



RESEARCH PAPER

Gandhian Nonviolent Communication as India's Relational Soft Power: Implications for Youth Diplomacy in Advancing *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary global politics is marked by intensifying polarisation, increasing democratic fragility, digital hostility, and erosion of trust. While multilateral institutions operate through state-centric frameworks, formal agreements alone cannot sustain peace where communicative environments remain adversarial. This paper argues that Gandhian Nonviolent Communication (GNVC), grounded in the principles of *Satya* (truth) and *Ahimsa* (nonviolence), represents a form of relational soft power. An ethical communicative praxis capable of transforming adversarial environments into dialogic ones through disciplined relational practice. Departing from conventional soft power theory, which emphasises attraction and symbolic projection. The paper reconceptualises soft power as the transformation of communicative environments through intentional relational engagement. The analysis situates this framework within the normative horizon of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* ("One Earth, One Family, One Future"), India's civilizational vision articulated during its G20 presidency. Drawing on 31 Participatory Action Research (PAR) case studies across 14 countries, along with intervention studies from Yemen, Nigeria, and Uganda, this paper shows how GNVC supports plural coexistence through everyday relational practice. The findings are further interpreted through Amartya Sen's Capability Approach, repositioning communication as a critical social conversion factor mediating between leadership practices and capability expansion. A Gandhian Communicative Fellows Programme is proposed to embed these principles within youth diplomacy and education systems globally.

Keywords: Relational Soft Power, Gandhian Nonviolent Communication, Youth-Centred Diplomacy, Grassroots Diplomacy, Civilizational Soft Power, *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*

The contemporary global condition is increasingly marked by what may be understood as a crisis of communication. Across political, social, and digital domains, communicative spaces are saturated with polarization, moralistic judgment, and the amplification of antagonistic narratives. This erosion of dialogic capacity extends beyond interpersonal tension. It increasingly limits cooperation, democratic

participation, and peaceful coexistence, constraining the possibilities for cooperation, democratic participation, and peaceful coexistence. Rising levels of anger, distrust, and social fragmentation suggest

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that the problem of peace is inseparable from the problem of communication itself.

Within this context, dominant frameworks of leadership and development remain insufficiently equipped to address the relational dimensions of this crisis. While approaches such as servant leadership emphasise empathy, stewardship, and community-building. They often lack a clearly articulated communicative mechanism through which ethical intent is translated into sustained social outcomes. Similarly, development frameworks grounded in institutional reform or resource distribution frequently under-theorise the communicative conditions that enable individuals and communities to exercise agency. Contemporary scholarship still pays limited attention to communication as a condition for social transformation.

This paper argues that Gandhian Nonviolent Communication (GNVC) provides a critical theoretical and practical bridge across these domains. Rooted in the principles of *Satya* (truth) and *Ahimsa* (nonviolence), Gandhian communication is not reducible to a set of interpersonal techniques but emerges as a normative and relational ethic. That reshapes the very conditions under which dialogue, conflict, and cooperation unfold. Its aim is not to avoid conflict. Rather, it seeks to transform relationships through dialogue and moral persuasion.

To situate this argument within a broader developmental framework, this study draws on Amartya Sen's Capability Approach, which conceptualises development as the expansion of substantive freedoms. That is the real opportunity individuals have to achieve valued ways of being and doing. This paper advances the proposition that communication itself operates as a critical social conversion factor, and that GNVC serves as a distinct form of such a factor. By shaping the relational and discursive environment within which individuals interact, GNVC determines whether leadership practices translate into enhanced capabilities such as voice, participation, trust, dignity, and collective agency.

The paper further situates this framework within the normative horizon of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*, India's civilizational vision articulated during its G20 presidency. It proposes that India's contribution to global coexistence lies not in symbolic projection but in communicative disciplines capable of strengthening plural societies. A Gandhian Communicative Fellows Programme is proposed to operationalize this vision through youth diplomacy and education.

Rethinking Soft Power: Toward a Relational and Communicative Paradigm

Joseph Nye's influential conception of soft power defines it as the ability to shape the preferences of others through attraction rather than coercion (Nye, 2004). In this formulation, soft power derives from a country's culture, political values, and foreign policies when they are perceived as legitimate or morally credible. While analytically valuable, this framework largely focuses on perception, legitimacy, and influence at the level of states and publics. It does not sufficiently account for the relational conditions within communities, the micro-level communicative practices, norms, and forms of trust that make diplomacy possible in the first place.

This paper proposes a relational understanding of soft power. It refers to the capacity to transform adversarial communicative environments through ethical relational practice. Rather than relying on spectacle or symbolic appeal, relational soft power reshapes interaction itself. It alters the normative conditions under which disagreement occurs, enabling conflict to unfold within a framework of dignity, reciprocity, and mutual recognition.

Gandhian Nonviolent Communication is grounded in *Satya* (truth), *Ahimsa* (nonviolence), and disciplined moral restraint. It denotes an ethical communicative praxis that integrates truthfulness with non-harm in both speech and intention. It entails conscious regulation of language. Gandhian nonviolent communication entails avoidance of humiliating or accusatory expressions, empathetic listening, reflective pausing before responding, and persuasion grounded in moral credibility rather

than domination. GNVC thus extends beyond interpersonal civility; it reflects an ethical mode of engagement oriented toward relational restoration and the preservation of dignity amid disagreement. For Gandhi, violence may originate in language and intention before it manifests physically. Communication is therefore never neutral; it either sustains dignity or undermines it.

This paper extends the relational perspective by advancing the concept of communicative soft power. In this context, it is understood as the capacity to transform social relations through ethical, dialogic, and non-coercive communication. Unlike conventional soft power, which operates primarily at the level of image and perception, communicative soft power emerges at the level of interaction and practice. It is enacted through the everyday micro-processes of communication that shape how individuals perceive one another, negotiate differences, and construct shared realities. Where coercive power may secure compliance, symbolic soft power may generate admiration, and relational soft power cultivates trust. Its durability lies in reshaping expectations of interaction, functioning as a pre-institutional diplomatic infrastructure that stabilizes plural coexistence from below rather than imposing order from above.

Gandhian Nonviolent Communication as Communicative Praxis

Gandhian thought offers a profound reorientation of communication not as a neutral medium for information exchange, but as an ethical and transformative praxis embedded within the broader pursuit of truth and nonviolence. At its foundation lie the intertwined principles of *satya* and *ahimsa*, which together constitute not merely moral ideals but operational guidelines for human interaction.

Unlike conventional models that treat communication as instrumental, aimed at persuasion, negotiation, or control, the Gandhian approach reconceptualizes it as a process of relational transformation. The objective is not to win an argument. It is to transform relationships through mutual recognition and moral engagement. This orientation is most

clearly articulated in the concept of *satyagraha*, often translated as “truth-force,” which positions communication as a dialogic process. That is oriented toward the discovery of shared truth rather than the imposition of competing claims.

From a communicative standpoint, *satyagraha* entails three interrelated commitments. First, it requires rejecting adversarial binaries, particularly the tendency to frame conflict as “us versus them.” Second, it necessitates empathetic understanding, involving a disciplined effort to comprehend the needs, emotions, and perspectives underlying the other’s position. Third, it relies on nonviolent persuasion, which eschews coercion and manipulation in favour of transparency, honesty, and moral consistency. Communication, therefore, becomes a form of ethical action, where the transformation of the self and the transformation of the relationship are inseparable.

The theoretical articulation of GNVC has been further developed in contemporary scholarship, notably in the work of Bode (1994), who identifies four core components: (1) nonviolent speech and action, (2) maintenance of relationships and enrichment of personhood, (3) openness, and (4) flexibility. Subsequent interpretations have emphasized the systemic and ecological dimensions of Gandhian communication. Meanwhile Kundu (2022) enlists the key elements of Gandhian nonviolent communication. These include:

1. The Gandhian model of nonviolent communication necessitates use of nonviolence in all aspects of communication, whether verbal or nonverbal, our thoughts and ideas. It underlines how the mind, heart, and body remain disciplined at every stage.
2. We learn the art and science of nonviolent persuasion and efficacy from the Gandhian approach. It explains how nonviolent persuasion is a key component of a nonviolent communication ecosystem.
3. The Gandhian model teaches us the significance of self-discipline and self-restraint in all aspects of our communicative efforts.

4. Gandhi's nonviolent nonverbal symbolism, like fasting, tells us about its efficacy in nonviolent action. We learn how nonverbal symbolism aims at encouraging self-introspection.
5. The Gandhian approach to empathy in nonviolent communication teaches us how to emotionally connect with the people, even the adversaries, and build bridges.
6. The Gandhian nonviolent communication model encompasses principles of human interdependence and its relevance in a holistic communication ecosystem. It talks on the importance of the cosmocentric approach to human nature.
7. Mahatma Gandhi's communication strategy was to reach the hearts of the masses through constructive work for social and economic emancipation. For instance, his Talisman is a powerful statement about how each needs to introspect on what they are doing for the last person of the society. It underscores the essence of empathetic connections.
8. Mahatma Gandhi's five pillars of nonviolence- respect, understanding, acceptance, appreciation, and compassion - can be considered the foundational architecture of a nonviolent communication ecosystem.
9. The Gandhian model of nonviolent communication entails the evolution of an individual to a higher plane of values and ethics and respect for human dignity.
10. His communication model underlines the importance of being morally disciplined, strictly adhering to the principles of *ahimsa* and truth.
11. Openness and flexibility were the hallmarks of Gandhian nonviolent communication. These attributes are important for the constructive resolution of any conflict.
12. Using the strategies of Gandhian nonviolent communication enables communicators to avoid getting into the trap of misrepresentation, fake information, and wrong stereotypes.

In the context of this model, the Gandhian model of nonviolent communication extends nonviolence to thought, intention, and behaviour, encompassing

the entire communicative ecosystem. Gandhi's dialogical approach modeled truth-seeking as shared inquiry rather than imposition, treating dialogue as moral experimentation in which participants test assumptions, suspend reactive judgment, and remain open to transformation (Kundu & Shah, 2025).

The empirical findings of this study point toward four interrelated dimensions of communicative praxis, each corresponding to a core Gandhian principle: (1) relational ontology and empathetic presence; (2) dialogue as transformative action; (3) communicative flexibility and cultural adaptation; and (4) accountability, transparency, and ethical governance. Together, these dimensions suggest that GNVC operates as a coherent communicative system, operating simultaneously at individual, relational, and systemic levels.

Communication as a Social Conversion Factor: Extending the Capability Approach

The Capability Approach, most prominently developed by Amartya Sen, provides a powerful framework for understanding development as the expansion of substantive human freedoms. A central insight is that resources alone do not automatically translate into capabilities. The transformation of resources into actual opportunities is mediated by conversion factors, the personal, social, and environmental conditions that determine how effectively individuals can utilise available resources (Sen, 1999, 2009).

While Sen acknowledges the importance of communication in relation to public reasoning and democratic participation, the specific role of communicative environments as conversion factors remains under-theorized. This paper argues that communication itself functions as a critical social conversion factor. By shaping the relational and discursive conditions under which individuals interact, GNVC directly influences the extent to which individuals are able to convert available opportunities into meaningful capabilities.

The findings suggest that GNVC contributes to capability expansion as a social conversion factor,

in at least three interrelated ways. First, it cultivates observational capability, rooted in practices of deep listening and non-judgmental attention. Second, GNVC cultivates relational capability, characterized by trust, empathy, and emotional regulation. It creates conditions of mutual respect and recognition that expand individuals' willingness and ability to engage. Third, GNVC facilitates systemic capability, enabling collective action and shared problem-solving through dialogic engagement, nonviolent persuasion, and inclusive communication.

These three dimensions show that communication is more than a peripheral skill. It functions as a meta-capability shaping other capabilities, enabling the exercise of other capabilities. This perspective extends the Capability Approach by highlighting the communicative conditions of agency. And by providing a concrete, ethically grounded framework through which these conditions can be cultivated. It also connects the Capability Approach to civilizational frameworks such as *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*. Which conceptualise the world as an interconnected moral community where communicative soft power is not merely strategic but morally integral to the pursuit of sustainable peace.

Data Base and Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design, grounded in the assumption that social reality, particularly communicative practice, is contextual, relational, and meaning-laden. The research is further informed by principles of Participatory Action Research (PAR). Insofar as the empirical material emerges from practitioner-engaged contexts in which participants are active contributors to knowledge production. Methodologically, the study employs a multi-case analytical approach enabling both in-depth examination of individual cases and cross-case comparison to identify recurring patterns, facilitating analytical generalisation.

Data Sources

The empirical foundation comprises multiple, triangulated data sources:

- ⊙ **Primary Case Corpus:** 31 PAR reports, each documenting the practices of a servant leader operating within a specific community context. These cases span diverse geographical regions including Africa, South Asia, and Latin America and encompass domains such as community development, governance, faith-based leadership, conflict mediation, and social entrepreneurship.
- ⊙ **Supplementary Case Material:** Focused intervention studies from Yemen (youth nonviolent communication training), Yobe State Nigeria (vigilante group transformation), and Nakivale Refugee Camp Uganda (refugee youth programmes).
- ⊙ **Supporting Textual and Conceptual Sources:** Analytical papers on servant leadership and nonviolent communication, thematic analyses of leadership communication practices, and Gandhian scholarship on nonviolence and dialogue.

Analytical Strategy

Data analysis followed an iterative process combining inductive and deductive approaches. Open coding identified recurring communicative practices and relational dynamics, which were subsequently organised into four overarching thematic dimensions: (1) relational ontology and empathetic presence; (2) dialogue as transformative action; (3) communicative flexibility and cultural adaptation; and (4) accountability, transparency, and ethical governance. These empirical themes were then interpreted through the theoretical lenses of GNVC and the Capability Approach. Mapping observed practices onto the conceptual framework of conversion factors and capability expansion.

Validation and Limitations

To strengthen analytical credibility, the study employed triangulation across multiple data

sources. Comparative cross-case analysis, thick description enabling transferability assessment, and reflexive interpretation were undertaken. Limitations include the qualitative design's focus on theoretical rather than statistical generalisability. The potential for selective representation in self-reported PAR narratives, and the absence of longitudinal data could be seen as other limitations. Despite these limitations, the consistency of patterns across diverse cultural contexts provides strong support for the central claims.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Relational Ontology and Empathetic Presence: Enabling Voice and Recognition

Across many cases, leaders prioritized deep listening, non-judgmental presence, and empathetic engagement, creating communicative spaces in which individuals feel seen, heard, and respected. This orientation aligns with the Gandhian emphasis on the enrichment of personhood and the ethical imperative to engage the other as a co-equal participant in dialogue. In one instance, a community leader facing a volatile protest situation shifted from an enforcement-oriented approach to a dialogic one. By convening a meeting and beginning with a simple question: "What do you want?" This act of communicative reorientation transformed a potentially confrontational encounter into a sustained dialogue leading to a negotiated resolution.

In Ethiopia, Dr. Zumra Nuru, founder of the Awra Amba community, has institutionalised norms against "bad speech," embedding respectful dialogue as a principle of governance rather than a personal moral expectation. In Kenya, Chief Johnson Amimo's shift from authoritarian leadership to collaborative stewardship, addressing youth radicalization. Through trust-building initiatives rather than surveillance, it demonstrates how relational credibility can operate as an informal peace infrastructure. In Uganda, Nantongo Teddy Lutaay created a dialogic space in which each party in a marital dispute was heard without interruption and encouraged to listen before responding.

Positioning listening as a form of preventive diplomacy enacted through everyday relational practice is significant.

These communicative practices expanded opportunities for participation and recognition. By reducing fear and judgment, they create conditions of psychological safety, enabling individuals to exercise their voice, a core capability within Sen's framework. Participants who might otherwise remain silent became active contributors to the discussion, thereby moving from passive recipients of decisions to agents in collective processes.

Dialogue as Transformative Action: From Conflict to Collective Agency

Leaders consistently engage conflict as an opportunity for relational transformation rather than suppression. This is achieved through structured dialogue, mediation forums, and nonviolent persuasion, where all parties are invited to articulate their perspectives and collaboratively explore solutions. In Ghana, Emmanuel Nikoi Kotei emphasized listening and empathy as a foundation. To promote collaborative leadership, he actively sought diverse perspectives before decision-making to cultivate shared ownership. In the United States, Edwin Rutsch's facilitation of Empathy Circles provides a concrete example of structured dialogic design functioning as relational soft power. It was done by ensuring equal speaking turns, prioritizing reflective listening, and encouraging participants. To restate opposing views before replying, he transformed ideological confrontation into mutual recognition.

In Yobe State, Nigeria, 270 vigilante officers underwent sustained training in nonviolent communication. Leading to observable changes in interrogation practices and the creation of dialogue-based investigation platforms (Mshelia & Birma, 2022). Coercive interrogation was replaced with "tranquil communication," and community stakeholders were invited to participate in deliberative processes. This shift strengthened community trust and voluntary cooperation, illustrating how GNVC can reshape institutional authority in fragile security environments.

Youth Transformation as Grassroots Diplomacy

In conflict-affected settings, youth frequently operate within communicative environments. It is characterised by heightened emotional volatility, mistrust, and the normalisation of adversarial interaction. The introduction of GNVC produced a marked shift not merely in communicative behaviour but in the orientation of youth toward conflict, dialogue, and collective life. In Yemen, youth participating in a GNVC programme reported shifts from reactive anger toward restraint and dignity-centred dialogue. Reframing anger as a signal to pause and respond constructively rather than react impulsively (Sidhu, 2022).

In Nakivale Refugee Camp, Uganda, youth participants described enhanced emotional regulation, deeper listening, and strengthened relational cohesion following training (Kitwika, 2023). The practice of attentive listening and positive language enabled individuals to navigate emotionally charged situations with greater composure. Fostering environments in which dialogue could occur without fear of humiliation or retaliation. Particularly significant was the emergence of youth as active carriers of communicative transformation. Participants did not remain passive recipients of training but initiated peer-level dissemination, forming informal networks. Through which nonviolent communication practices were shared and adapted.

Across all contexts, communicative environments characterized by nonjudgmental dialogue expanded participation among previously marginalized voices. Authority correspondingly shifted from coercion to persuasion. These patterns indicate that Gandhian communicative discipline operated not as an episodic intervention but as an embedded relational infrastructure within leadership practice.

GNVC as Meta-Capability and Relational Infrastructure

The preceding analysis supports the paper's central theoretical claim: GNVC provides both a meta-

capability and a form of relational infrastructure. The findings suggest that communication is more than a discrete skill. It shapes the broader conditions of social interaction. That determines how individuals relate to one another. In contexts where communication is characterized by judgment, hostility, or opacity, even well-designed leadership initiatives struggle to generate participation or trust. Conversely, where principles of empathy, openness, and nonviolence are embedded within communication, individuals are more likely to engage, collaborate, and exercise agency. Individuals are more likely to engage, collaborate, and exercise agency.

GNVC may be understood as a meta-capability because it enables the development and exercise of other capabilities. Operating at a level before, and foundational for, specific freedoms such as the ability to participate in political processes or access education. Without the capacity to engage in nonviolent, dialogic interaction, individuals are effectively excluded from processes that shape their lives. This reconceptualisation further refines the Capability Approach by highlighting the communicative conditions of agency. Providing a concrete, ethically grounded framework through which these conditions can be cultivated.

Furthermore, the Gandhian framework introduces a normative dimension often absent in conventional soft power discourse. It situates communication within an ethical horizon where the aim is not simply influence but the cultivation of relationships grounded in truth, nonviolence, and human dignity. GNVC establishes a form of ethical soft power that is neither coercive nor merely attractive but transformative. It operates through the reconstitution of relationships and the reshaping of communicative norms. Its influence is distributed rather than centralized. Community leaders, youth participants, and institutional actors all participate in its practice. It is enacted by individuals across contexts, community leaders, youth participants, and institutional actors alike, which aligns with the concept of grassroots diplomacy.

Policy and Practice Implications: A Gandhian Communicative Fellows Initiative

The findings carry significant implications for policy design, institutional practice, and youth engagement strategies. If communication acts as a foundational conversion factor shaping the possibility of agency then investments in development, governance, and peacebuilding must extend beyond material. Further, institutional domains should include the systematic cultivation of communicative capacities. Youth are frequently positioned within policy discourse as beneficiaries of development or as potential sources of instability requiring management. The findings suggest an alternative framing: youth as active agents of diplomacy, capable of shaping relational environments through communicative practice. Policy frameworks should move beyond treating youth engagement as participation within predefined structures and to support youth as producers of communicative environments. An important insight is the distinction between unintentional and intentional uses of GNVC structured training, which transforms intuitive civility into a deliberate communicative strategy, enabling youth to function not merely as participants in dialogue but as architects of dialogic environments.

To operationalize relational soft power, this paper proposes the establishment of a Gandhian Communicative Fellows Initiative (GCFI). The core components include:

- ⊙ Foundational training modules in GNVC, including theoretical grounding in *Satya* and *Ahimsa* and practical skills such as deep listening, empathetic engagement, and dialogic facilitation.
- ⊙ Contextual adaptation and translation of training materials to local cultural and linguistic contexts through partnerships for contextualization.
- ⊙ Peer-to-peer dissemination networks enabling fellows to train and facilitate within their communities, leveraging the multiplier effect observed empirically.
- ⊙ Dialogue labs and community platforms provide structured spaces for applying GNVC in real-world contexts, including youth forums, mediation circles, and community consultations.
- ⊙ A monitoring and evaluation framework assessing capability expansion through indicators such as participation rates, trust levels, conflict resolution outcomes, and inclusivity.

This framework aligns with the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 16 on peace, justice, and strong institutions, as well as with India's civilizational commitment to *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*. By embedding communicative ethics within youth leadership development, India may extend its civilizational ethos through lived relational practice rather than symbolic projection, strengthening pathways toward a plural global order characterized by dignity and mutual recognition.

CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that Gandhian Nonviolent Communication may be understood as a form of relational soft power that reshapes social norms from confrontation toward dialogue and from domination toward recognition. Sustainable peace cannot rely only on interstate agreements or institutional design. It depends upon communicative practices embedded in everyday interaction. *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* becomes durable only when mirrored in relational ethics that normalise dignity, restraint, and persuasion.

Taken together, this analysis points toward three broader theoretical propositions. First, communication serves as a social conversion factor, mediating between leadership practices (means) and capability expansion (ends). Second, GNVC establishes a meta-capability, enabling the development of observational, relational, and systemic capacities that underpin the exercise of other capabilities. Third, GNVC represents a form of ethical soft power operating through the transformation of communicative norms and relational structures, manifesting as grassroots diplomacy embedded in everyday interaction.

Empirically, the findings demonstrate that across diverse contexts. The presence of Gandhian communicative practices is associated with expanded capabilities, including voice, participation, trust, dignity, and collective agency. The integration of Gandhian ethics with the Capability Approach bridges normative and analytical traditions. Demonstrating how communicative praxis can expand the space of agency in ways that are both measurable and normatively defensible.

India's civilizational inheritance includes dialogic traditions that prioritize inquiry, moral courage, and persuasion over coercion. Gandhian communicative praxis may be understood as a contemporary articulation of this heritage, translating philosophical commitments into disciplined relational practice. When embedded within youth education and leadership development, such praxis positions younger generations as custodians of dialogic coexistence in a plural global order. Relational soft power, therefore, emerges not as symbolic projection but as ethical infrastructure: a communicative discipline capable of strengthening democratic resilience across cultural contexts.

Several avenues for future research emerge from this study. Longitudinal analyses could examine the durability of communicative transformations over time, while comparative studies could explore variations across cultural and institutional contexts. Further work is needed to develop quantitative and mixed-method approaches to complement the interpretive insights presented here, enabling broader validation of the proposed framework.

GENERATIVE AI DECLARATION

The author(s) confirm that there was no use of artificial intelligence (AI)-assisted technology for assisting in the writing or editing of the manuscript, and no images were manipulated using AI. The authors developed and verified all scientific content, data analysis, interpretation of results, and conclusions. The authors take full responsibility for the accuracy, integrity, and originality of the work presented, and no AI tool was listed as an author.

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