peace cultures thrive on and are nourished by visions of how things might be, in a world where sharing and caring are part of the accepted lifeways for everyone. The very ability to imagine something different and better than what currently exists is critical for the possibility of social change. (Elise Boulding, 2000:29)*

In contemporary society, the world is presented and mediated to us in myriads of ways, through news, social media, written words and innumerable visualities, in digital and analogue forms. These representations of society show different visions of the reality around us, the status quo of societal relations, and the directions to which our society is heading. Some years back, peace scholar Elise Boulding wrote about the importance of vision to sustaining and thriving peace cultures. Do we envision a peaceful future, or one of war and terror? Fostering peace and peace cultures, in her understanding, was dependent on visionaries that could imagine peaceful futures, no matter the present state of affairs. Rather than seeing utopia in its common negative connotation, she argued for the importance of alternative visions as profound “critiques of the present” (Boulding 2000:29) and as drivers for social change.

In this article, we draw on this understanding to investigate sources of peace cultures in India through the lives and philosophies of those that carry such alternative visions and have made them relevant for social and political transformation. India is probably the most culturally, ethnically and religiously diverse country in the world. If one examines different cultures in the country, one finds that religious and spiritual values comprise an important part of traditional and emerging notions of peace (Kumar 2010; Upadhyaya 2010; Kumar and Jacobsen 2014). There is no doubt that peace is part of the local cultural practices and traditions of societal living; socio-religious traditions in India are widely acknowledged as resources of values of peace, love, compassion, non-violence and tolerance (Upadhyaya 2010, Kumar 2010; 2011).

The sub-continent is the birthplace of some of the major religious traditions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, and Jainism.

India has also been home to various socio-religious figures and movements that have carried forward values of peace and social harmony based on societal ethics, ancient scriptures and lived traditions on the sub-continent (Upadhyaya 2010, Kumar 2010). This article explores four Indian figures and their peace work against the background of the UN decades for a culture of peace and non-violence and rapprochement for cultures, *Mohandas K. Gandhi, Aurobindo Ghose, Jiddu Krishnamurti and Mata Amritanandamayi (Amma)*. It recognizes their lives as a contribution to the peace cultures, based on their philosophical and practical approach to issues such as conflict, social reform, humanitarian relief and other societal issues.

### **Peace culture and the social vision**

The understanding of peace as rooted in religious and spiritual traditions and practices is found in avenues of Peace Studies that emphasize on the importance of cultural understandings of peace, its historical, social and etymological meanings in different parts of the world, as well as local understandings of conflict resolution and peace works (Lederach 1995, 2005, Boulding 1978, 1985, Richmond 2007, Mac Ginty 2006, Upadhaya 2010, Kumar and Jacobsen 2014, Dietrich et al. 2011). Indian culture holds a rich promise to explore religion and spirituality as potent sites for peace building and conflict transformation, an insight that has been appreciated by both early as well contemporary scholars of Peace Studies (Galtung 1969, Lederach 1995, Upadhaya 2010, Upadhaya and Kumar 2014, etc.).

In the last decade we have seen a proliferation of work towards cultures of peace worldwide - not only within the field of Peace and Conflict Studies but also on a broader communal, societal and international level - spurred by the United Nations declaration for a year and a decade dedicated to education for a culture of peace and non-violence. The purpose of the Decade for Peace and Nonviolence has been to promote a culture of peace in all arenas of the global society - the family; the neighborhood communities where people live, work, play, study, serve, and worship; and between and among people in states and nations in the larger global society through peace education. The decade is followed by the current International Decade for the Rapprochement of Cultures (2013-2022) which emphasizes on the importance of interreligious and intercultural dialogue, cultural diversity and understanding and cooperation for peace.

Even long before the UN and UNESCO identified cultures of peace, non violence and cultural diversity as important goals that needed to be globally achieved in the

21<sup>st</sup> century, Indian society at large had already been involved in a national movement – the independence movement against British colonial rule- that embraced a culture of peace and non-violence as its core values. The Indian people's non-violent struggle against colonialism became an inspiration for many other social and political movements around the world in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, e.g. Civil rights movement in the US, Anti-Apartheid movement in South Africa.

In post-independent India, several social movements and peace workers have adopted principles of non-violence and 'peace by peaceful means' in order to achieve their goals (Ramachandra 2006, Kumar and Jacobsen 2014). However, the various cultures of peace work that are taking place in India do not only belong to the modern conditions of the colonial and post-colonial period, but also are based in the cultural traditions and the various religions and philosophical customs of the country that date back to pre-colonial times. Throughout history, various prominent figures and movements have used the support of socio-religious tradition as transformative tools in order to carry out various social reforms (Upadhyaya 2010, Kumar and Jacobsen 2014). The bhakti traditions from South and North India in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century, for example, stressed for an egalitarian and peaceful society (Gandhi 2004: 63). The bhaktisaints from that period like Guru Nanak (1469-1539)

- the founder of Sikhism - largely rejected the hereditary of Brahminical rule and caste system and its focus on prescribed ritual and morals, emphasising instead the need for purity of heart and an attitude of selfless love (Gandhi 2004; Kumar 2010). Sikhism thus became a movement of social and religious reform.

The cultural history of India is a filled with countless stories of sages, saints and ordinary people who have dedicated their lives to self-knowledge and personal and societal transformation. Some of those figures have impacted their followers and societies with values such as selfless-love, peace and compassion. In the nineteenth century, for example, several individuals such as Rammohan Roy (1774–1833), Swami Dayanand Saraswati (1824–1883) used indigenous Hindi discourses to oppose oppressive cultural practices as untouchability and prohibition of widow marriage (Upadhyaya 2010). Saraswati established the Arya Samaj to spread values of social equality and development in the Hindu community. Another outstanding reformer of that era was Swami Vivekanand (1863–1902) who introduced the teachings of the Vedanta and yoga to the West and accorded Hinduism a status of as a world religion. He opposed caste discrimination and emphasized the task of ending poverty and illiteracy as critical religious work. Vivekananda founded the Ramakrishna Mission, which continues to remain an active site of peace education and spiritual learning in India and around the world today. There are several hundred educational institutions and hospitals inspired and supported by the Mission.

In the following sections of this article, we look into the visions of four individuals who have fostered social change and contributed to cultures of peace through their visions of society and human relationships, and “how things might be” (Boulding 2000:29).

### **Gandhi’s visions of non-violence and self-rule**

Amongst those people who appropriated the value of Indian religious traditions as a resource for societal peace and for achieving socio-political reforms, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869–1948) has been an outstanding figure. Gandhi built his philosophy on the teachings of Indian traditions such as Hinduism and Jainism (Gandhi 2006). Gandhi’s principles and ethics such as ahimsa – non-violence- and satyagraha – holding to the truth - as well as his struggle for swaraj -self-rule - against the British Empire were firmly rooted in these traditions of India (Kumar and Jacobsen 2014).

Gandhi’s principles and ethics of love and non-violence have been influential in the activities of many modern environmental, social, human rights and peace movements in the world. His philosophy and activism have been important resource for peace workers as well as significant in the conceptualization of important theories within the field of contemporary Peace and Conflict Studies (Kumar 2010; Upadhaya and Kumar 2014). Early modern peace researchers and scholars such as Johan Galtung, Gene Sharp or Kenneth Boulding, for example, have drawn essential insights from Gandhi’s philosophy on peace, violence and conflict, and developed them to systemic theories and promoted Gandhi’s ideal of non-violence and ‘peace by peaceful means’ (Weber 1999; 2004). These peace scholars were especially influenced by Hindu and Buddhist philosophy and ethics (Weber 1999).

In theories of Peace Studies the focus is oftentimes on how to transform violent conflicts among adversaries, or prevent such conflicts from occurring. Gandhi’s philosophy and actions, rooted in Indian cultural and religious traditions, were firmly situated in the belief that one could fight an opponent without resorting to violence. Gandhi’s (peace) philosophy, in particular, emerged from *satyagraha*, which he saw as the most noble, perpetual, a high and thoughtful value. Indeed, Gandhi referred to his teaching as ‘holding to truth’ (Bondurant 1988) in his autobiography ‘My Experiments with Truth’ (2006). The teachings and practices of *satyagraha* and *ahimsa* developed by Gandhi rapidly became a central feature of the struggle of the Indian people, providing a strong counter to the power and dominance of the colonial state. Gandhi rejected intolerant and hate-filled opposition to any adversary. His position was that contradictions were best resolved through a compassionate process of dialogue, but failing that, a non-violent dispute was the only truthful strategy (Hardiman 2003).

Gandhi thus founded the struggle for India's freedom in visions that would normally seem 'utopian' to the common man. The notion of *satyagraha*, for example, was a forceful combination of reason, ethics, spirituality and politics. It appealed to the opponent's head, heart and interests (Parekh 1995). *Satyagraha* incorporated such positive traits as courage, directness, civility, absolute honesty, respect for other living creatures, and willingness to suffer in pursuit of deeply felt goals (Barash 2000). Gandhi always stressed that the decision to embark on *Satyagraha* was a choice to be made consciously by each individual. To him, it was wrong, in principle, to force people against their will for the purpose of protest. Gandhi, however, taught people that however humble and powerless they may appear to be, they had the power in themselves to resist, and that this resistance was entirely legitimate (Hardiman 2003).

Gandhi's Truth was intimately connected to his concept of *ahimsa*, often conflated with and interpreted as non-violence. *Ahimsa*, as a means, does not only imply non-violence, but also non-violent love (Uyangoda 2005). For Gandhi *ahimsa* was rooted in love, altruism and compassion towards fellow humans and all beings. He believed that without *ahimsa* it wasn't possible to seek and find Truth, as *ahimsa* is a constituent of *satya*/truth:

*Ahimsa* and Truth are so intertwined that it is practically impossible to disentangle and separate them. They are like the two sides of a coin, or rather of a smooth unstamped metallic disc. Who can say which is the obverse and which the reverse? Nevertheless, *ahimsa* is the means and Truth is the end. (Gandhi qtd. in Kibriya 1999:17).

*Ahimsa*, for Gandhi, involved qualities of respect and sympathy for the opponent, freedom from anger, and a desire for peace (Hardiman 2003). Rather than a passive state of resistance and restraint from participation in violent acts, *ahimsa* is quite a dynamic element in Gandhi's thinking, 'one that calls on all self-aware sentient beings to actively transform the conditions that make violence likely or possible' (Oberprantacher 2009). Gandhi expressed not only an attitude of non-injury, non-killing and non-harming, but he uncovered love and compassion as active forces that could potentially transform all forms of violence.

Gandhi's political and social struggle and teachings have played an important role in shaping contemporary Indian peace and social movements. There are leaders who are guided by his philosophy both in the political and in the social realm (Kumar and Jacobsen 2014). In more recent times, some socio-spiritual leaders have evoked

the Gandhian ethos, distinguished themselves as advocates of peace and societal harmony. Sri Sathya Sai Baba (1926-2011), Sri Sri Ravi Shankar (1956-), Baba Ramdev (1965-) have devoted their lives and teachings to disseminate the understanding and practices of inner and societal peace. They have promoted the message of peace across communities through establishing numerous spiritual education and humanitarian centres (Upadhyaya 2010).

### **Aurobindo Ghose: social and human evolution**

Another Indian thinker that has influenced social transformation is Aurobindo Ghose(1872-1950). He is today best known as a spiritual philosopher and yogi, the author of numerous and voluminous works such as *Savitri* (1950), *The Synthesis of Yoga* (1932) or *The Life Divine* (1949), and the founder of an ashram in Pondicherry, South India, that bears his name. In 1950 he was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize.

Before Aurobindo 'retired' from political activism and settled in Pondicherry to engage himself in practices of yoga and the spiritual elevation of humanity he was famous throughout India as a political writer and activist. The editorials he published in the newspapers *Bande Matram* (1906-08) and *Karmayogin* (1909-10), and the speeches he delivered during the same period, were among the most remarkable expressions of anti-colonial nationalism to come out of the Indian freedom struggle. Many of these pieces dealt not only with transient political issues but also with some of the perennial problems of human society (Heehs 2005).

In a series of works written between 1915 and 1920, Aurobindo Ghose presented a theory of social and human evolution that was of a piece with his spiritual philosophy, personal experiences and empirical observation. These later works, together with some of the earlier pieces, constituted a significant contribution to political, social and cultural theory (Kumar 2011). In brief, Aurobindo's philosophical discourses aimed towards a transgression of the human mind and a spiritual evolution of humanity. His teachings were the result of his meditative practices and 'supramental' inner visions and accordingly cannot be measured solely on rational and/or empirical grounds. His comprehensive and integrative system of yoga was primarily concerned with the spiritualization of society (Kumar 2011).

Aurobindo's life exemplified vividly the blending of socio-political activism and spiritual insight. In his writings on philosophy and yoga, Aurobindo emphasised that the right way for society to move towards a harmonious and peaceful state was for each individual in it to achieve the greatest possible self-realization and self-expression (Heehs 2005: 261). According to him, social harmony could only be reached when

the inner self of man is awakened, free and generous, not enslaved to selfish thoughts and aims. Social harmony is not a result of social machinery but the freedom of the human intellect and the nobility of the human soul (Heehs 2005:145). Aurobindo thus embraced a wide range of achievements and developments that led to fostering cultural values towards peace cultures based in visions of an alternative society. In addition to his political activities and political thoughts, his inheritance comprises a systematic philosophy, literary works, yoga system and the spiritual force attributed to him by his followers and contemporary companions.

Visionaries of potentialities of future peace are ultimately also critics of the present (Boulding 2000). Similarly, in his political and social writings Aurobindo cautioned that it would be vain to imagine that a solution to the pressing problems of the world could come from arrangements that were what he called solely 'mechanical' (Aurobindo 1997). As a believer in a reality that would arrive through the means of spiritual revolution, he affirmed that:

“[...] a deeper, wider, greater, more spiritualised subjective understanding of the individual and communal self and its life and a growing reliance on the spiritual light and the spiritual means for the final solution of its problems are the only way to a true social perfection” (Aurobindo 1997:183).

This would come by a deeper understanding of the spiritual truth of existence, supported by a persistent effort after knowledge and harmony in all domains of human activity. Aurobindo thus was not primarily a social thinker, but also a mystic and philosopher who was interested not only in spiritual matters but also in secular problems. He certainly believed that a general change of consciousness had to precede the final solution of such problems, but he did not believe that the striving for harmony and peace had to be pursued on the spiritual plane alone.

Like other famous Indian figures, such as the noble laureate Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), former Indian President Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1888-1975) and Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948), Sri Aurobindo combined impressively traditions of India and the West, and envisioned a subtle integration of Indian and Western cultures. Sri Aurobindo firmly believed that the two great components of the future evolution of man were Indian spirituality and Western intellectuality. Thus Aurobindo did not view and categorise the world in terms of fixed dichotomies: East and West, spiritual and material, conservation and progress. When two cultural systems came into conflict, he would see it as an occasion for them to move towards a synthesis in which both would be harmonised and exceeded (Heehs 2005:237). For Aurobindo

East and West have the same human nature, a common human destiny, the same aspiration after greater perfection, the same seeking after something higher than itself. East and West have always met and mixed more or less closely, they have powerfully influenced each other (Heehs 2005: 287).

There is a common hope, a common destiny, both spiritual and material, for which both are needed as co-workers. It is no longer towards division and difference that we should turn our minds, but on unity, union, even oneness (Aurobindo qtd. in Heehs 2005:287).

Aurobindo's life and thought creatively related the spiritual East with the intellectual and historical West, thus allowing them to jointly serve as a model for a societal peace culture.

**Krishnamurti: 'we are the society'**

Similar to Aurobindo, Jiddu Krishnamurti's (1895-1986) life and teaching combine in an unparalleled manner thoughts of India and the West. Krishnamurti teachings were concerned with our day-to-day struggles and with some of human's fundamental question on existence and peace. In his writings and discussions, the reader found a contemporary relevance for fundamental human problems, together with an invitation to solve it for and by oneself (Kumar 2011). What is interesting about Krishnamurti's approach is that while addressing social, political and economic issues of the period, his answers are rooted in a timeless and universal vision of life and universal values.

Born in South India and educated in Europe, Krishnamurti spoke a language that could be understood by people from diverse backgrounds. He explained with great precision the subtle workings of the human mind. His vision of peace was, similar to Aurobindo, founded in a philosophy of self-realization. At age 90 Krishnamurti addressed the United Nations on the subject of peace and awareness, as he was awarded the 1984 UN Peace Medal. In his speech to the UN in New York Krishnamurti said, "[...] there can only be peace when mankind, when you and I, have no conflict in ourselves" (Krishnamurti 1985). He continued that,

The present is not only the past, but also contains the future; the past modifying itself constantly through the present and projecting the future. If we don't stop quarrels, struggles, antagonism, hate, now it will be like that tomorrow. And you can stretch out that tomorrow

for a thousand years, it will be still tomorrow. So it behoves us to ask ourselves whether we, as human beings, single or a community, or in a family, whether we can live peacefully with each other? (Krishnamurti 1985).

Krishnamurti stressed that a radical individual human transformation was essential as a prerequisite for any approach to peace, love and compassion. He considered that humanity would be set free from conflict through discovering love in the core of the self. He maintained that the individual is freed by becoming aware of their own psychological conditioning, and that this awakening would enable them to care to another. In his eyes, love alone can transform the present madness and insanity in the world, not systems, not theories: "It is only when there is love that all our problems can be solved and then we shall know its bliss and its happiness" (Krishnamurti 2013:262).

Krishnamurti's practical and profound teaching marks an important contribution to modern social thinking as well as to a culture of peace. At the core of his teaching is the realization that fundamental changes in society can be brought about only by transformation of individual consciousness. Krishnamurti's teaching stresses that a radical individual human transformation is essential as a prerequisite for any approach to peace, harmony and compassion. In order to transform the conflicts and wars in our world there must be first and foremost a transformation in ourselves, which will lead to a change in society. His teachings are thus valuable for the idea of multiple cultures of peace that are based in universal values found locally in different cultures (c.f. UNESCO 2016).

### **Amma's universal peace message**

Mata Amritanandamayi, more popularly known as Sri Amma (Mother), is a contemporary example of an Indian figure that has rooted her spiritual and humanitarian work in the values of Indian religious traditions. Revered as a saint, she is certainly one of the most widely respected and appreciated Indian women of our time and is an inspiration for peace workers, educationalists, spiritual leaders and environmentalists (Kumar and Jacobsen 2014). Her practices are based on the devotional tradition of Hindu faith – *bhakti* – within which values such as selfless service and love are central (Warrier 2003).

Mata Amritanandamayi's teachings contain a universal message that peace is unconditioned love and compassion for others (Amritanandamayi 2004). The absence of love leads to human suffering, and obsession with the self (ego) and preoccupation

with consumerism and material goods also creates deficit for love (Warrier 2003). In her speech at the UN Millennium World Peace Summit in New York in the year 2000, she emphasized on humanity's need to seek peace from within: 'The real change must happen within us. For only when conflict and negativity are removed from within can we play a truly constructive role in establishing peace.' The last three decades, Amritanandamayi has also been teaching spiritual aspirants all over the world. She is the leader and founder of Mata Amritanandamayi Math (MAM), one of the largest humanitarian organizations in India, providing education, medical care, disaster relief, community development and environmental protection with a particular concern for the very poor.

In 2005, the United Nations conferred 'Special Consultative Status' to Mata Amritanandamayi Math, thus enabling collaboration with U.N. agencies in the future. This status was given in recognition of MAM's outstanding disaster relief work and other humanitarian activities.

### **Conclusion: cultures of peace and their visionaries**

We began this article with the understanding that peace cultures are rooted in the possibilities to envision alternative futures. Boulding later in her work also problematized the importance of 'utopia' as a driving force for social change, and drew example from national failed utopian experiments. In this article, we have investigated four past and contemporary thinkers and revolutionary leaders who have utilized visions for a better society in order to drive social change and transformation. The thinkers discussed in this article have also had tremendous impact on Western thought, and contributed to the development of peace studies as a discipline.

The lives and teachings of socio-religious figures such as Gandhi, Amritanandamayi, Aurobindo and Krishnamurti emphasize the relevance for transformation in human consciousness for the achievement of individual and societal peace. Amritanandamayi's understanding of peace and peace work reflects Indian culture's integrative approach in addressing human problems. In a similar manner the lives and teachings of two Indian thinkers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Aurobindo Ghose and Jiddu Krishnamurti, offer prominent insights to understand the socio-religious culture of peace in India, as they give both value to direct spiritual experience and intellectual understanding. In their teachings Aurobindo and Krishnamurti ask for a transformation of society through invoking human's spiritual consciousness. Though Aurobindo's and Krishnamurti's philosophies and approaches deviate from each other due to their personal experiences and practices, their teachings share a distinctive commonality (Kumar 2011). Society is made up of people, in the words of

Krishnamurti “we are society”, and these thinkers hold on to the relevance and need for individual insight and values such as compassion.

According to their philosophical thought, social harmony and a culture of peace grow by removing the motives for engaging in activities that bring about a conflict between man and man. The thinkers mentioned in this chapter show that cultures of peace in India bear values such as compassion, non-violence and selfless love. Those cultures of peace also emphasise the integration of spirituality into a more complete vision of humanity. The lives and teachings of figures like Gandhi and Aurobindo appeal to a culture of peace that recognizes the spiritual dimension of life. Gandhi’s life and teachings can be seen as best example of that integrative approach. Gandhi advocated a culture of peace where selfless love and non-violence were to be the fundamental point in attaining individual and collective peace. In modern times Amritanandamayi has carried forward Gandhi’s principles. She is advocating a culture of peace through combining unconditional love and compassion with an honest engagement of humanitarian relief work. Their teachings contain a unique and timeless perception of humanity’s transformation and a culture of peace, bearing brilliant testimony of the vibrant and dynamic spiritual realism that is native to Indian life.

These thinkers are still relevant to discussions today about the world-wide fostering of peace cultures. As UNESCO has proclaimed the current decade of ‘rapprochement of cultures’, as a means to ‘take into account and clearly demonstrate new articulations between cultural diversity and universal values’ (UNESCO 2016), it becomes all the more important to appreciate Indian past and present contributions to universal values such as non-violence, love and compassion, and the effects these have had on fostering peace cultures in the subcontinent.

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