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UNIVERSITY OF DELHI

GANDHI STUDY CIRCLE

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7th Session

ON MORAL CRUELTY: GANDHI, DIGNITY AND RESENTMENT

SPEAKER

Prof. Aishwary Kumar

Eminent Political Theorist and Intellectual
Historian, Stanford University, USA



DATE: 30TH JAN

|

TIME: 11:00 AM



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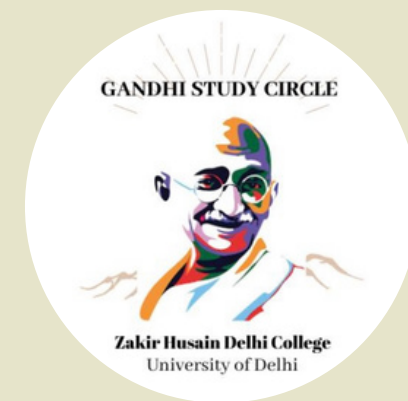
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On Moral Cruelty Gandhi, Dignity, and Resentment

Aishwary Kumar
Professorial Fellow in Philosophy, History, and Government
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ABSTRACT

Although “dignity” appears only once in Gandhi’s 1909 masterwork *Hind Swaraj*, it comes to acquire a fundamental place in his theory of political action over the next four decades. Just as new words were born from the most ancient languages, Gandhi insists, there is dignity in believing that new worlds could be built upon the worst impulses of the old order, even and especially if there were no such precedents. “To believe that what has not occurred in history will not occur at all,” he writes in *Hind Swaraj*, “is to argue disbelief in the dignity of man.” Satyagraha is unthinkable, in other words, without the dignity that radiates from the human will to bring things into the world that did not exist in it before, or, like nonviolence, had disappeared from it entirely. But while the revolutionary democratic tradition posits dignity as an inalienable constituent of political justice—a justice whose resilience secures the rights of man and freedom of citizen—Gandhi reverses course. In place of justice as the sovereign right in politics, satyagrahic dignity comes to be attached to acts of mastery as the fulcrum of personhood, and, in the final instance, to the disinterest of sacrifice in the face of human need and neglect, deprivation even. Satyagraha’s justice flows not from a moral axiom but from the moral agent who must, through action, clear the ground for his own justice by forging his own relationship with needs (or overcoming the burden of material necessity altogether). Such a world can seem honorably just (or liberatingly disinterested) to one but can feel oppressively monastic (or calculatedly derelict) to another. Is sacrifice truly free from interest, then? Does attaching sacrificial value to dignity—a value Gandhi often associates with *kshatriyadharma*—make it susceptible to extreme violence, only now this cruelty of disregard is backed by moral justifications and verdicts (caste being one such classical paradigm of indictment of the poor, the outcaste, the minor)? In this lecture, looking at Gandhi’s assassination 74 years ago, I suggest that it is in very the logic of moral cruelty and its caste contract to pull dignity into the vortex of political resentment. And to forget that sacrifice often threatens to bring dignity to even the most unforgivable violence would amount not only to misreading the structure of India’s political majority and the ferocity of its resentments; it would amount to risking democracy and losing freedom itself (*again*, Ambedkar might say). What is moral cruelty, after all, if not that which makes such tyranny bearable, even excusable?