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SARVODAYA: GANDHI'S RENDITION OF 'VASUDHAIVA KUTUMBAKAM'

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Introduction

The concept of *Sarvodaya* constitutes a foundational element within Mahatma Gandhi's moral, socio-political, and philosophical framework. More than just a prescriptive agenda for societal restructuring, *Sarvodaya* encapsulates an extensive vision for collective human existence, fundamentally grounded in ethical conduct, reciprocal accountability, and spiritual coherence. Gandhi's exposition of *Sarvodaya* notably constitutes a unique practical recontextualization of the ancient Indian tenet, '*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*' ('the world is one family'). Although the classical interpretation primarily underscores the inherent, ontological unity of all humanity, Gandhi transformed this abstract, metaphysical principle into a tangible, action-oriented structure. This framework was specifically designed to effectively mitigate the systemic disparities and inequities prevalent in contemporary societal paradigms.

Originating in ancient Sanskrit scriptures, the maxim '*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*' articulates an expansive philosophical stance, conceptualizing all sentient entities as inextricably linked within a singular, comprehensive moral universe. Nevertheless, Mahatma Gandhi recognized that such a universalist principle was prone to remaining purely theoretical unless it was firmly operationalized through daily behavioral standards and concrete institutional frameworks.

Consequently, *Sarvodaya* serves as Mahatma Gandhi's operative ethical apparatus, designed to link enduring spiritual principles with the concrete and immediate demands of socio-political life. This philosophy asserts that the prosperity of any singular person is fundamentally and inextricably linked to the betterment of society's most marginalized segment. In this regard, *Sarvodaya* comprehensively reconfigures the criteria for measuring societal advancement, intentionally redirecting the focus from the pursuit of material wealth accumulation or the exertion of national geopolitical power toward the realization of holistic collective moral and civic upliftment.

This article seeks to examine *Sarvodaya* as Gandhi's lived and practiced rendition of '*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*.' Specifically, it will investigate the methodologies by which Gandhi effectively recontextualized an ancient civilizational ideal to directly address the systemic challenges of colonialism, entrenched social stratification, and acute economic inequity, all while successfully preserving its inherent universal humanistic resonance.

'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam'

The concept of '*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*' is a notable védāntic dictum, or authoritative pronouncement, that is specifically documented within the ancient text of the *Maha Upaniṣad*, a minor *Upaniṣad* belonging to the group of *Viṣṇu Upaniṣads*. We read thus:

ayaṁ bandhurayaṁ neti gaṇanā laghucetasām
udāracaritānāṁ tu vasudhaiva kuṭumbakam.¹

"To one person this is a relative, to another they are a stranger; such are the thoughts of the narrow-minded. To the magnanimous, however, the whole world is a family."²

The precise authorship and date of composition for the *Maha Upaniṣad* remain undetermined, yet academic consensus holds it to be the most ancient among the *Vaiṣṇava Upaniṣads*, traditionally categorized as an auxiliary text of the *Atharva Veda*. This text is also encountered in various manuscript traditions under the title *Mahopaniṣad*. The verses of this *Upaniṣad* notably articulate a distinction in perspective: they declare that a discriminatory approach, differentiating between 'kin' and 'stranger,' is characteristic solely of the narrow-minded, whereas the magnanimous or enlightened

¹ *Maha Upaniṣad* 6: 71.

² *Maha Upaniṣad* 6: 71, Translated by Sunder Hattangadi, 2000.



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perceive the entirety of the world as a singular family. Linguistically, the expression '*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*' is a compound phrase derived from three distinct Sanskrit terms: '*Vasudhā*' (signifying 'earth' or 'world'), '*iva*' (meaning 'like' or 'as'), and '*Kutumbakam*' (denoting a 'large' or 'extended family').³ A similar verse is found in *Hitopadéśa*:

Ayam nija paro veti gananaa laghuchetasam

Udaar charitaanaam to vasudhaiva kutumbakam (Hitopadéśa 1: 71)

"Only people with a narrow outlook differentiate, saying, this is mine, and this is others, But for those with a liberal and magnanimous mind, the entire world is one family."

The demonstrable antiquity of both referenced sources unequivocally establishes '*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*' as a perennial and foundational tenet of Indian cultural philosophy. This maxim articulates a core philosophy of holistic unity (oneness) and holds profound import for both spiritual and ethical dimensions of human existence. Within the Vedic tradition, '*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*' is explicitly defined as the principle that all sentient beings inhabiting the terrestrial sphere constitute a single, interconnected family. This deep-seated Indian conceptualization underscores the imperative of universal fraternity, emphasizing the inherent interconnectedness of existence and advocating for the empathetic treatment of all organisms as kin. Consequently, it serves to propagate cohesion, mutual understanding, and global equilibrium. Its integral relationship with India's cultural framework is further evidenced by the ceremonial inscription of this specific verse from the *Maha Upaniṣad* within the entrance hall of the Parliament of India, signifying its foundational importance to national ethos and governance.

The principle of '*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*' encapsulates a fundamental, pervasive human aspiration for global harmony and is profoundly integrated into the collective consciousness of the Indian populace. Conversely, any attempt to enforce uniformity inevitably precipitates conflict, societal fragmentation, and violent opposition. Crucially, '*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*' operates not through the imposition of homogeneity, but through the active affirmation and acceptance of pluralism and diversity. This foundational validation of heterogeneity is precisely what renders the concept exceptionally pertinent and indispensable in the contemporary global context, offering a framework for peaceful coexistence amidst cultural, social, and political differences.⁴

This fundamental dictum asserts that equal respect and consideration are due to every individual, irrespective of their originating background or socio-cultural context, thereby affirming an essential interconnectedness among all people. Furthermore, the phrase encapsulates the principle that the well-being and prosperity of any single entity are intrinsically linked to, and inseparable from, the collective welfare of the entire human community.

This phrase fundamentally underpins a philosophy of holistic unity and intrinsic interconnectedness, thereby actively cultivating a pervasive sense of universal kinship encompassing all sentient life and the encompassing natural environment. Specifically, '*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*' functions as a philosophical paradigm that inculcates the understanding that the entire world constitutes a single, unified family. Furthermore, operating as a distinct social philosophy, it emanates from a deeper spiritual comprehension: that the totality of humanity is unified by a singular, shared life energy. This principle thus mandates recognition of the inherent, indivisible bond among all people.⁵ This philosophical foundation served as the direct impetus for adopting the concept as the central theme, "One Earth, One Family, One Future," for India's G20 Presidency (spanning December 1, 2022, to November 30, 2023). This thematic selection was strategically deployed to champion the cause of global solidarity and to promote a shared international responsibility for shaping a more favorable collective future. The core conceptual tenet asserts that all forms of life are fundamentally interconnected and constitute integral parts of a singular global community, thereby necessitating the

³ "Vasidhaiva Kutumbakam: The Concept" Galgotias University, <https://www.galgotiasuniversity.edu.in/public/school-of-liberal-education/vasu.html>, accessed on 09 - 12 - 2025.

⁴ Arvind Gupta, "Reimagining Multilateralism: The Ethos and Philosophy of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam," *National Security* Vol. IV Issue I, January, 2021, 21. 20 - 24.

⁵ Arun Kumar Kar, "The concept of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* (The World is a Family): Insights from the Mahopanisad," *National Journal of Hindi & Sanskrit Research*, 2023, 1(49), 42. 42-45



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cultivation of empathy and reciprocal respect. This profound notion maintains significant relevance in the contemporary global environment, particularly where deep-seated divisions and seemingly intractable conflicts frequently prevail.

Metaphysical Dimensions and Axiological Frameworks

Swami Shuddhidananda asserts that the principle of 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' functions as a direct and logical corollary to the fundamental, non-dualistic reality established by advaitic metaphysics.⁶ The Mahopaniṣad articulates the concept of Brahman—the ultimate, transcendent reality—as the fundamental, unifying cosmic principle that permeates and underlies the entirety of existence. The text emphasizes that beneath the surface of apparent distinctions and phenomenal diversities lies an essential, profound unity that inextricably links all life forms, including humans, fauna, flora, and the entire natural ecosystem. This profound interconnectedness is not circumscribed by arbitrary boundaries or territorial borders; rather, it extends universally to encompass the entire cosmos.⁷ When the realization dawns that the same singular consciousness (advaita) underlies and permeates every individual, encompassing both animate and inanimate entities, the perception of the world transforms into that of a unified family. This precise perspective—the recognition of the world as a singular, interconnected family—is formally designated as 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' within the Mahopaniṣad.

Viewing other individuals in isolation constitutes a narrow and limited cognitive orientation. Conversely, the distinguishing characteristic of individuals possessing a magnanimous disposition is the pervasive sense of universal belongingness they cultivate. These individuals transcend the restrictive dichotomy of 'mine and yours,' thus enabling them to regard the entirety of the Vasundhara (the entire terrestrial sphere) as their encompassing family.⁸

The Bhagavad Gītā, a foundational Indian scripture that significantly shaped the philosophical outlook of Mahatma Gandhi, articulates the ideal state of realization as the capacity to perceive the self within all beings and all beings within the self. This insight represents advaitic jñāna (knowledge of non-duality)—the profound understanding of oneness, implying that no individual entity is truly isolated; rather, all are constituent elements of a singular, eternal, transcendent reality. If the ultimate Divine source is monistic, the differentiation among individual subjects becomes philosophically unsustainable. This understanding dissolves the distinction between the observer and the observed (the concepts of 'you' and 'me'), thereby transcending all cultural, religious, ethnic, linguistic, and geographical boundaries. This realization empowers a worldview free from discriminatory biases, allowing the principle of 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' to manifest in its most authentic and practical sense.

A prominent characteristic of Indian civilization is its foundational commitment to the principle of pluralistic unity. This sense of underlying coherence is manifest across numerous domains, including spirituality, religious practices, cultural expressions, and the material dimensions of existence. Significantly, this unity, which remains pervasive amidst multiplicity, is not merely esteemed as an abstract ideal but is recognized as the Universal Truth.⁹

Transcultural Utility

The paramount objective of the concept 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' is to delineate the defining attributes of an individual who has successfully achieved the apex of spiritual evolution—specifically, the state of advaita jñāna (non-dualistic knowledge) or jīvanmukti (liberation while living). This realized state is characterized by the ability of the individual to navigate the world devoid of attachment to material possessions or transient phenomena.¹⁰ Despite its

⁶ Swami Shuddhidananda, "The Philosophical Basis of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam" *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam: Relevance for India's Ancient Thinking to Contemporary Strategic Reality* New Delhi: Vivekananda International Foundation, 2020, 102 – 103. 102 – 119.

⁷ Arun Kumar Kar, "The concept of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam (The World is a Family): Insights from the Mahopanisad," 43.

⁸ Shakeel Husain, Ashish Nath Singh and Amit Singh, "Vasudhaiva Kutumkakam: Indian Model of Multiculturalism" *Research Expression* Vol. VI, Issue 8, March 2023, 38. 36 – 44.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ K.T.S. Sarao, "Buddhist and Jaina Perspective on Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam"



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spiritual underpinnings, the central tenet of '*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*' affirms the intrinsic value of all forms of life, encompassing humans, fauna, flora, and microorganisms. Furthermore, the philosophy critically emphasizes the interdependence of these diverse species, recognizing their mutual reliance both within the terrestrial domain and across the broader cosmic environment.¹¹

Acknowledging the complexity of actualizing a global family, it is recognized that even within a single domestic unit, variations exist in cognitive patterns, aspirations, personal desires, and character traits. Extrapolating to the global scale, the heterogeneity introduced by multiple castes, races, colors, genders, classes, and religious affiliations significantly complicates the realization of universal unity. Nevertheless, the ethical framework of '*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*' offers a structured guidance system promoting peaceful conflict resolution, economic equity, and sustainable living. It is grounded in universal values that advocate for treating every person with comprehensive kindness, irrespective of their nationality, racial origin, or religious affiliation, thereby serving as a practical model for global citizenship. This capacity to embrace diversity while maintaining cohesion is exemplified by India, which stands as a robust, exemplary nation, reflecting the perennial ethos of '*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*'. This philosophy actively encourages the populace to celebrate the inherent richness of humanity resident in its heterogeneity. By embracing this diversity, the implicit understanding is that no single community, culture, or belief system possesses the totality of definitive knowledge. Consequently, this perspective mandates mutual learning, fostering appreciation and respect for the unique contributions of every group to the collective global wisdom. This celebration of diversity is thus not a passive tolerance but an active appreciation and profound respect for the myriad ways in which human beings inhabit and interpret the world.¹²

Geopolitics of Solidarity

*In the context of national life, the philosophy of '*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*' constitutes a critical imperative, challenging individuals and collective entities alike to transcend narrow self-interest and egoic perspectives. It encourages viewing the world through the lens of empathy and compassion, thereby affirming and celebrating our shared humanity. This cultivated empathy serves as a powerful catalyst for motivating collective action aimed at mitigating suffering and advancing global well-being. Ultimately, the philosophy functions as an ethical call to action: to actively construct a global environment where the virtues of love, respect, and mutual understanding are predominant, thereby guiding humanity toward a future characterized by peace and harmony. By internalizing the notion of a universal family, societies foster an enduring attitude of inclusivity and acceptance. This approach is instrumental in bridging the divides—social, cultural, and national—promoting enhanced understanding and securing international peace.¹³ In the sphere of international relations, the principle of '*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*' provides a framework that actively encourages sovereign nations to engage in collaborative efforts for the common global good, to resolve potential disputes primarily through diplomatic channels, and to offer mutual support during times of necessity. This ethos demands the cultivation of a global community where individual countries function as constituent members of a singular, extended family, consequently prioritizing the comprehensive welfare of humanity above exclusive national interests.¹⁴*

The Moral Economy

*Economic development must be pursued without compromising environmental sustainability or social equity, thereby ensuring the long-term well-being of the entire population. Both economic equity and sustainability constitute critical concerns within the framework of '*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*'. There is a compelling ethical requirement to strive*

¹¹ "Vasidhaiva Kutumbakam: The Concept."

¹² Surendra Pathak, "Vasidhaiva Kutumbakam: Path to A Harmonious Interconnected World" *Global Peace Foundation*, <https://globalpeace.org/vasudhaiva-kutumbakam-path-to-a-harmonious-interconnected-world/> accessed on 09 - 12 - 2025.

¹³ Arun Kumar Kar, "The concept of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* (The World is a Family): Insights from the Mahopanisad," 43.

¹⁴ Surendra Pathak, "Vasidhaiva Kutumbakam: Path to A Harmonious Interconnected World."



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for the equitable distribution of wealth and resources, guaranteeing universal access to fundamental necessities, a goal that necessitates immediate action to address the pronounced global inequalities currently observed. Sustainable development inherently requires a balanced methodological approach wherein economic activities are synergistically aligned with environmental conservation and social justice. This mandate involves the adoption of green technologies, robust support for renewable energy infrastructure, and the stringent enforcement of regulatory measures designed to protect natural ecosystems. Crucially, it also necessitates fostering inclusive growth that provides demonstrable benefits across all segments of society, ensuring that no population group is marginalized or neglected.¹⁵

Communitarian Egalitarianism

The core philosophical foundation of 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' necessitates embracing the premise that diversity actively enriches the human experience and simultaneously promotes unity. Every distinct culture, tradition, and belief system offers unique insights and intrinsic values that collectively augment the richness of global civilization. By fully embracing this heterogeneity, we acknowledge that our differences do not function as impediments but rather as assets that enhance both collective understanding and developmental progression. This philosophy advocates for moving beyond mere tolerance to the active appreciation and celebration of diversity, thereby fostering a profound and genuine sense of global unity.¹⁶

Cosmic Ecology

The primary connotation of 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' denotes that *prakṛti* (nature) itself functions intrinsically as a *kutumb* (family) – a dynamic system characterized by inherent interdependence, mutual support, and comprehensive inclusivity.¹⁷

According to Swami Shuddhananda, the Sanskrit term 'Vasudha' signifies the totality of creation, encompassing both the animate and the inanimate realms. Consequently, the philosophical definition of the 'family' is not restricted merely to the human species but is extended to include the botanical kingdom, the faunal kingdom, geographical features (such as rivers and hills), and celestial bodies (including stars and galaxies)—essentially, the entirety of existence.¹⁸ In summary, the *Mahopanīṣad* exhorts us to recognize the natural world (*prakṛti*) as an integral component of our extended family. This foundational perspective actively promotes robust environmental ethics and underscores the necessity of responsible stewardship of the Earth. It formally acknowledges the fundamental and mutual interconnectedness between human prosperity (well-being) and the overall health and vitality of the natural world.¹⁹

The concepts of sustainable living and non-violence (*ahimsa*) are fundamental and prominent features within the framework of 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam.' The philosophy explicitly advocates for the adoption of a lifestyle characterized by practices that systematically minimize harm to both living entities and the surrounding natural environment.²⁰ The recognition that individual actions, including waste reduction, energy conservation, and the support of ethical practices, have consequential effects on the wider global community is crucial. This understanding actively facilitates the cultivation of a robust sense of stewardship for both the planet and all its inhabitants.²¹

The global family, as conceived by this philosophy, encompasses all living beings along with both physical and non-physical variables. Consequently, the concept of 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' is inherently comprehensive: it not only

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Kapil Kapoor, "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam: A Civilizational Maxim" *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam: Relevance for India's Ancient Thinking to Contemporary Strategic Reality* New Delhi: Vivekananda International Foundation, 2020, 5. 3 – 12.

¹⁸ Swami Shuddhananda, "The Philosophical Basis of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam," 85.

¹⁹ Arun Kumar Kar, "The concept of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam (The World is a Family): Insights from the *Mahopanīṣad*," 43.

²⁰ Ibid., 44.

²¹ Surendra Pathak, "Vasidhaiva Kutumbakam: Path to A Harmonious Interconnected World."



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mandates companionship and unity among human beings and human communities but also extends its definition of family to include all living organisms, advocating for peaceful coexistence among every living entity.²²

Operationalizing the Ideal

The wisdom articulated in the *Mahopaniṣad*, specifically its profound concept of 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam,' possesses an enduring relevance that transcends conventional boundaries of time and space. In the context of rapid globalization, where the world is characterized by heightened interdependence and technology seamlessly connects individuals across continents, the concept of the world as a singular family gains intensified significance. We are increasingly aware of how our actions impact distant communities and ecosystems, thereby reinforcing the interconnectedness of all life. By formally recognizing our shared humanity and the intrinsic worth of every individual, this philosophy provides the ethical foundation necessary to promote social justice, equality, and inclusivity on a global scale.²³

It is essential to first acknowledge that the guiding principle of 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' prioritizes the promotion of values over the pursuit of narrow self-interests.²⁴ To successfully actualize 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' in practice, the imperative is to educate individuals to perceive themselves as integral members of a global community, thereby cultivating a profound sense of responsibility toward all of humanity. This fundamental transformation must begin by embedding the foundational idea of global citizenship within educational systems worldwide.²⁵

Behavioral frameworks anchored in empathy, altruism, and collaboration are indispensable for establishing a harmonious society. Empathy facilitates deep connection with others, enabling the comprehension of their emotions and subjective experiences. This emotional resonance cultivates compassion, providing the motivation to alleviate suffering and promote the well-being of others. The promotion of selfless actions for the benefit of others is essential for creating a more caring and mutually supportive community. Acts of altruism, regardless of scale, contribute significantly to a culture of kindness and generosity. Such actions not only assist those in need but also strengthen the social fabric, ultimately building trust and mutual support. Collaborative efforts across all domains, including family, community, professional environments, and global initiatives, result in superior outcomes and a more cohesive societal structure. Encouraging volunteerism, community service, and participation in global movements empowers individuals to contribute meaningfully to society. Grassroots initiatives, where communities mobilize to solve localized problems, serve as potent examples of collective action yielding significant improvements. On the global stage, active support for international aid, disaster relief, and sustainable development projects fosters a crucial sense of unity and shared purpose.²⁶

The *Mahopaniṣad* presents a significant challenge to limiting the perception of 'family' and emphatically urges the adoption of a worldview that regards the entire world as an extended family. By internalizing this perspective, the text fosters a profound and expansive sense of belonging and responsibility towards all beings, entirely irrespective of their superficial differences.²⁷

Arvind Gupta suggests that in the political sphere, the application of 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' necessitates cautious scrutiny, particularly because it includes the concept of tolerance. He highlights the crucial paradox that the tolerance of intolerant entities can ultimately lead to the destruction of the tolerant population. Therefore, for 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' to function as a viable and workable political idea, its principles must be universally accepted

²² Shakeel Husain, Ashish Nath Singh and Amit Singh, "Vasudhaiva Kutumkakam: Indian Model of Multiculturalism," 41.

²³ Arun Kumar Kar, "The concept of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam (The World is a Family): Insights from the Mahopanisad," 43.

²⁴ Waheguru Pal Singh Sidhu, "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' for the 21st Century" *Brookings*,

https://www.brookings.edu/articles/vasudhaiva-kutumbakam-for-the-21st-century_trashed/ accessed on 09 – 12 – 2025.

²⁵ Surendra Pathak, "Vasidhaiva Kutumbakam: Path to A Harmonious Interconnected World."

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Arun Kumar Kar, "The concept of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam (The World is a Family): Insights from the Mahopanisad," 43.



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and fundamentally based on the concept of reciprocity. A unilateral or one-sided implementation of 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' is deemed impractical and unsustainable.²⁸

According to Gurumurthy, "The philosophy and practice of 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' is a long evolved cultural and civilizational idea, which has been voluntarily accepted and lived for millennia in India and is in vogue even today."²⁹ The contemporary interpretation of 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' aligns closely with the concept articulated by Mahatma Gandhi, known as *Sarvodaya*. The overarching objective of both philosophies remains identical: the promotion of the welfare of all. The principle of 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' will remain abstract and unrealistic until it is actively implemented in the world. Consequently, Gandhi's *Sarvodaya* can be considered the modern, practical philosophy for the operational realization of 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam.' Gandhiji wrote in "What is *Sarvodaya*?" in 1938: "There is no such thing as Gandhism. I have not put anything new before India; I have only presented an ancient thing in a new way. I have tried to utilize it in a new field."³⁰ He strongly emphasizes that his advocacy is rooted in the eternal truths found within major religious texts. These truths have historically served as the intellectual and spiritual wellspring for influential European literature, inspiring thinkers ranging from Isaiah to Karl Marx. Correspondingly, in the Indian literary tradition, these same truths have inspired works spanning from the *Vedas* to contemporary significant writings.³¹

Sarvodaya

Sarvodaya is a practical philosophy promulgated by Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, who is reverently known as Mahatma Gandhi, popularly referred to as Gandhiji, and affectionately called Bapuji. As documented in his autobiography, *My Experiments with Truth*, Gandhiji states that John Ruskin's treatise on political economy, *Unto This Last*, precipitated an "instantaneous and practical transformation" in his life. He subsequently entitled his Gujarati translation of Ruskin's work as *Sarvodaya*, which literally means 'the welfare of all'.³² This marks the conceptual formation of the word *Sarvodaya* within Gandhi's life, philosophical thought, and educational teachings. Subsequently, Gandhi adopted the term to denote the ideal aspiration of his own political philosophy. Later adherents of Gandhian thought, such as the prominent Indian nonviolence activist Vinoba Bhave, embraced the term as the name for a significant social movement in post-independence India. This movement was specifically dedicated to ensuring that the principles of self-determination and equality successfully permeated all strata of Indian society.

Gandhiji propounded the philosophy of *Sarvodaya* specifically as a framework to overcome the pervasive challenges associated with casteism, communal evils, economic inequalities, and various social divisions.³³ Gandhiji's ultimate aim was the realization of a classless, casteless, and stateless society. He mandated that this vision must be achieved exclusively through the application of non-violent methods (*ahimsa*) and the principle of non-centralization (decentralized governance).³⁴ The consequential philosophical influence is profoundly evident in his *Sarvodaya* philosophy. Gandhian *Sarvodaya* is fundamentally a philosophy dedicated to the "upliftment of all" (*Sarva udaya*). It envisions an egalitarian society constructed upon the core tenets of non-violence (*ahimsa*), truth (*satya*), and decentralized community (*Grām Swaraj*). This framework distinctly prioritizes the welfare of the weakest member, while simultaneously emphasizing the dignity of labor, the equitable distribution of wealth (through the principle of trusteeship), self-reliance, and ultimately, inclusive development.

²⁸ Arvind Gupta, "Reimagining Multilateralism: The Ethos and Philosophy of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam," 22.

²⁹ S. Gurumurthy, "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam – 'World As One Family': The Ancient Indian Civilizational Concept from Contemporary Strategic Perspectives" *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam: Relevance for India's Ancient Thinking to Contemporary Strategic Reality* New Delhi: Vivekananda International Foundation, 2020, 13. 13 – 57.

³⁰ Mahatma Gandhi, "What is *Sarvodaya*?" Cited in *The Essential Writings of Mahatma Gandhi*, Ed. Raghavan Iyer, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000, 384.

³¹ Archana Sinha, *The Social and Political Philosophy of Sarvodaya*, Patna: Janaki Prakashan, 1978, 1656

³² Mohandas K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth* Boston: Beacon Press, 1957, 298 – 299.

³³ Rabindra Kumar Behuria, "Gandhiji and Sarvodaya" *Orissa Review*, October 2009, 12. 10 – 13.

³⁴ Archana Sinha, *The Social and Political Philosophy of Sarvodaya*, 166.



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The idealism embedded in *Sarvodaya* stands in direct opposition to several mainstream political and economic concepts: majoritarianism (rule by the majority); the concept of class and racial struggle; and the utilitarian principle of the 'greatest good of the greatest numbers,' as *Sarvodaya* instead advocates for the welfare of all.³⁵ *Sarvodaya* translates to the welfare and prosperity of all individuals. The core principle demands that all must advance collectively without any collision of interests. The philosophical foundation of *Sarvodaya* is all-embracing love. This philosophy operates simultaneously as: a code of personal conduct; a plan of community work; and a means to achieve the higher ends of universal brother/sisterhood. In essence, *Sarvodaya* endeavors to guide humanity onto a path that leads them toward genuine social happiness.³⁶ According to Mahatma Gandhi, "Sarvodaya is impossible without *satyagraha*.... the attainment of *Sarvodaya* depends upon the attainment of non-violence."³⁷

Gandhiji held the opinion that *Sarvodaya* can only be achieved when selfless individuals voluntarily commit to the reform and reconstruction of society. This requires a community that eschews the literal use of weapons of steel (violence and coercion) and, instead, adopts a culture where the needs of others are taken into the kindliest consideration, even prior to their own personal requirements.³⁸ Gandhiji wrote in *Young India*: "He will strive for the greatest good of all and die in the attempt to realize the ideal. He will therefore be willing to die so that the other may live.... The greatest good of all inevitably includes the good of the greater number..."³⁹ What such a renunciation will bring is written in a letter to Narandas Gandhi: "One who serve others will not waste a thought upon his own comforts, which he leaves to be attended to or neglected by his Master on high."⁴⁰ For Gandhiji, service to others is true service.⁴¹ He defined the pure devotee as one who dedicates themselves to the service of humanity without any reservation whatsoever.

Mahatma Gandhi held the resolute view that the Earth possesses sufficient resources to satisfy every human's needs, but is inadequate to meet every human's greed. Consequently, in the ideal *Sarvodaya* society he envisioned, every member would be liberated from the compulsion of limitless acquisition of material wealth and a pursuit of increasingly luxurious living. Instead, they would consciously adhere to the guiding principle of simple living and high thinking.⁴² Consequently, every individual within this framework will be guaranteed ample opportunity to produce and earn sufficiently through honest work, ensuring a decent and dignified living.⁴³ Consequently, the issue of unemployment will be fundamentally eliminated. Naturally, the income of various individuals may still exhibit differences, contingent upon their talent, ability, and effort. However, those who accrue greater earnings are expected to utilize the bulk of their excess wealth for the benefit of the society as a whole. In such a society, all wealth, including land, will be axiomatically viewed as common property, designated for utilization in the welfare of all. If any individual possesses more than their proportionate share, they automatically become a trustee of the excess wealth for the benefit of the less fortunate members of the society (the principle of Trusteeship). Furthermore, to minimize the reliance on mechanized production within a

³⁵ Rabindra Kumar Behuria, "Gandhiji and Sarvodaya" 12.

³⁶ B. P. Pandey, *Gandhi Sarvodaya and Organizations*, Allahabad: Chugh Publications, 1988, 9, 14.

³⁷ Mahatma Gandhi, "What is Sarvodaya?"

³⁸ B. P. Pandey, *Gandhi Sarvodaya and Organizations*, 9, 24 – 25; Archana Sinha, *The Social and Political Philosophy of Sarvodaya*, 165.

³⁹ Mahatma Gandhi, "The Greatest Good of All," *Young India*, 9th Dec. 1926, Cited in *The Essential Writings of Mahatma Gandhi*, Ed. Raghavan Iyer, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000, 376.

⁴⁰ Mahatma Gandhi, Cited in *The Essential Writings of Mahatma Gandhi*, Ed. Raghavan Iyer, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000, 383; Mahatma Gandhi, *From Yeravda Mandir*, Cited in *The Gandhi Sutras*, Ed. D. S. Sarma, Madras: G. S. Press, 1938, 47.

⁴¹ Mahatma Gandhi, *From Yeravda Mandir*, Cited in *The Gandhi Sutras*, 48.

⁴² Mahatma Gandhi, "Equal Distribution," *Harijan*, August 1940, Cited in *The Essential Writings of Mahatma Gandhi*, Ed. Raghavan Iyer, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000, 390.

⁴³ Mahatma Gandhi, "Questions and Answers," *Young India*, 26th March 1931, Cited in *The Essential Writings of Mahatma Gandhi*, Ed. Raghavan Iyer, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000, 396.



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Sarvodaya society, Gandhi strongly advocated that every individual must engage in some productive physical work to earn their daily sustenance.⁴⁴

Gandhiji's *Sarvodaya* philosophy was fundamentally rooted in the concept of universal brotherhood, mirroring the core ideal espoused by '*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*.' He wrote in *Young India*: "I believe in *advaita*, I believe in the essential unity of man and, for that matter of all that lives. Therefore, I believe that if one man gains spiritually, the whole world gains with him, and if one man fails, the whole world falls to that extent."⁴⁵ Gandhiji actively raised his voice and expressed strong opposition against the superiority claims asserted by *brāhmaṇas*. He wrote: "...all life is absolutely equal and one. It is therefore an arrogant assumption on the part of the *bhāshmin* when he says, "I am superior to the other three *varṇas*."⁴⁶ For Gandhi, all humans are equals, members of one family – '*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*.' This he clearly jotted down in *Young India*: "Indeed, Hinduism teaches us to regard the whole of humanity as one indivisible and undivided family and holds each one of us responsible for the misdeeds of all."⁴⁷ In his work *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhiji articulated the principle that the law of the family ought to serve as the law of the world.⁴⁸

The systemic exploitation of marginalized populations by dominant socio-economic groups represents a fundamental moral failing within a social structure. The realization of *Sarvodaya* necessitates the total eradication of such predatory dynamics. Furthermore, the inherent tension between the exploiter and the exploited precludes the possibility of achieving sustainable social harmony. Gandhiji wrote: "There can be no living harmony between races and nations unless the main cause is removed, viz., exploitation of the weak by the strong. We must revise the interpretation of the so-called doctrine of 'the survival of the fittest.'"⁴⁹ The ramifications of such exploitation are not confined to anthropogenic structures; rather, they influence the symbiotic relationship between humanity and the broader ecosystem. This suggests that social justice is inextricably linked to an ecological ethic that encompasses both biological organisms and abiotic elements.

The *Sarvodaya* paradigm constitutes a multi-dimensional framework that permeates every facet of the collective experience, including the economic, sociological, and ethico-religious domains. Economically, it advocates for a radical egalitarianism based on the principle of equitable advantage. By prioritizing individual self-actualization alongside social cohesion and altruism, *Sarvodaya* seeks to mitigate the constraints of economic determinism and social rigidity, ultimately fostering an integrated ideology centred on *sarva-dharma-samānatva*, or establishing a unified vision for a just and pluralistic society.⁵⁰

In its sociological dimension, *Sarvodaya* seeks to facilitate an existential communion, moving beyond mere coexistence toward an ontological unity among individuals. Within this framework, the service of humanity is elevated to a fundamental *niyama* (creed), while self-sacrifice is positioned as the primary *nīti* (moral imperative). Central to this ideology is the rejection of the dichotomy between the self and the collective; instead, it posits that individual flourishing and social advancement are functionally and ethically inseparable.⁵¹ The *Sarvodaya* conception of democracy is fundamentally antithetical to all forms of stratified organizational hierarchy, advocating instead for a flattened, horizontal social structure. In this model, the ethical framework of governance is entirely synonymous with the collective ethos of the citizenry. This vision of egalitarianism, encapsulated in the principle of *sāmya yoga* (the ideology pursues a totalizing

⁴⁴ Shibhangi Rathi, "Gandhian Philosophy of Sarvodaya and Its Principles," *Mahatma Gandhi* https://www.mkgandhi.org/articles/gandhi_sarvodaya.php accessed on 11 – 12 – 2025.

⁴⁵ Mahatma Gandhi, *Young India*, 4th December 1924, Cited in *The Gandhi Sutras*, Ed. D. S. Sarma, Madras: G. S. Press, 1938, 20.

⁴⁶ Mahatma Gandhi, *Young India*, 20th September 1928, Cited in *The Gandhi Sutras*, Ed. D. S. Sarma, Madras: G. S. Press, 1938, 30.

⁴⁷ Mahatma Gandhi, *Young India*, 13th May 1926, Cited in *The Gandhi Sutras*, Ed. D. S. Sarma, Madras: G. S. Press, 1938, 33.

⁴⁸ Mahatma Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj*, Cited in *The Gandhi Sutras*, Ed. D. S. Sarma, Madras: G. S. Press, 1938, 33 – 34.

⁴⁹ Mahatma Gandhi, Cited in *The Essential Writings of Mahatma Gandhi*, 387.

⁵⁰ V. Narayan Karan Reddy, *Sarvodaya Ideology & Acharya Vinoba Bhave*, Hyderabad: The Andhra Pradesh Sarvodaya Mandal, 1963, 19, 30 – 32.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 40, 43 – 44, 50.



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egalitarianism), seeks to establish a social order wherein the marginalized and the disenfranchised (the 'last and the least') possess a subjective sense of worth and agency equal to that of the most privileged, thereby neutralizing traditional class distinctions.⁵²

The *Sarvodaya* philosophy advocates for a profound moral optimism predicated on a metaphysical continuity, wherein the material realm is viewed as inherently moral, and the moral is elevated to the spiritual. In this framework, the collective conscience is conceptualized as the manifestation of the 'total divine.' Consequently, the actualization of *Sarvodaya* depends not on the extraneous imposition of heteronomous laws, but rather on the autonomous, voluntary internalisation of moral principles by the individual.⁵³

Mirroring the Gandhian endeavor to cultivate an elevated existence within the temporal realm, the *Sarvodaya* religious framework seeks to actualize a state of transcendent righteousness within the precariousness of material life. In this paradigm, religious devotion is redefined as the praxis of piety and empathy. Central to this concept is the radical reformation of human agency, necessitating the total subordination of both instrumental means and terminal ends to the collective well-being – a pursuit of universal welfare over individualist utility.⁵⁴

In summary, *Sarvodaya* emerges as a comprehensively integrated socio-moral philosophy, deeply anchored in the primordial Indian axiom of '*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*.' As an idealized social blueprint, it endeavors to reconstruct the modern social order upon the foundational pillars of classical Indian spiritual and ethical values. It represents a synthetic ideology that transcends its cultural origins, offering a universalist conceptual framework for collective human flourishing.

Sarvodaya Movement

While the ideological lineage of *Sarvodaya* can be traced to the Upanisadic principle of '*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*,' its modern popularization and systematic application were the results of Gandhian philosophy. Gandhi sought the practical manifestation of a *Sarvodaya Samāj* – a society characterized by the radical decentralization of power. By empowering grassroots communities, he aimed to institutionalize *Grām Swaraj*, ensuring a permanent state of village self-governance and communal autonomy.⁵⁵ The intellectual potency of the *Sarvodaya* philosophy served as a primary catalyst for a widespread socio-political awakening in India, culminating in the institutionalized *Sarvodaya Movement*. Under the stewardship of prominent figures such as Vinoba Bhave and Jayaprakash Narayan, this movement sought to translate Gandhian theory into concrete social praxis. It represented a collective effort to realize structural reform through non-violent mobilization and grassroots ethical transformation. Gandhiji wrote in *Young India*: "If we can erase the 'I's and the 'Mine's from religion, politics, economics, etc., we shall soon be free and bring heaven upon earth."⁵⁶ The *Sarvodaya Movement* represented a systematic endeavor to operationalize this vision, transitioning the philosophy from an abstract socio-ethical construct into a tangible historical reality. It served as the empirical vehicle through which the theoretical 'dream' of universal uplift was tested and implemented within the complex landscape of post-independence India.

Through his editorial contributions to *Harijan*, Gandhi disseminated three core ethical axioms to the *Sarvodaya* community: 'i) The good of the Individual is contained in the good of all; ii) A lawyer's work has the same value as the barber's in as much as all have the same right of earning their livelihood from their work; iii) A life of labour, i.e., the life

⁵² *Ibid.*, 52.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 58 – 59, 72 – 73.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 75, 82.

⁵⁵ Rabindra Kumar Behuria, "Gandhiji and *Sarvodaya*" 10.

⁵⁶ Mahatma Gandhi, "The Curse of "I" and "Mine"," *Young India*, 23rd Sept. 1926, Cited in *The Essential Writings of Mahatma Gandhi*, Ed. Raghavan Iyer, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000, 414.



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of the tiller of the soil and the handicraftsmen is the life worth living.”⁵⁷ These lessons were instrumental in defining the behavioral expectations for his followers, ensuring that the movement remained rooted in a rigorous synthesis of moral integrity and social service. This didactic approach was essential for maintaining the ideological purity of the Sarvodaya praxis. Gandhi posited that the cultivation of individual character, specifically the rigorous discipline of the somatic, cognitive, and spiritual faculties, serves as an essential prerequisite for the realization of an egalitarian social order. In the Indian context, this was operationalized through a comprehensive 'constructive program' designed to facilitate the harmonious development of the populace. This eighteen-point framework acted as the foundational praxis of Sarvodaya, seeking to internalize the values of universal elevation and collective well-being through systematic social and personal reconstruction.⁵⁸

The Gandhian legacy transcends the immediate achievement of Indian sovereignty (*swarāj*), evolving into a sustained post-colonial praxis through the efforts of his successors. Under the leadership of figures such as Vinoba Bhave and Jayaprakash Narayan, the Sarvodaya Movement sought to actualize a social order that Anima Bose characterizes as a more comprehensive and substantive iteration of popular democracy than traditional Western models. During the mid-twentieth century, this intellectual network operationalized the principles of self-organization through radical agrarian initiatives like *Bhūdān* and *Grāmdān*, fostering a lineage of localized grassroots activism that persists in the contemporary Indian socio-political landscape.⁵⁹

As an instrument of collective welfare, Sarvodaya explicitly repudiates power politics and exploitative structures in favor of a framework grounded in moral and spiritual imperatives. It advocates for a comprehensive transvaluation of social and economic norms, most notably through the substitution of private possession with the principle of trusteeship. In this model, labor is motivated by a commitment to the common good, facilitated by a communal ethos modelled after familial solidarity. Consequently, the social order is defined by the maximal realization of individual liberty, fraternal fellowship, and egalitarianism.⁶⁰ Gandhi's egalitarianism is rooted in a metaphysics of spiritual identity, asserting that equality resides in the soul rather than in somatic or biological characteristics.⁶¹ By de-emphasizing physical differentiation, this perspective provides a moral foundation for a society that respects the inherent dignity of all individuals, regardless of their external circumstances. It shifts the discourse from a quantitative equality of attributes to a qualitative equality of being.

Structural Blue-prints for Grassroots Decentralization

The overarching objective of the Sarvodaya Movement is the institutionalization of a decentralized network comprising self-reliant agrarian communes. This vision entails a radical expansion of the altruistic 'family' unit, transcending biological kinship to encompass the entire village collective, thereby systematically dismantling stratifications predicated on ethnicity, caste, and creed. Economically, the movement advocates for an autarkic model where agricultural production is calibrated to ensure universal food security, and industrial activity is localized through cottage industries to achieve full employment. Governance is predicated on the principle of subsidiarity, wherein the Village Council, a representative body of the collective, possesses the executive authority to determine and fulfil the specific developmental needs of the community.⁶²

In a significant departure from conventional liberal discourse, Gandhi prioritized the fulfilment of duties over the assertion of rights, positing that social harmony emerges from reciprocal obligations. Central to this ethical shift is the

⁵⁷ Mahatma Gandhi, *Harijan*, 28th March, 1936, Cited in Archana Sinha, *The Social and Political Philosophy of Sarvodaya*, 166.

These three lessons Gandhiji gathered and summarized from John Ruskin's *Unto This Last*. See in Detlef Kantowsky, *Sarvodaya: The Other Development*, Ghaziabad: Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd., 1980, 4.

⁵⁸ Archana Sinha, *The Social and Political Philosophy of Sarvodaya*, 167 – 169.

⁵⁹ Shishhangi Rathi, "Gandhian Philosophy of Sarvodaya and Its Principles."

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ Archana Sinha, *The Social and Political Philosophy of Sarvodaya*, 170.

⁶² Shishhangi Rathi, "Gandhian Philosophy of Sarvodaya and Its Principles."



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principle of *aparigraha* (non-possession), which seeks to replace proprietary claims with a discipline of non-acquisition. Gandhi recognized that the conceptualization of private possession serves as a primary driver of class stratification and inevitable social conflagration; thus, he argued that only by delegitimizing the theory of possession could a society avoid the structural violence inherent in economic disparity.⁶³ Consequently, the ethos of *dān* (altruistic contribution) emerged as a central pillar within the Sarvodaya Movement, functioning not as mere charity but as a radical social ideal. This philosophy operationalizes various dimensions of sacrifice to address systemic inequality: *Sampatti Dān* (redistribution of wealth), *Śrama Dān* (the contribution of physical labor), *Gupta Dān* (anonymous philanthropy), and *Jīvan Dān* (the total consecration of one's life to social service). Within the Sarvodaya framework, *dān* constitutes the quintessential element that bridges abstract moral philosophy with tangible grassroots mobilization.⁶⁴ Gandhi advocated for the affluent to internalize the axiom of 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' thereby catalyzing a movement toward voluntary dispossession. He posited that the intentional renunciation of surplus wealth by the elite is a fundamental prerequisite for mitigating socioeconomic friction and facilitating a state of universal contentment. In this framework, the divestment of private assets is not merely a charitable act, but a strategic moral initiative designed to achieve a more equitable and harmonious social equilibrium.

Conclusion

This unwavering commitment to equality stemmed from his complete internalization of 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, which infused the entirety of his teachings, including the doctrine of Sarvodaya. The realization of both 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' and Sarvodaya is contingent upon individuals committing to a path characterized by unconditional love, shared resource allocation, reciprocal deference, and voluntary suffering. Gandhi himself modelled this pathway, personally assuming immense hardship and sacrifice to facilitate a harmonious existence for others, enabling the vision of a truly unified, familial global community.

Sarvodaya transcends the limited scope of mere social welfare; rather, it constitutes the holistic well-being of all, realized through the mechanisms of reciprocal affection, collective care, and shared distribution, predicated on the core understanding of universal human kinship. Given the preceding discussion of the historical genesis, foundational influences, and intrinsic characteristics of these principles, it can be asserted with confidence that Mahatma Gandhi's doctrine of Sarvodaya functions as the action-oriented, practical translation of the ancient maxim, 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam.'

⁶³ Archana Sinha, *The Social and Political Philosophy of Sarvodaya*, 169.

⁶⁴ V. Narayan Karan Reddy, *Sarvodaya Ideology & Acharya Vinoba Bhave*, 32.