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The Impact of Gandhian Praxis on the Mexican Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN)

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Research Article

Keywords: EZLN, Gandhi, Non-Violence, Satyagraha, Strategies

Posted Date: November 3rd, 2026

DOI: https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-11375664/v1

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Additional Declarations: No competing interests reported.

Abstract

The Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) opposed NAFTA, viewing it as a near-fatal threat to the region's indigenous populations. The organization shifted its strategy significantly after its initial conflict, focusing on political dialogue, struggle, and peaceful resistance to pursue autonomous self-governance. The study has utilized descriptive and exploratory methodologies to explain how the Zapatistas, independent of the Mexican government, adopted Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy of non-violent resistance and his comprehensive constructive program as the core ideology of their movement. This study aligns with Gandhi's principles and analyses the Zapatistas' self-governing institutions responsible for justice, education, healthcare, and economic development. The movement's principles closely align with Gandhian ideology through their common focus on self-reliance (Swadeshi), moral persuasion (Satyagraha), and decentralised self-governance (Gram Swaraj). The Zapatistas also effectively used the internet to build global solidarity, support networks for their autonomy, and organize resistance against government oppression. The movement has made significant progress by strengthening its organizational structure and autonomous territories, emphasizing civilian protection during regional conflicts, and launching international dialogue initiatives, such as the "Journeys for Life" movement from 2019 to 2025. It serves as a notable example in the fields of global justice and indigenous rights that the Gandhian philosophy of non-violence remains a powerful tool for resisting neoliberalism and colonial autocracy.

1. Introduction

The Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) was an indigenous revolutionary movement which emerged onto the world stage on January 1, 1994, arising in opposition to the implementation of NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement) in North America. The spokesperson, Subcommandant Macros, of the EZLN declared NAFTA as a 'death sentence' for the indigenous people and argued that it would remove the protection for communal land, which was known as Ejido land, and this would lead them towards long-term poverty and make them landless (Harvey, 2011).

The protest began with a brief, violent skirmish that became the organization's official founding date. However, the movement quickly changed course, shifting its strategy significantly after that initial conflict to focus on political dialogue, struggle, and peaceful resistance to pursue autonomous self-governance. Central to this theoretical shift in the Zapatista movement was their core principle of coll*mandar obedeciendo* (leading by obeying), which was to mirror the collective will of the indigenous people of Chiapas rather than impose it, thereby enabling them to achieve their own goals (Collier & Quaratiello, 2005). This movement changed its shape over time and lasted three decades.

Half a century ago, Mahatma Gandhi built a mass movement against British rule in India, based on 'Satyagraha', meaning truth grounded in moral discipline, and 'Ahimsa', meaning the absence of arms or violence (Giannola, 2025). The observers, journalists and academics directly compared the Zapatistas' unarmed march to Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr.'s march, which started from Chiapas to Mexico City in 20001, to put forward their demand for indigenous rights.

Crucially, this study explains how the Zapatistas, independent of the Mexican government, align with Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy of 'Non-Violent Resistance' and his comprehensive constructive program as the core ideology of their movement. Aligning with Gandhian principles, the analysis focuses on the Zapatistas' self-governing institutions responsible for justice, education, healthcare, and economic development. These autonomous communities critique neoliberal and state-centric approaches through non-violent resistance, emphasizing local languages, cultures, lifestyles, and community well-being. Indeed, their principles closely align with Gandhian ideology through their shared focus on self-reliance (Swadeshi), moral persuasion (Satyagraha), and decentralized self-governance (Gram-Swaraj).

This article takes the existing but scattered equation and organizes it into a single logic. It explores what two traditions have in common and the extent to which the Zapatista movement is similar to Gandhian principles in its struggle against the British in India. It also explains how they differ.

Statement of Problem

Most studies have argued that the Zapatista movement and the Gandhian movement are distinct, as the Zapatistas are products of Latin American peasant history and anti-globalization politics, whereas the Indian anti-colonial figure is Gandhi. These two strands of literature rarely coincide in the long term. This study closes this gap by answering the underlying question of how materially weak and marginalized people can resist a very strong economic and political system without using violence and being destroyed by it. A structured comparison can show which parts of the Gandhian principles in the movement travelled through the culture and history.

Research Questions

This article explores three questions.

1. What are the economic and political conditions that pushed the Zapatista movement towards its founding language of dignity, and how does it relate to the moral vocabulary of Mahatma Gandhi, which was used against colonial rule by him?
2. What are the core specific practices, namely self-governance, community building, and public communications, in the Zapatista organizations that resemble the Gandhian philosophy?
3. What does the comparison suggest about the broader range of moral resistance movements that emerged in response to trade liberalization and structural economic reforms?

2. Literature review

2.1 The Zapatista Movement's History

2.1.1 1983 to 1993

The Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) was not new at the time when NAFTA came into existence, but it was secretly founded on November 17, 1983, in the Lacandon Jungle of Chiapas, Mexico as a secret wing of the National Liberation Forces (FLN), which was an urban Marxist-Leninist guerrilla group founded in Monterrey in 1969. It was an underground military command within the FLN that believed it should act as a vanguard to start a revolution and seize state power. When this organization reached Chiapas, to survive, they had to completely change the method of their operations and transform into 'students from teachers' to learn how to listen to others. Instead of forcing their Marxist ideas onto the Mayan Communities, they blended their political view with Mayan ancestral traditions, which were highly organized. This created a unique, hybrid philosophy known as '*Neozapatismo*'. Their primary challenges were to tackle extreme poverty, landowner violence, and private white guards (Gahman, 2017).

Mayan women played a massive role during these 10 years of the underground period from 1983 to 1993. They participated in organization and made up one-third of the rebel army forces. The tradition of Mayan culture was patriarchal and sexist; these women fought to change their own communities from within, and they drafted the Women's Revolutionary Law, which demanded equal rights for women, including the right to education, safety from violence, and the freedom to choose their own partners and when to have children (Tilly & Kennedy, 2006).

By the early 1990s, the underground movement was massive yet completely hidden, but the breaking point came in 1992, when the Mexican government amended Article 27 of the Constitution, ending land distribution and destroying the Mayan communities' legal hopes of ever owning their communal lands.

2.1.2 First Public Insurrection 1994

The community assemblies voted to prepare for war after all peaceful options were closed, and thousands of masked Mayan Zapatistas stepped out of the jungle on January 1, 1994; the exact day the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) began (Figure 1). They took over several towns in Chiapas and shouted '*¡Ya Basta!*' which means 'Enough' to the world. They captured seven municipal centers in Chiapas, including San Cristóbal de las Casas, and proclaimed the First Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle (EZLN, 1994). Their manifesto demanded eleven basic human rights, namely work, land, housing, food,

healthcare, education, independence, liberty, democracy, justice, and peace. The militant skirmishes with the Mexican army lasted only twelve days, but the national and global responses were massive and positive.

Recognizing the need for peace, the EZLN initiated a major strategic pivot and declared a unilateral ceasefire and transformed from an armed offensive vanguard into an armed non-violent civil movement (Collier & Quaratiello, 2005). To protect their communities from state-backed paramilitary violence, they maintained their weapons as a defensive shield, while using early internet networks to coordinate global solidarity campaigns (Arquilla & Ronfeldt, 2001). This innovative 'netwar' bypassed state-controlled media, mobilized international civil society, and established an international protective shield of human rights observers in rebel territory (Arquilla & Ronfield, 2001).

2.1.3 Unilateral Autonomy and the Caracoles (1996- 2018)

Peace negotiations in 1996 produced the San Andrés Accords on Indigenous Rights and Culture, which promised constitutional recognition of indigenous self-determination and autonomous governance (Stavenhagen, 2003). However, after the Mexican Congress passed a heavily diluted autonomy bill in 2001 that betrayed the core tenets of the accords. The Zapatistas ceased all dialogue with the federal government. They turned inward to construct unilateral, de facto autonomy 'from below' without state sanction, organizing around thirty Rebel Zapatista Autonomous Municipalities (MAREZ).

They established five regional hubs called Caracoles, which means 'Snails,' governed by civilian Juntas de Buen Gobierno (Councils of Good Government) (Harvey, 2005). Central to this theoretical shift in the Zapatista movement was their core principle, mandar obedeciendo (leading by obeying), which meant mirroring the collective will of the indigenous people of Chiapas rather than imposing it, thereby enabling them to achieve their own goals (Collier & Quaratiello, 2005) (Figure 2). These autonomous zones developed alternative, self-reliant institutions mirroring Gandhian 'Swadeshi' and 'Swaraj', including independent healthcare systems, agricultural cooperatives, and bilingual primary schools modelled on critical pedagogy, closely aligned with Gandhi's educational paradigm of Nai Talim (Baronnet, 2015).

2.1.4 Decentralization (2019- present)

Over the past few years, the state of Chiapas has become dangerous due to drug cartels and their violent war to control the border area near Guatemala. The COVID-19 pandemic made local farming and economic survival very difficult, but the Zapatista communities refused to accept any aid from the government, and many young people left their hometowns for better opportunities and to study, which began to shrink the movement.

In late 2023, they announced they would dissolve all MAREZ and their regional councils of good government due to multiple external challenges and counterinsurgency tensions, which made them easy targets for central violence, extortion, and government spying. Instead, they relied on three highly localized levels: the local Autonomous Governments (GAL), the Collective of Zapatista Autonomous Government (CGAZ), and the Assemblies Collective of Zapatista Autonomous Government (ACGAZ) (Martinez & Stahler-Sholk, 2024).

Along with the new structure, the Zapatistas introduced a model of land sharing called "the common and non-property" and declared that the land they won during the 1994 uprising would not be anyone's property but would be lent to anyone who wants to work on it. They also closed their regional hubs to outside tourists to keep their people safe (Moisés, 2023) (Figure 3).

2.2 Gandhian Philosophy and it's principles

The Gandhian philosophical base in the Zapatista movement centres on Gandhi's 'constructive program'. The concept suggests that revolutionary change originates from creating alternative social relationships and lifestyles now, instead of initially gaining political power and then transforming society (Chabot, 2018). Gandhian philosophy unifies truth, nonviolence, and self-rule as an indivisible way of life.

Gandhi believed in Satya (Truth), Ahimsa (Non-Violence), Swaraj (Self-rule), and 'Satyagraha' (Truth Force). He described truth and non-violence as two sides of a single unstamped metallic disk where distinguishing means from end becomes irrelevant (Gianolla, 2025). Rather than abstract theory, Gandhi treated philosophy as engaged practice, focusing on living truth and non-violence rather than formulating doctrinal systems (Allen, 2019).

Satyagraha is the methodology of non-violent resistance that Gandhi developed through experimental and experiential practice, creating constructive communities where social and political practices were tested before being scaled nationally (Gianolla, 2025). 'Swaraj' means self-rule and ethical living, which encompasses both political freedom from colonial rule and individual self-mastery. Gandhian philosophy critiques unchecked modernity and violence, offering sustainable practices aligned with human values as an alternative to dominant Western models of development.

2.3 Existing Comparison between the Two traditions

Gandhi's formative program, his practice of building self-sufficient institutions instead of opposing the colonial state, offers Zapatistas a valuable model for grasping the shift towards autonomous commons and community development (Chabot, 2018). The Zapatista concept of dignity functions more as a moral assertion of full humanity rather than a demand for resources. It parallels Gandhian ideas, where truth and self-esteem are seen as foundational for achieving material goals (Rojas, 2025; Turner,2021).

At the same time, many researchers kept the two thoughts separate from each other in terms of violence. The post-1994 Zapatista movement was more strategic and gradual rather than theoretical from the start, which was very different from Gandhi's principles of non-violence, even in self-defence, in almost all cases (Smith,2016).

3. Methodology

This study has utilized descriptive and exploratory design which is basically used for comparative political thinking. It has used secondary sources such as published Zapatista communiques, interviews, Mahatma Gandhi's own writing on 'Satyagraha' and 'Swaraj', published articles, academic books, and editorials from various authentic websites.

The exploratory method is mostly used in political theory and field studies where the subject of study is language, theory, or public communication rather than quantitative analysis or data driven facts. Authors' have done the descriptive and exploratory analysis in mainly three stages, where first stage comes with understanding the economic and social situation why this movement took place, second, how it started, it's history and growth over period, third, understanding Gandhian Philosophy and finally fourth, how these two thoughts aligns and Zapatista movement survival by adopting Gandhian principles.

4. Detailed Analysis of Gandhian Philosophy and Principles

Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy is not a set of rigid, static rules; he lived those principles in his life as an integrated framework of decolonial praxis, not only in India but also in South Africa. Gandhian thought is held together by five central, deeply interconnected principles that link personal, ethical transformation of the individual to the political and economic liberation of the collective (Salcedo, 2025).

4.1 Swaraj (Self-Rule)

'Swaraj' is traditionally understood as political independence or individual self-control, but it carries much deeper, highly integrated philosophical, spiritual, and ecological meanings. There are different definitions of 'Swaraj', such as Economic Swaraj, Social Swaraj, Spiritual Sovereignty, and self-sufficiency, etc. In Gandhian Philosophy, 'Swaraj' was a rich, multi-layered concept that goes far beyond simple political independence from colonial rule. It was inspired by traditions such as the Bhagavad Gita, Jain Ahimsa, and Tolstoy's radical Christianity (Salcedo, 2025). Gandhi contended that in the absence of this inner freedom, political independence would simply serve as a replication of the oppressor's paradigm.

In Hind Swaraj (1909), his key political work, he emphasized that true home rule primarily means self-rule. He explained that 'Swaraj', 'Satyagraha', and 'Swadeshi' are interconnected principles.in his own words, "It is when we learn to rule ourselves" (Anand, n.d). Politically and economically, Swaraj is built from a bottom-up approach through Gram Swaraj. In his model, each village functions as a complete republic, independent of its neighbors for vital basic needs, yet cooperative and interdependent for secondary needs. He emphasized economic and Village swaraj, which dictate the Khadi, Charkha, and Village industries with Gram Swaraj (PolSci Institute, 2025).

4.2 Swadeshi (first Neighbors rule)

'Swadeshi' is the path to reach the goal of 'Swaraj'. It is a comprehensive philosophy of localized responsibility. If needed, first reach out to those around you before reaching out to those distant and unfamiliar (PolSci Institute, 2025). Gandhi transformed 'Swadeshi' from a bycott movement into a comprehensive philosophy of economic self-reliance, advocating the use of locally produced goods and services to sustain communities (Senawiang et al., 2024).

In his 1916 address to the Missionary Conference at Madras, Gandhi described 'Swadeshi' as "that spirit in us which restrict us to use and service of our immediate surroundings to the exclusion of the more remote" (Pai, 2021). Khadi and the Constructive Programme were part of the 'Swadeshi' call. He made Khadi (hand-spun cloth) the central symbol of 'Swadeshi' and urged people to spin and weave their own clothes as a sacrament, opposing the British factory-made clothes (Giri, 2004). It created a sustainable foundation for a decentralized village economy with self-dependency, empowerment, and a way to reduce inequality.

Gandhi famously championed "Production by Masses, not Mass Production". It created dignity of labor when women also took part and played their role economically. Charkha and Khadi making was not only a process for the poor peasants; the elite also practiced it, and it broke down the rigidity of class segregation in labor. Gandhi famously said 'Swadeshi' as the soul of 'Swaraj'.

4.3 Satyagraha (Dynamic Truth-Force)

It is a Sanskrit term, 'Satyagraha', which literally means 'clinging to truth.' It was a methodology of nonviolent resistance that Gandhi developed through experimental and experiential practice, creating constructive communities in which social and political practices were tested before being scaled nationally (Gianolla, 2025). He first introduced the term in 1906 by announcing a contest in the Indian Opinion newspaper. Maganlal Gandhi suggested the word "sadagraha," which Gandhi then thoughtfully refined to 'Satyagraha'. This change was meant to uplift the goal from merely a tangible cause to a higher, transcendental pursuit of truth, highlighting its deeper significance (Bhand, 2025).

Gandhi emphasized three essential characteristics of 'Satyagraha', which were: the weapon of the strong, it admits of no violence, and it ever insists upon truth (Gajić & Despotović, 2025). It aims to convert the opponent by awakening their moral conscience, not to defeat or humiliate them, and it is oriented toward 'welfare for all'. Ahimsa is an inseparable part of 'Satyagraha'; it is not passive but an active, mind-driven practice of beneficence (Davies, 2021).

4.4 Gram Swaraj (Village Republic & Decentralization)

Mahatma Gandhi defined Gram Swaraj as a philosophy in which each village functions as an autonomous republic with complete powers of its own, self-sufficient in fundamental necessities and self-governing in vital matters (Aishwarya & Sagar, 2022). He emphasized local-level governance and Gram-Panchayat for decision making powers rather than a centralized rule of states and central for the villages.

His famous quoted for Gram Saraj is "My Idea of village swaraj is that it is a complete republic, independent of its neighbors for its on vital wants, and yet interdependent for many others in which dependence is a necessity." (Singh, 2012).

He practiced Gram Swaraj at three which was individual self-control, national freedom from colonial rule, and community-level Gram Swaraj (Rout, 2021). The model promoted 'Swadeshi' goods, cottage industries, and local production-

consumption relationships to prevent rural exploitation by urban centers. It also served as sustainable alternative to industrialized society, which Gandhi believed caused gross inequality and materialism (Gandhi, 2021).

Gandhi's constructive programme for village liberation encompassed communal unity, removal of untouchability, prohibition, village health, home industries, basic education, and changes in social attitudes toward women. It ultimately aimed at Sarvodaya, meaning 'welfare of all' (Rout, 2021; Gandhi, 2021).

4.5 Nai Talim (Basic Education for Decolonization)

Nai Talim which means "New Education" was initiated as a radical, ancient new paradigm of decolonized knowledge production and sharing (Jain, 2023) (Figure 4). He formalized the concept at the Wardha Conference in October 1937, where he gathered leading educationists to deliberate on a national education scheme built around productive work and mother-tongue instruction (Sharma & Rawat, 2025). The core philosophy of Nai Talim was holistic integration and nurturing of the head, hand, and heart (Patil & Sinha, 2022).

It stood in sharp contrast to state-approved schooling that promoted standardization, centralization and the ideology of unlimited material wealth.

In this manual labor such as gardening, agriculture, pottery, and weaving was centre of learning, and not treated as extracurricular hobbies only. They put practical practice at the core and broke down the rigid caste and class barriers that historically despised manual work. Gandhian philosopher Vinoba Bhave expanded the core objective of Nai Talim by linking it to self-sufficiency. He also argued that Nai Talim should not be imprisoned into a system, otherwise it would be killed.

5.NAFTA and Zapatista Movement (core principles and strategies)

5.1 NAFTA and its Consequence's in Mexico

NAFTA was a agreement signed by the United States, Canada, and Mexico in 1992, eliminating most trade tariffs while establishing intellectual property protections and removing barriers to foreign investment (Vita, 2021). They argued that privatization of collectively held lands and neoliberal economic policy would undermine small producers and make Mexico more dependent on imported crops such as corn at cheap rate from US, which was there main staple food of indigenous people. This diluted the price of corn (Harvey, 2011). NAFTA was seen in North America to achieve prosperity, but the Zapatistas, in their own words, considered it a "death sentence." They argued that NAFTA would undermine their economic and social traditions, destroy their communal assets, and exacerbate existing inequalities (EZLN, 1994; Goodell Ugalde, 2024; Vita, 2021). Their central fear was that it would reinforce a master-servant relationship in which Mexican human and natural resources were exploited for the benefit of the United States and Canada.

The literature and data suggest that Zapatistas' fears were largely not baseless. Extreme poverty in Mexico rose quickly from 16 per cent to 28 per cent in the first five year of NAFTA, while heavy investment has been seen in richer northern states which left southern states disadvantaged (Vita, 2021). It fed an unequal exchange of natural and human capital, accentuating Mexico's role as a "factory" for North America. It was seen that one-third of corn subsequently were imported form United States which they were exporting before. So, there was not a single reason for this movement but a serial sequence of exploitation of Mexican people, labor, and their lands (Fig. 5).

5.2 Strategies and Methodologies of the Zapatista Movement (EZLN) in the Struggle

Researchers view this strategic shift by the EZLN as moving from "seizing power" to "building power." This change has significantly influenced anti-globalization movements globally and those fighting for the fundamental and natural rights of indigenous peoples (Holloway & Peláez, 1998). In their initial action within the movement, they maintained their core demands, which encompassed the rights to employment, housing, food, autonomy, land, justice, and regional peace (Harvey,

2005, 2011). These demands served as a testament to their opposition to neoliberal ideology and their expansive vision for a more egalitarian and just society. The Zapatistas have also profoundly altered perceptions of modern social movements by challenging the traditional notions of resistance and revolution associated with Chiapas, Mexico. They did not rely on the traditional methods of armed insurgency groups, including violence, guerrilla warfare and raids; instead, they adopted themes of political participation, dialogue, the formation of autonomous institutions and engagement with the international community (Speed, 2006).

There are a few strategies which they practised over the period of this movement:

5.2.1 Horizontal self-Governance (*Mandar Obedeciendo)*

Prominent among the primary strategies adopted for struggle within the Zapatista movement is the establishment of autonomous self-governing organizations. Under this Mayan paradigm, leaders derive their mandate directly from the consent of the general populace and remain accountable to them. This process fosters a form of participatory democracy wherein the general public actively engages in policy formulation, thereby guiding the direction of governance.

The Zapatista community's decision-making is horizontal, with leaders accountable to the community. They regularly seek public support through community assemblies. This approach shows a strong commitment to grassroots democracy, social equity, and the empowerment of marginalized groups (Collier & Quaratiello, 2005). Such governance challenges traditional state-centred and hierarchical models. It also aligns with Gandhi's critique of modern governments and his idea of a non-violent social order.

To prevent their military command from dominating civilian life, they established a strict division of power. The EZLN's military commands stepped back to serve purely as defensive sentinels while administrative control was handed to regional *Caracoles* (Snails) governed by the *Juntas de Buen Gobierno* (Good Government Councils) (Harvey, 2005). The council members served very short, rotating shifts and received zero personal accumulation of power. In late 2023, when regional councils became easy targets due to pyramids of power, they dissolved all the MAREZ and pushed all administrative power down to the direct local assembly through Local Autonomous Governments (GAL).

5.2.2 Self-Reliance and Solidarity Economics

The Zapatistas developed a self-sufficient cooperative economic network designed to reduce their livelihoods from exploitation by states and corporations. Historically, Mayan coffee farmers were exploited by local middlemen called coyotes. To combat this, they formed their own coffee cooperatives, drying and processing their coffee for direct export to fair-trade markets in North America and Europe. This way, they kept all the value to cover essential needs like education and healthcare (Forbis, 2014).

Further, as part of the strategy of "being in resistance," they refused all government funds, including anti-poverty funds, housing aid, and social projects that fostered self-reliance. To protect their families from price shocks, they established a credit fund for low-interest emergency loans and ran collective stores which purchased essential goods in bulk to eliminate transport costs (Gahman, 2017).

5.2.3 Autonomous Education (Rebel Schooling)

Rejecting the state-imposed, monocultural public school system, indigenous communities identified and operated their own schooling, which is popularly known as "rebel schooling. Its curriculum fosters critical thinking and differs significantly from the official Mexican government curriculum by examining indigenous Mayan languages, culture, history, and global politics through a critical lens (Esteva & Prakash, 1998). They treated the natural environment as their classroom, and students learned hands-on sustainable agroecological farming and cultivated traditional non-transgenic corn to protect their cultural identity (Gahman, 2017). In 2013, they initiated a widespread global educational campaign, inviting thousands of international activists to stay with Zapatista families for a week to experience firsthand how daily communal resistance functions through physical labor and survival efforts. (Ericson & Tan, 2021).

5.2.4 Healthcare

Much like its educational system, the Zapatista movement also maintains a healthcare system, managed by educated community health workers, that provides services to the region by integrating traditional Mayan healing practices with modern medical methods. In 2005, 84.5 per cent of Zapatista children were fully vaccinated, while the figure for pro-government communities stood at 74.8 per cent (Castellanos, 2014). To prevent domestic abuse and household financial ruin, the assemblies mandate a 100 per cent ban on the possession, planting and consumption of alcohol and narcotics (Warfield, 2014).

5.2.5 Women's Active Participation

Mayan women organized extensively during the clandestine underground phase (1983–1993). The Tzotzil consultative networks led by Susana; the Women's Revolutionary Law was declared publicly on January 1, 1994. It legally guarantees women's rights to decide whom and when they marry; it banned arranged marriages; allowed them to choose their reproductive timing; allowed them to run for political and military offices; and ensured equal pay (Tilly & Kennedy, 2006).

5.2.6 The Netwar

At the core of the Zapatista survival was their pioneering use of communication as an apolitical weapon, transforming a highly localized conflict into a globally visible struggle. EZLN activists understood the power of storytelling and shaping public opinion during their struggle. Though the movement lacks a single leader, speeches by its prominent figure, Subcomandante Marcos, have enabled the Zapatistas to share their principles, grievances, and goals worldwide. They used a unique, highly poetic style of writing to make anti-capitalist concepts more accessible, engaging and culturally grounded. This has elevated their origins from a local dispute to an internationally recognized cause (Schulz, 1998).

The movement's activists were pioneers in utilizing nascent platforms and the internet to disseminate their message; in doing so, they bypassed the filters of traditional media as well as government regulations (Russell, 2005). Sites like *¡Ya Basta!* At Swarthmore College, the Chiapas95listserve, and Swaraj networks translated and broadcast their messages globally. This global network has provided the movement with vital material, political, and technical support for its struggle. They run their own underground FM radio station (Voice of Voiceless), which they broadcast 16 hours per day in native languages, bypassing massive barriers of local illiteracy and geographic isolation to reach across the mountains. They used *pasamontañas* a type of ski mask to enforce a philosophy that "everyone is Macros" (Biel, 2012).

6. The Strategic and Ethical Alignments between Mahatma Gandhi's Philosophy and the Zapatista Movement

The two strategies, arising in different eras and geographies, both shift the target of resistance from merely swapping state rulers to dismantling the coloniality of deep structures: a matrix of racial, cultural, and economic exploitation that outlives formal independence (Salcedo, 2025). A key similarity between Gandhi's methods and the Zapatistas is their focus on moral persuasion and 'Satyagraha', the power of truth. Gandhi's approach, based on passive resistance and 'Satyagraha', revolved around the idea of Satya Shakti (the strength of truth), which he constantly aimed to embody through non-violent actions. This Zapatista strategy helped build their connections with their backers, allowing them to align their broader political and economic agenda with the aspirations and experiences of the Maya communities in Chiapas. Their innovative approaches and technologies, especially their use of the Internet to communicate internally within the organization, enabled them to work around obstacles posed by the government and the media's dissemination of inaccurate information. This enabled them to make direct connections and create a global network that brought together scholars of social movements, anti-globalization groups, communities negatively affected by NAFTA, and the Zapatista revolutionary cadres (Schulz, 1998). The Zapatistas have systematically implemented some core Gandhian Principles, translating them into twenty-first-century indigenous practice (Figure 6):

6.1 Satyagraha and the Strategy of "Armed Non-Violence"

The Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) movement made a strong start to its struggle, adopting flexible strategies and tactics that have enabled it to sustain its existence for over three decades. Initial stages of the EZLN were full of violence due to the non-response of the state towards their problems and the abrupt establishment of NAFTA, but soon they rejected the path of violence and shifted towards the multifaceted strategy centered on self-governance, non-violence, political and economic dialogues and organizations with global connections (Collier & Quaratiello, 2005). They adopted a strategic posture known as “armed non-violence”, retaining their arms strictly as a defensive shield to safeguard their communities from state-backed paramilitaries. International human rights activists and delegations from global civil society remained active within Zapatista territories, acting as a non-violent buffer. They monitored all human rights violations and lent international credibility to the movement's mission for autonomy.

So, Zapatistas followed the path of Gandhi’s ‘Satyagraha’ in their own way. The ultimate goal of Gandhi's ‘Satyagraha’ was to appeal to the adversary’s inner conscience and guide them toward the path of justice (Gandhi, 1927). Similarly, through messages delivered in a poetic and eloquent style, Subcomandante Marcos (now Galiano) raised awareness among the Zapatista community regarding globalization, neoliberalism, systemic governmental corruption, and the conspiratorial marginalization of indigenous peoples.

6.2 Swaraj and Gram Swaraj

Gandhi’s concept of ‘Swaraj’ and ‘Gram Swaraj’ envisioned a decentralized society of self-sufficient villages free from state control (Singh, 2025). The Zapatistas parallel this by constructing autonomous municipalities and regional Good Government Councils, effectively creating village republics independent of the Mexican state. Gandhi’s democratic ideals, especially the decentralization of power and the sovereignty of the people, are closely connected to the Zapatista principle of *mandar obedeciendo*. Both philosophies emphasized community life, consensual participation, and breaking away from authoritarian systems to achieve collective self-sufficiency. They rejected the goal of seizing state power but focused on building their own power with strict collective accountability, as Gandhian philosophy also mentions.

In precisely the same vein as Gandhi’s village-level administration, members of the Zapatista community have meticulously developed their own autonomous political and economic structures. These structures include Councils of Good Government and Conch Shells, which serve as cultural and regional administrative hubs. Collectively, these structures systematically manage a comprehensive system within the Zapatista community, encompassing economic development, education, healthcare services, and restorative justice for resolving disputes. Operating autonomously, these structures function explicitly outside the jurisdiction and control of the Mexican government (Harvey, 2005; Baronnet, 2009; Esteva & Prakash, 1998).

This inclusive, constructive program serves as a robust and steadfast vehicle for empowering, enabling, and fostering self-reliance among segments of society currently on the margins. This constructive program aligns with Gandhi’s vision, which posits that true freedom and liberation are not attained by violently overthrowing an established political regime, but rather emerge from genuine self-governance and economic independence (Sharp, 1973).

6.3 Swadeshi

The economic strategy of Gandhian praxis is ‘Swadeshi’, which encourages communities to produce and consume within their immediate surroundings (Polsci Institute, 2025). He used the spinning wheel and hand-spun clothes as tools; in parallel, they built fair-trade coffee cooperatives, collective bulk grocery stores, ran revolving credit banks, and practised non-chemical, sustainable agroecological subsistence farming to protect their ancestral seeds and maintain food sovereignty (Collier & Quaratiello, 2005). Both movements linked economic resistance to broader liberation, using local production and consumption to undermine external control (Gahman, 2020).

6.4 Education and Healthcare

To prevent children from being domesticated by state schooling, Gandhi started Nai Talim; in parallel, the Zapatistas rejected state-mandated public schooling, created their own curriculum, and built their own Autonomous Education System, including all holistic measures of the 3H. Over the past six years, autonomous education and healthcare systems have been vital to the Zapatistas, who have adapted to the difficulties caused by the COVID-19 pandemic (EZLN, 2020). Zapatista health workers in autonomous communities have developed protocols rooted in traditional knowledge, including Mayan healing practices such as acupuncture, and emphasise community cooperation, echoing Gandhi's push for self-reliant, locally based healthcare solutions (Gandhi,1940).

6.5 Communication as Powerful Tool

In 2021–2022, the Zapatista community launched the *Viaje por la Vida* (Journey for Life) campaign, sending a delegation, the *Escuela Itinerante* (Travelling School), to participate in it. They travelled through North America, Europe, and other areas to voice their concerns (EZLN 2021a, 2021b). Gandhi emphasized the importance of communicating with people, using newspapers, articles, and letters. He consistently shared his thoughts and struggles with the nation and presented his ideas on international platforms, including at conferences. In line with this, they used the internet to reach locals and others, so they wouldn't be misled by state-controlled information; they welcomed foreigners to join them to better understand their issues. FM radio channels.

7. Limitations

The study explores how this movement aligns with Gandhian thought and philosophy, while noting several differences. The key similarities stem from the significant alignment and the shift from violence to armed non-violence, primarily for protection from paramilitaries. Future research could include a systematic literature review (SLR) combined with bibliometric analysis to examine how scholars differentiate between these two perspectives.

8. Conclusion

The most significant demand of the Zapatista movement remains, to this day, the protection of natural resources and their land. This resistance is rooted in a comprehensive ecological philosophy that reveres the Earth as a mother. The Zapatista movement demonstrates how a group, although grounded in armed conflict and functioning within state objectives, can intentionally employ non-violent, Gandhian strategies of 'Satyagraha' to secure and sustain significant social, environmental, ecological, political, and economic transformations.

Mahatma Gandhi's strategic insight is reflected in the EZLN's struggle, even amidst some differences. Although they have different strategic nuances and backgrounds, this approach shows a deep understanding of power dynamics. In essence, the Zapatista movement presents a robust and contemporary interpretation of how Gandhian principles and strategies can be applied effectively. It stands as a prime example of grassroots democracy, with autonomy and self-governance as its primary objectives.

This is because the Zapatista community effectively employs the moral authority of Gandhian non-violence and is deeply committed to self-sufficiency, establishing innovative democratic systems at the grassroots level to achieve this. Their movement embodies a continuous form of "everyday resistance"; its growth shows how people can challenge a power system rooted in force and coercion, while also fostering a future of grassroots freedom and well-being using Gandhian methods.

Furthermore, the movement is regarded as exceptional because, despite facing widespread repression, it remains steadfastly committed to active resistance and to the construction of an alternative, just future. This achievement is attributable to a unique blend of indigenous wisdom, authentic resistance, and an unwavering commitment to community autonomy.

Declarations

Author Contribution

All authors contributed to the conceptualization and design of the study. Dr. Virendra Kumar Gandhi formulated the core research framework, conducted the primary theoretical analysis on Gandhian philosophy, and drafted the manuscript. Dr. Reshma Gupta contributed to the data collection, literature review on the Zapatista movement (EZLN), and the analysis of autonomous institutional structures. Both authors actively participated in revising the manuscript, provided critical feedback, and approved the final version for submission.Author Details:Dr. Virendra Kumar Gandhi (First Author / Corresponding Author)Assistant Professor, Department of Humanities and Liberal Arts, Rabindranath Tagore University, Bhopal, IndiaReshma Gupta (Second Author)Co-Author

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Figures

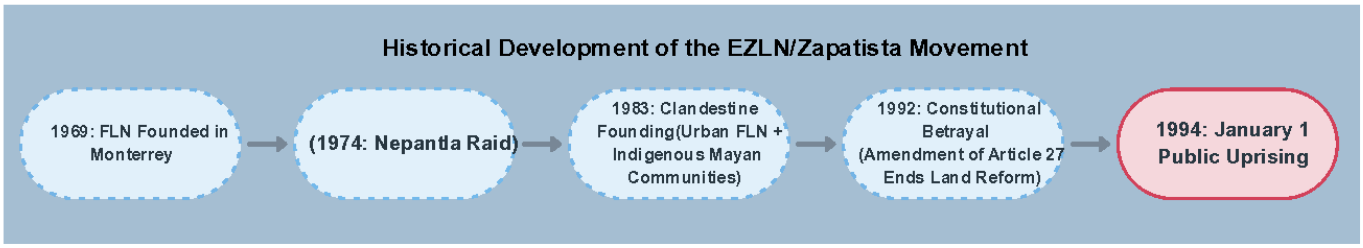


Figure 1

Historical Development of Zapatista Movement with Timeline

Source: Authors' own creation

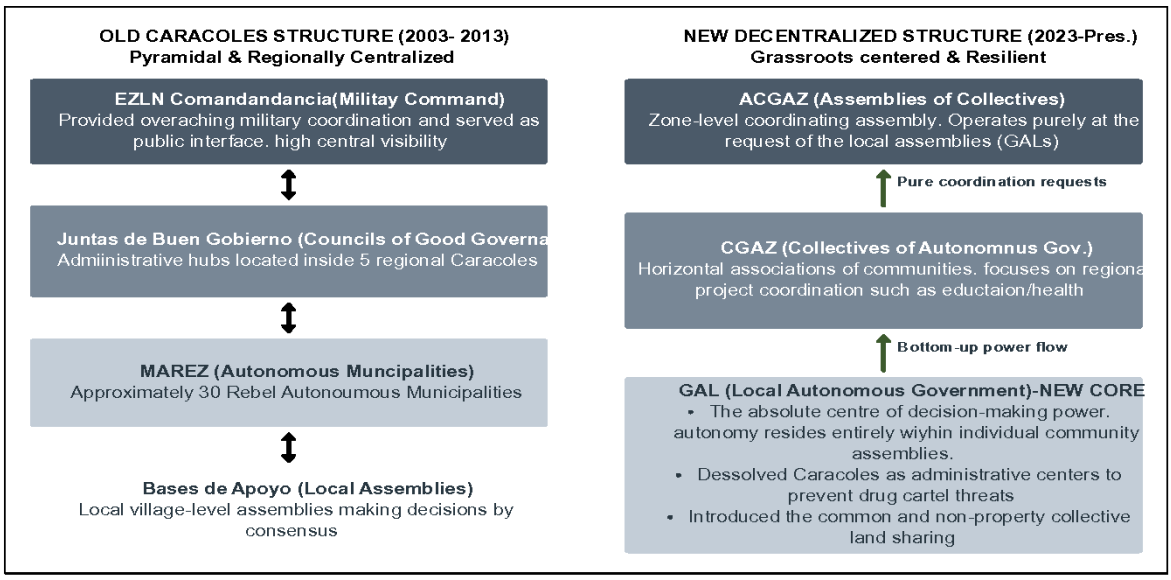


Figure 2

Caracoles Structure Old vs. New
Source: Authors' creation using EZLN Reports

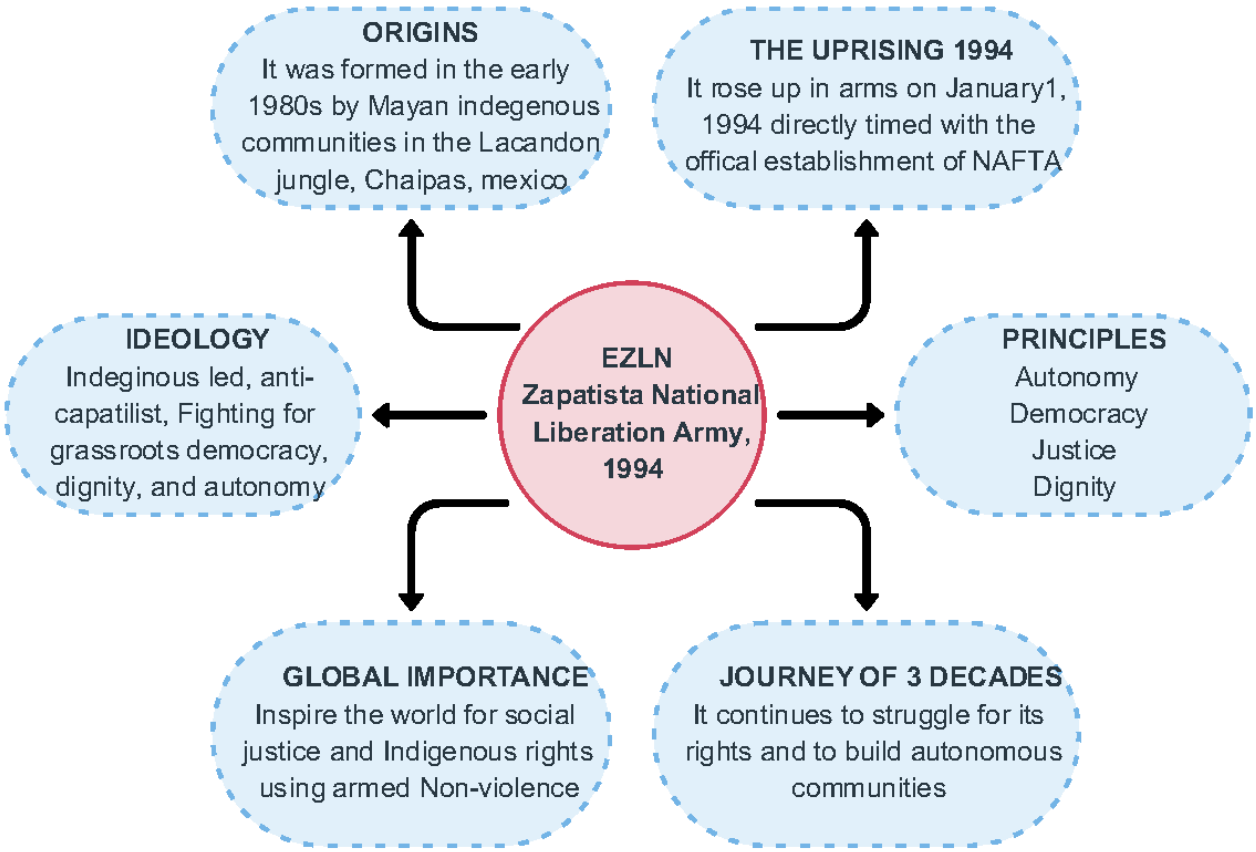


Figure 3

History of the Zapatista Movement
Source: Authors' own creation

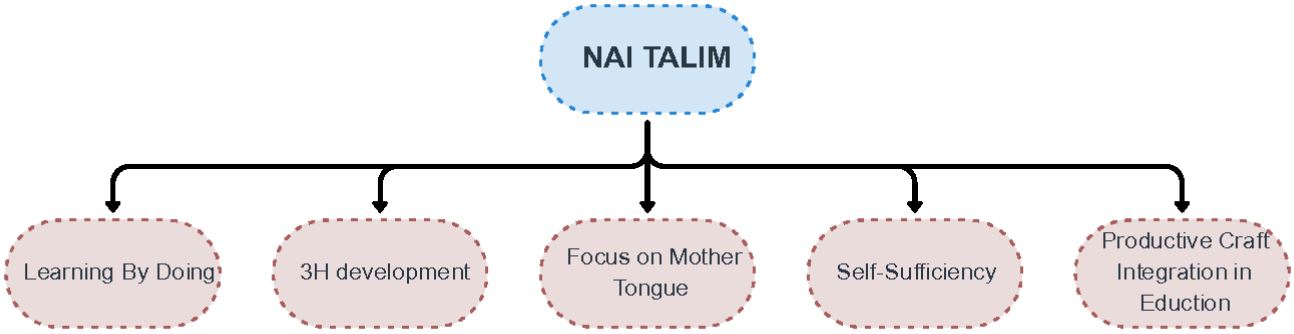


Figure 4

Key Characteristics of Gandhian Nai Talim

Source: Authors' own creation

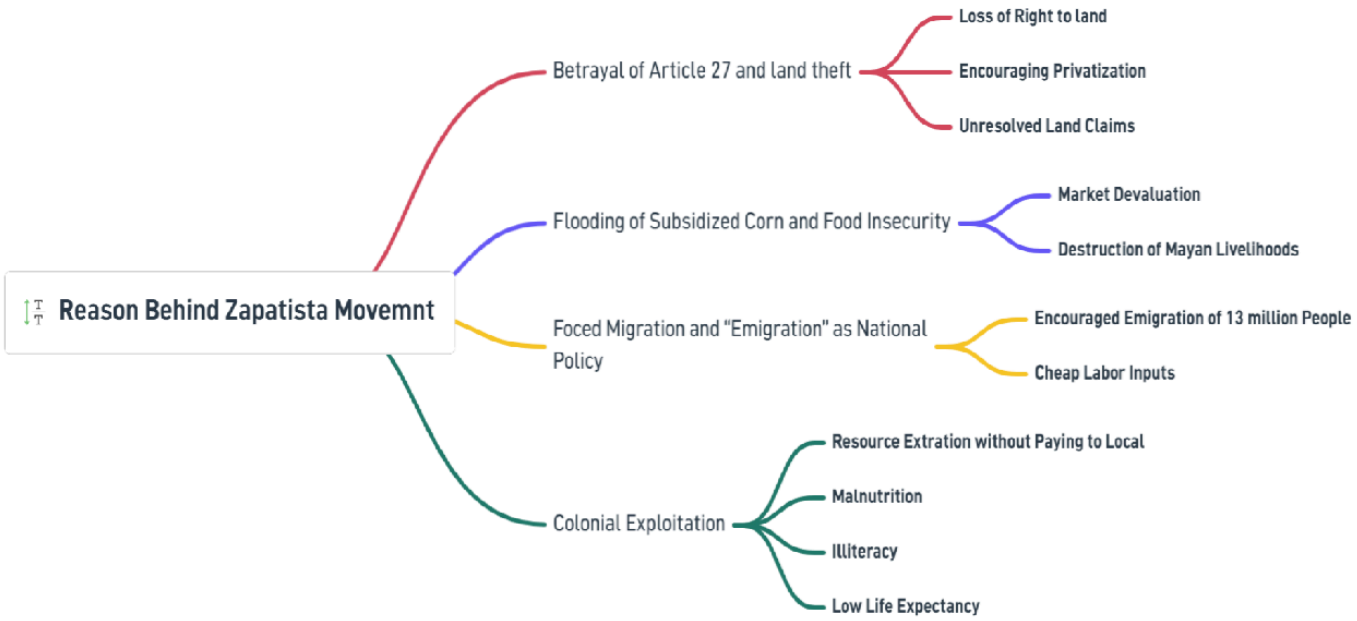


Figure 5

Mind-Map of the forces behind the Movement of January 1, 1994

Source: Authors' own creation



Figure 6

A Conceptual Map of Core Structural and Strategic Alignments

Source: Authors' own creation