

Original Article

Beyond Profit: Aligning Corporate Practices with Gandhian Principles of Justice for Sustainable Future

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Manuscript ID:
BN-2025-020107

ISSN: 3065-7865

Volume 2

Issue 11

January 2025

Pp. 31-39

Submitted: 02 Dec. 2024

Revised: 28 Dec. 2024

Accepted: 10 Jan. 2025

Published: 31 Jan. 2025

DOI:
10.5281/zenodo.15017437

DOI Link:
<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15017437>



Quick Response Code:



Website: <https://bnir.us>



Abstract

The relentless pursuit of profit by modern corporations has intensified environmental harm and deepened social disparities. This research explores a transformative framework that weaves Gandhian ethical principles—trusteeship, universal welfare (Sarvodaya), and non-violence—into today's corporate governance models. Adopting a qualitative, conceptual approach, it blends Gandhi's writings with current scholarly works and real-world examples, such as Hindustan Unilever's Project Shakti and Patagonia's eco-friendly efforts. Through detailed content and thematic analysis, the study reveals how integrating these ethics can redirect corporate focus from short-term gains to enduring societal and ecological well-being. The investigation pinpoints practical strategies like fair profit sharing, sustainable resource use, and broad stakeholder inclusion to harmonize business activities with social equity and environmental care. It also underscores the importance of supportive regulations and leadership training to nurture ethical choices and encourage responsible corporate actions. By linking age-old ethical ideals with present-day business dilemmas, this work offers a robust model for ethical governance. This study enriches discussions on sustainable business while providing clear guidance for policymakers and corporate heads. It champions a governance approach that balances economic progress with social good, proving that ethical practices can enhance long-term stability and sustainability. Viewing corporate success through a Gandhian perspective, the research demonstrates how ethical governance can foster a fairer, greener global economy.

Keywords: Gandhian Principles, Trusteeship Philosophy, Corporate Governance, Sustainability, Social Justice, Environmental Protection, Ethical Leadership, Sustainable Development, Corporate Responsibility, Sarvodaya

"The Earth has enough resources for our need but not for our greed."

– M.K. Gandhi

Introduction

In today's corporate landscape, numerous organizations continue to prioritize profit spiralling, often at the expense of broader societal and ecological responsibilities. The "Beyond Profit" concept urges a fundamental rethinking of corporate objectives, advocating for the deep integration of Gandhian ethical considerations into essential business practices. The paper examines how incorporating Gandhian principles of justice—specifically, trusteeship, nonviolence, and universal welfare—can pave the way for a more sustainable and equitable future. By analysing responsible resource management and environmental accountability, this study explores the practical framework these principles offer for contemporary corporate governance (Gandhi, 1909).

The ongoing environmental crisis is primarily fuelled by unregulated ecological exploitation, unsustainable business practices, and deepening social inequalities. Modern corporate governance frameworks are increasingly criticized for their disproportionate emphasis on profit maximization, often at the expense of environmental integrity and societal well-being.

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How to cite this article:

Barge, V. V. (2025). Beyond Profit: Aligning Corporate Practices with Gandhian Principles of Justice for Sustainable Future. *Bulletin of Nexus*, 2(1), 31–39. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15017437>

In an age of rapid industrial expansion, heightened globalization, and depleting natural resources, the urgency for ethically sound and comprehensive governance models is more apparent than ever. This paper explores the critical intersection of environmental sustainability and corporate ethics, analysing the ways in which contemporary business practices aggravate environmental and social issues.

Conventional business models that prioritize profit above all else have significantly contributed to environmental degradation and the widening socio-economic divide. The lack of robust ethical frameworks that promote responsible resource management and fair wealth distribution has further aggravated these challenges. There is a pressing need to develop and implement alternative governance strategies that encourage **corporate accountability, sustainability, and social equity**. Carroll (1991) conceptualizes corporate social responsibility beyond profit, establishing a hierarchy of economic, ethical, legal, and philanthropic obligations that compel organizations to serve broader stakeholder interests. This framework aligns with Gandhian trusteeship, which views wealth as a communal trust benefiting society. The United Nations Principles for Responsible Investment (UNPRI, 2006) reinforces this perspective by providing ESG integration guidelines that encourage sustainable practices prioritizing societal welfare over short-term gains. These complementary approaches signal a paradigm shift where corporate success is measured through social justice and environmental sustainability rather than profit alone.

The research examines how Gandhian ethical principles can address modern environmental challenges through Corporate Governance Transformation (CGT). By analysing core concepts of Trusteeship, Sarvodaya (universal welfare), and ahimsa (non-violence), this study investigates their application in reshaping business practices beyond profit intensification. The research aims to develop a governance framework that emphasizes ethical stewardship and sustainable development while preserving long-term environmental stability.

This study critically examines corporate models and proposes an ethical transformation rooted in Gandhian philosophy. Beginning with a

theoretical analysis of Gandhian trusteeship, the research explores fundamental principles and their contemporary relevance to business ethics and corporate responsibility. The study then evaluates current corporate practices through an assessment of their environmental and social impacts, identifying critical governance gaps stemming from profit-centric approaches. Building on these insights, the research develops an integration framework that provides practical guidelines for implementing Gandhian principles through governance reforms and ethical protocols. The study ultimately aims to catalyse a transformation in corporate thinking by aligning business practices with Gandhian justice principles to establish sustainable and equitable governance models for positive global impact.

In pursuit of these objectives, the study will address the following research questions:
How can Gandhian ethics be effectively integrated into the complexities of modern corporate governance systems?

In what ways do profit-driven business models accelerate environmental and social challenges?
What practical steps can corporations take to align their operations with the ethical principles of trusteeship and sustainable development?

Significance

The fusion of Gandhian ethical principles with contemporary corporate governance offers a compelling alternative to current models that frequently neglect environmental and social responsibilities. By redefining corporate leadership through the lens of ethical stewardship, this study contributes meaningfully to academic discourse on sustainable business practices and to the formulation of practical strategies for both policymakers and corporate leaders. The research findings lay a solid foundation for developing corporate frameworks that are sustainable, equitable, and socially responsible (Carroll, 1991; United Nations Principles for Responsible Investment, 2006).

Scope and Limitations

This study primarily links Gandhian ethics and corporate governance. Limitations are acknowledged. The research is mainly qualitative and relies on conceptual analysis and case study

reviews rather than quantitative data. In addition, the application of traditional ethical frameworks may vary across corporate environments. Thus, the recommendations should be seen as part of a broader strategy for fostering corporate sustainability.

Research Gap

Although Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and sustainability have garnered significant academic attention, research examining non-Western ethical frameworks—specifically Gandhian principles—in modern corporate governance remains limited. This study bridges this gap by analysing how Gandhian ethics can provide both theoretical grounding and actionable guidelines for addressing environmental degradation and social inequity in corporate practices.

Literature Review

Gandhi's trusteeship philosophy provides a strong ethical foundation for tackling the

interconnected crises of environmental decline and social inequity. Trusteeship posits that wealth and natural resources are not personal possessions but communal trusts that must be managed for the collective welfare (Gandhi, 1909). Sarvodaya underscores the importance of inclusivity and equitable resource distribution, while non-violence advocates for minimizing harm in all human actions, extending to both society and the environment. These principles closely align with contemporary corporate governance theories such as Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and stakeholder theory, offering practical frameworks for sustainable and ethical business practices.

Conceptual Framework

A conceptual model illustrates how Gandhian ethics—trusteeship, Sarvodaya, and non-violence—intersect with modern corporate governance elements. Each principle is linked to specific governance practices:

Figure 1: Conceptual Diagram of Gandhian Principles and Corporate Governance



This conceptual framework positions Gandhian principles on the left side, aligned with contemporary corporate governance elements—including CSR programs, sustainability initiatives, and stakeholder accountability—on the right. Directional arrows illustrate the dynamic relationships, revealing how Gandhian ethics enhance and strengthen modern corporate governance practices.

Each element within this framework plays a crucial role in reshaping corporate governance structures:

Trusteeship: Gandhi's concept of trusteeship challenges traditional ideas of ownership. It views wealth as a societal asset, not personal property (Gandhi, 1909). In businesses, this idea makes leaders stewards of resources. Their role is to manage these resources for the good of society. They focus on long-term community welfare instead of quick profits.

Sarvodaya: Sarvodaya means universal upliftment. It supports inclusive economic growth and fair treatment of all stakeholders (Mohapatra, 2021). This principle fits well with modern CSR practices. It highlights fair labour

conditions and community progress. Businesses guided by Sarvodaya aim for shared prosperity. They ensure marginalized groups benefit from economic growth.

Non-Violence: Ahimsa, or non-violence, is central to Gandhian philosophy (Gandhi, 1909). In corporate sustainability, it encourages organizations to reduce environmental harm. It promotes ethical consumption habits. This principle shapes company policies to protect nature. It inspires practices that restore and preserve ecosystems.

Integrating Trusteeship, Sarvodaya, and Non-violence offers a transformative blueprint for a sustainable future. By reorienting corporate governance toward ethical stewardship, inclusive growth, and harm minimization, these principles drive long-term societal benefits, environmental preservation, and shared prosperity, ensuring that businesses consistently and actively foster a just, thriving, and sustainable global economy (Gandhi, 1909; Mohapatra, 2021).

Integration with Contemporary Theories

This framework effectively integrates Gandhian ethics with established corporate governance theories:

Triple-Bottom-Line Framework: John Elkington's model (Elkington, 1997) emphasizes economic, social, and environmental corporate performance. Gandhian principles reinforce the social and environmental aspects, guiding equitable resource utilization and environmental stewardship as a moral compass.

Stakeholder Theory: Stakeholder theory closely aligns with Sarvodaya, stressing the importance of addressing all stakeholder interests—not just shareholders (Banerjee, 2008). Integrating Gandhian ethics enhances inclusivity and promotes fair resource distribution, strengthening a company's focus on social justice.

By integrating these concepts, the framework offers a comprehensive approach to reimagining corporate governance. It tackles modern challenges like sustainability and social equity, providing practical strategies for embedding ethical stewardship in corporate decision-making.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, conceptual research design to explore integrating Gandhian ethics into modern corporate governance. A qualitative approach, suitable for examining ethical stewardship and sustainability in business, facilitates detailed textual and thematic analysis to address research questions (Creswell, 2013).

Data Collection

Data derives from two main categories:

Primary Sources: Mahatma Gandhi's key writings, including *Hind Swaraj* (Gandhi, 1909) and other texts, are central. These offer direct insights into Gandhian principles—trusteeship, Sarvodaya ("universal uplift/progress of all"), and non-violence—forming the study's philosophical basis.

Secondary Sources: Peer-reviewed articles, scholarly books, and case studies on CSR and sustainable governance are reviewed to deepen understanding. These sources provide modern perspectives linking Gandhian ethics with current corporate practices (Elkington, 1997; Banerjee, 2008; Mohapatra, 2021).

Data Analysis

A multi-layered analytical process is used:

Employing a rigorous multi-layered analytical process, this study first utilizes **content analysis**, systematically examining primary and secondary texts to identify recurring themes related to ethical stewardship, resource management, and corporate responsibility. Subsequently, **thematic analysis** undertakes a comparative examination of case studies and relevant literature, extracting key insights and highlighting both alignments and divergences between Gandhian ethics and contemporary corporate social responsibility (CSR) practices. Finally, **synthesis** integrates the findings derived from both content and thematic analyses into a unified framework, effectively connecting Gandhian principles with modern corporate governance models and yielding practical insights for advancing sustainability and social equity.

Validity and Reliability

To enhance the credibility of the study, triangulation will cross-verify findings across multiple data sources (Denzin, 1978). Consistency in coding will be ensured through iterative reviews and peer debriefing sessions, reinforcing methodological rigor and reducing potential biases. These strategies are essential for ensuring the reliability and trustworthiness of the analytical process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Empirical Analysis / Case Studies

Empirical Analysis / Case Study Investigations

A comparative empirical analysis via selected case studies, illuminating exemplary sustainable corporate practices. The selection process was guided by three core criteria: the integration of sustainability and social responsibility within the initiatives, the presence of ethical governance mechanisms, and the congruence of these practices with Gandhian principles of trusteeship, Sarvodaya (holistic progress), and non-violence. The study delves into two illustrative case studies, presenting contrasting perspectives on sustainable corporate governance:

Integrating Social and Environmental Imperatives

Aligning social justice with environmental stewardship demands comprehensive stakeholder engagement through:

Policy Development: Advocating for regulatory frameworks that promote equitable resource allocation and sustainable business practices. Stakeholder Collaboration: Facilitating meaningful community participation in corporate decision-making to ensure initiatives align with local needs. Innovation Partnerships: Fostering alliances with NGOs and research bodies to advance technologies that reduce ecological impact while promoting social progress.

Case Study 1: Project Shakti by Hindustan Unilever Hindustan Unilever's Project Shakti exemplifies the successful integration of social and environmental objectives. The initiative empowers rural women entrepreneurs while promoting sustainable consumption practices, demonstrating how businesses can effectively harmonize profitability with social advancement and environmental preservation (Hindustan Unilever, 2021).

Case Study 2- Patagonia, a US outdoor clothing brand, integrates sustainability with profit goals by prioritizing environmental stewardship and social responsibility. Its initiatives, including recycled materials usage and community support, reflect a Gandhian trusteeship approach, creating a model for sustainable, equitable corporate practices (UN Environment Programme, 2019). Patagonia, awarded the UN Champions of the Earth honour, exemplifies the "Beyond Profit" model by integrating sustainability into operations, reflecting Gandhian trusteeship to foster environmental stewardship and social equity.

These findings indicate that for corporate governance to achieve genuine sustainability, it must transcend conventional profit-cantered approaches and embrace holistic ethical frameworks that prioritize collective well-being. By incorporating Gandhian principles into governance structures, businesses can generate enduring value not only for shareholders but also for society at large.

Interpretation of Findings

Project Shakti by Hindustan Unilever and Patagonia serve as compelling examples of corporations successfully implementing Gandhian principles in their business practices. Through Project Shakti's focus on rural women's empowerment and sustainable consumption (Hindustan Unilever, 2021), and Patagonia's environmental stewardship model (UN Environment Programme, 2019), these companies demonstrate how business success can align with social equity and environmental responsibility. Their approaches exemplify the practical application of trusteeship principles, where profit serves as a means to advance societal welfare rather than an end in itself, despite implementing substantial Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programs, primarily operate within profit-oriented frameworks. This dichotomy accentuates the central research question: to what degree can Gandhian ethical constructs be integrated into contemporary corporate governance? Empirical evidence, substantiated by foundational texts (Gandhi, 1909) and contemporary scholarship

(Mohapatra, 2021; Banerjee, 2008), indicates that while CSR practices have progressed, they often lack the profound ethical transformation championed by Gandhi.

Practical Applications of Gandhian Ethics in Corporate Governance

Transforming Corporate Objectives

Gandhian trusteeship urges corporations beyond profit, positioning them as societal and environmental stewards (Gandhi, 1909). Unilever's "Sustainable Living Plan" exemplifies ethical integration with measurable social and ecological impacts.

Operationalizing Trusteeship: Examples

- **Profit Redistribution:** Strategic profit allocation to social initiatives, e.g., Tata Trusts' community projects.
- **Fair Labor Practices:** Equitable wages and worker rights, e.g., Patagonia's fair-trade certification.
- **Sustainable Resource Management:** Renewable energy and circularity, e.g., IKEA's "People and Planet Positive."

Implementation Framework

- **Governance Reforms:** Accountability and transparency models.
- **ESG Integration:** Measurable environmental, social, governance metrics.
- **Stakeholder Engagement:** Community & employee participation in decisions.

Key Challenges

- Stakeholder resistance to shift from profit focus.
- Resource limitations, especially for smaller businesses.
- Regulatory gaps in ethical governance incentives.

Gandhian ethics integration offers a viable framework for global challenges, transforming businesses into catalysts for sustainable development and social progress.

Practical Implications

The study's findings yield crucial practical implications for both corporate operations and public policy formulation. For businesses, embedding Gandhian principles into their governance structures can shift strategic priorities away from a singular focus on short-term profit maximization and towards enduring social welfare and ecological sustainability. In practical terms, this entails managing resources as communal trusts and fostering inclusive, participatory decision-making processes involving all stakeholders. From a policy-making standpoint, the research underscores the necessity for regulatory environments that promote ethical leadership and incentivize corporations to move beyond standard CSR initiatives. Strategic policy recommendations include the development of frameworks that harmonize corporate incentives with broader societal and environmental goals, thereby fostering a more inclusive and sustainable business ecosystem (Banerjee, 2008).

Critical Reflections

While this study provides valuable insights, certain inherent limitations warrant acknowledgement. Its qualitative and conceptual methodology, while offering rich interpretative depth, inherently limits the broad generalizability of the findings. The chosen case studies, while illustrative, may not comprehensively represent the full spectrum of corporate practices across diverse sectors and geographical contexts. Furthermore, effectively integrating traditional ethical frameworks into the complexities of modern corporate governance requires a nuanced understanding that is context-dependent. Future research would greatly benefit from employing a mixed-method approach to quantitatively assess the impact of ethical governance models on tangible corporate performance and sustainability metrics.

The following table outlines a Gandhian framework for corporate sustainability. It critiques profit-driven models and proposes ethical, environmental, and socially just practices for a sustainable future, rooted in key Gandhian principles.

Gandhian Principles for Sustainable Corporate Practices: A Tabular Framework

Table- 1 - Gandhian Principles for Sustainable Corporate Practices

I. Gandhian Critique	Core Tenet	Corporate Implication	Sustainable Outcome
A. Profit-Centric Models	Challenges profit as sole aim; advocates balanced success (economic, environmental, social).	Broaden success metrics beyond finance to include environmental & social impact.	Holistic success: societal & ecological well-being.
B. Industrialization	Critiques environmental/social damage; favors decentralized, local economies; warns against urban sprawl ecology. (Tiwari, 2019)	Prioritize local production, minimize environmental footprint, support local economies; balanced urban planning.	Reduced environmental damage; strong local communities; balanced urban/rural; resource preservation.
C. Materialistic Development	Questions material progress as sole measure; advocates balanced industrialization for human needs & environmental harmony. (Gandhi, 1938)	Re-evaluate endless growth; focus on sustainable fulfillment of essential human needs; prioritize well-being & ecology over material gain.	Wellbeing-focused development, not just consumption; reduced inequality; environmental harmony.
II. Gandhian Principles	Core Tenet (Concise)	Corporate Implication (Concise)	Sustainable Outcome (Concise)
A. Environmental Ethics (Ahimsa)	Non-violence to environment; responsible, minimal resource use; conservation focus; challenges consumerism. (Tiwari, 2019)	Environmental non-violence; minimize ecosystem harm; needs-based resource use, conservation & renewables; discourage excess consumerism.	Environmental preservation; reduced depletion & pollution; biodiversity protection; less consumerist economy.
B. Business Ethics (Satyagraha)	Truth & non-violence in business; collective welfare (Sarvodaya) over profit. (Gandhi, 1938)	Ethical business: truth, transparency, non-violence; prioritize stakeholder well-being (employees, communities, environment), contribute to Sarvodaya.	Ethical corporate behavior; stakeholder relations; accountability; businesses as social change agents; reduced exploitation.
III. Contemporary Solutions	Core Tenet (Concise)	Corporate Implication (Concise)	Sustainable Outcome (Concise)
A. Swaraj (Self-Rule)	Sustainable development blueprint; ecological & social justice linked; self-sufficiency, local autonomy. (Gandhi, 1938)	Support local communities & economies; community-led development; align with Swaraj at all levels.	Resilient communities; reduced global system dependence; localized, relevant development; social justice; climate mitigation via local solutions.

B. Modern Challenges	Gandhian principles solve climate change, resource depletion, inequality, ethical deficits. (Tiwari, 2019)	Adopt principles to address climate change (sustainable practices, conservation, ethics); champion social justice & ethical culture.	Climate change mitigation; social equity; ethical corporate sector; resilient, just global economy.
IV. Conclusion: Holistic Approach	Core Tenet (Concise)	Corporate Implication (Concise)	Sustainable Outcome (Concise)
A. Integrated Sustainability	Holistic framework: ethics, environment, social justice are interconnected, not separate. (Gandhi, 1938; Tiwari, 2019)	Embed Gandhian philosophy holistically; integrate ethics, environment, social justice into all operations & strategy. Sustainability core to business.	Success redefined: financial & positive societal/environmental impact; corporate sector for just & sustainable future.

Future Research Directions

Building upon these research outcomes, future investigations should prioritize empirical validation of the proposed integrative framework through expanded cross-sector case studies and longitudinal analyses. Significant potential exists for developing quantifiable indicators to assess the influence of ethical stewardship on tangible corporate sustainability outcomes. Furthermore, future exploration should delve into how varied cultural and institutional contexts shape the practical application of Gandhian ethics within corporate governance structures. Incorporating mixed-method research designs would enhance the robustness of the model and yield more profound insights into the specific mechanisms through which ethical principles can act as catalysts for corporate transformation

Conclusion and Recommendations:

This study argues that incorporating Gandhian trusteeship into contemporary corporate governance offers a transformative pathway to achieving sustainable and equitable business practices. A close examination of primary texts, such as *Hind Swaraj* (Gandhi, 1909), alongside current scholarship in Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and sustainability (Elkington, 1997; Banerjee, 2008; Mohapatra, 2021), reveals key insights. Firstly, governance frameworks rooted in trusteeship, *sarvodaya* (universal well-being), and non-violence—exemplified by community-led initiatives like the Milk Cooperative Society—present compelling alternatives to conventionally profit-driven corporate models. Secondly, while CSR initiatives are increasingly common, they often function as peripheral additions to core business strategies. This highlights a significant divergence from the holistic ethical system championed by Gandhian philosophy.

Integrating Gandhian principles into corporate governance offers a transformative strategy to address social inequality and environmental degradation. Trusteeship enables corporations to redefine their purpose beyond profit by embracing societal stewardship. This ethical framework—rooted in accountability, nonviolence, and sustainability—bridges the gap between financial performance and broader social and environmental justice.

Gandhi's emphasis on Sarvodaya and equitable resource distribution remains highly relevant. Modern corporations, with their vast resources and global influence, are well-positioned to operationalize these values. Initiatives by Patagonia, Tata Group and Unilever illustrate the benefits of ethical corporate alignment, though challenges like institutional inertia, resource constraints, and global applicability require collaborative solutions.

Recommendations

Policy and Regulatory Framework: Mandatory ESG reporting and fiscal incentives should be established to promote sustainable corporate practices, backed by governmental oversight and enforcement.

Leadership Development: Comprehensive training programs integrating Gandhian ethics with modern business should be implemented for corporate decision-makers, emphasizing practical application.

Inclusive Decision-Making: Meaningful stakeholder participation, incorporating community, employee, and environmental perspectives, should be fostered in strategic planning and implementation.

Sustainable Innovation: R&D investments in eco-conscious technologies and circular economy solutions should be prioritized, advancing both environmental preservation and business efficiency.

Cross-Border Collaboration: International partnerships should develop adaptable frameworks for translating Gandhian ethics across diverse cultural and economic contexts.

Governance and Reporting: Transparent governance systems emphasizing ethical accountability should be instituted, validated through rigorous sustainability reporting and third-party audits.

Acknowledgments

I am Dr. Vrushali Vasantrao Barge thankful to HOD Dr. Sanjay Tambat, Department of Communication and Journalism, Savitribai Phule Pune University for granting permission to carry out the work.

Financial support and sponsorship

Nil.

Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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