



TOLSTOY'S ROLE IN SHAPING MAHATMA: THE STORY OF MAHATMA GANDHI'S INSPIRATION

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ABSTRACT

There is always an aura of mystery and curiosities when we talk about the two great minds are landmarks in the development of the history of ideas. The general public is seldom aware of the correspondence between Gandhi and Tolstoy, their admiration for each other's philosophy of life, and the profound influence Tolstoy had upon Gandhi. To read the correspondence between Mahatma Gandhi and Leo Tolstoy and fathom the thinking of these two literary giants is to capture the common threads running through Eastern and Western thought. In 1908, when Gandhi was pioneering his passive resistance experiments in South Africa, Tolstoy wrote *A Letter To A Hindu*. It had a strong impact on Gandhiji and shaped his revolutionary ideology. The present paper deals the significant phases of Gandhi and Tolstoy and their mutually coherent ideological imprints.

Keywords: *Leo Tolstoy, Mahatma Gandhi, Non-violence, Non-resistance, Revolutionary Ideology*

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INTRODUCTION

M. K. Gandhi, the Father of the Nation, was a charismatic figure in the gamut of world politics. He heralded a new era in the world through the doctrine of non-violence and peaceful co-existence; and remained as a unique wonder in the world.

GANDHIJI'S BIOGRAPHY: AT A GLANCE

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was born in Porebandar of Gujarat on 2 October 1869. His father was an officer in charge of a Province. Mohandas married Kasturaba while he was reading in High School. After passing the Entrance Examination he went to England to study law. M. K. Gandhi was not born great. He was an ordinary child like many of us. In the beginning he acted like a common child. He told lies only once in his life. However, he corrected his bad habits very soon. He smoked cigarette only once. He took meat with his friend only once. All these things were done due to the influence of bad company in his childhood. One day he confessed all these bad deeds before his father and vowed not to repeat them. M. K. Gandhi was much influenced by the character of the King Harischandra in the play entitled *Raja Harischandra*. He completed his law in England and came back to India in 1893. He started his career as a lawyer. He supported the poor and truthful clients.

GANDHIJI'S STRUGGLE IN SOUTH AFRICA: AT A GLANCE

Gandhiji's visit was not an accidental one, rather an opportunity for a struggling lawyer to earn his bread and butter and gaining some experiences in the profession. He became excited when he received an offer to join the law firm of Dada Abdulla & Co. in South Africa and quickly accepted the opportunity. But the path in South Africa was not a smooth one for him; there were myriads of challenges waited for him.

Gandhiji went to South Africa to deal with the cases of a famous merchant named Abdula Seth. In South Africa he faced many hurdles. He discovered that the white men were ill treating the dark Indians there. He himself was tortured and insulted by the white often. One day, he was travelling in a first class compartment a train. He had booked a ticket for him.

Still he was punished out of the compartment by the white men.

The first bitter experience Gandhi underwent was in Pietermartizburg, as he travelled from Durban to Pretoria. Just as the train was about to start, a fellow passenger called the guard and complained that a coloured man was in the first class compartment. Gandhi was asked to go to the van compartment but he refused: "A constable was brought, and the Indian stranger was forcibly ejected, his bundles pitched out after him, and with the train gone, he was left to shiver in the waiting room all night" (TCWM).

Gandhi resumed his journey the next morning, only to experience another humiliation. "Gandhi was seated on the box when the guard, a big Dutchman, wishing to smoke, laid claim to this place, telling the Indian passenger to sit down at his feet. 'No' said Mr. Gandhi quietly, 'I shall not do so.' The result was a brutal blow in the face. The victim held on to the rail, when another blow nearly knocked him down. Then the passengers interfered, much to the guard's disgust. 'Let the poor beggar alone,' they said, and the man, threatening to 'do for him' at the next stage, desisted" (Doke, 1919).

All Indians in South Africa were labeled "coolies" (labourers). Every Indian without exception was a coolie, regardless of education or profession ... a coolie barrister, a coolie merchant, a coolie doctor. The popular idea of the Indian was hardly human. "A thing black and lean and a long way from clean which they call the accursed Hindoo ... he is chockfull of lice and he lives upon rice ... I heartily cuss the Hindoo ... he is a black man" (*The Collected Works of Mahatma* (TCWM)). On another occasion he wore a turban and attended the Court. But the judge who was a white man ordered him: to remove the turban because he was a coolie-lawyer.

Gandhi took up the challenge to fight injustice and racial prejudice. This decision inaugurated his political career. "I began to think of my duty. Should I fight for my rights or go back to India. It would be cowardice to run back to India without fulfilling my obligation." It was at the time of Gandhi's crucial decision to stay in South Africa and fight discrimination that he first read the previously



unpublished *A Letter to a Hindu*. Gandhi was so impressed by Count Leo Tolstoy's message of love and non-resistance to evil that he decided to write to Tolstoy and ask his permission to reprint the letter. This accidental meeting through the printed word was to change Gandhi's life. (Gandhi, 1957). Gandhiji fought against this unjust and cruel treatment. He observed Satyagraha there and became successful. In South Africa he built up his career as a *Satyagrahi*.

GANDHIJI'S ROLE IN INDIAN FREEDOM MOVEMENT: AT A GLANCE

Gandhiji returned to India in 1915. In India he found similar unkind treatment by the white rulers. He started the Non-co-operation in 1930 and the Quit India Movement in 1942. During his struggle he applied no jealousy and violence against the rulers. Finally, he succeeded. The British Government granted independence to India. Mahatma Gandhi is remembered in the world for four major virtues. They are non-violence, truth, love and fraternity. By applying these four virtues he brought freedom to India.

Gandhi's style of living was very simple. He removed the caste barrier. He called the untouchables as the Harijan, the children of God. He was a reformer. He told the Indians to do manual labour. He advised the students of his time to read vocational subjects in order to be self-dependent. He also advised to introduce hand-spinning as a subject in educational institutions. He was a strong supporter of agriculture.

Gandhiji was a spiritual man. He spiritualised the politics. He was pained to find that many politicians had become greedy for power soon after independence. He earnestly appealed them to work for the development of the country. He also told the people to love and tolerate each other. He read *the Gita, the Koran, the Holy Bible* and all other scriptures. The saddest thing for us is that Gandhiji died an unnatural death. He was shot dead by an Indian on his way to attend a prayer on 30 January, 1948. It was a cruel murder. His death was mourned all over the world. His body was cremated at Raj Ghat in New Delhi. We observe this day as the martyr day every year. Gandhiji was really a noble soul (Gandhi, 1957).

TOLSTOY'S BIOGRAPHY AND LITERARY WORKS: AT A GLANCE

Leo Nikolaivich Tolstoy was born on August 28, 1828 to Princess Marie Volkonsky and Count Nicolas Tolstoy. Tolstoy was born at Yasnaya Polyana, the Volkonsky manor house on the road to Kieff in Russia. It was here that he was to spend the majority of his adult life. Leo was the fourth and last son of the family; they also had one daughter. Tolstoy's mother died when he was 18 months old, an event that would forever affect his feelings about women and motherhood. His father died when Tolstoy was nine years old, and the children grew up with a variety of aunts. According to Tolstoy, one of those aunts, Tatiana Yergolsky, "had the greatest influence on [his] life" because she taught him "the moral joy of love." All four Tolstoy sons attended the University of Kazan. An irregular student, Tolstoy studied law, but he was more attracted by high society than by the rote learning methods employed at the University. When his brother Nicolas finished school and enlisted in the Russian military, Tolstoy took advantage of the opportunity to leave as well. He went to St. Petersburg and Moscow, where he led a debauched life and claimed in his diary that "I am living like a beast." In April 1851 Nicolas, disturbed by the direction of his brother's life, convinced him to head for the Caucasus Mountains with Nicolas' artillery division. Their journey to the Caucasus, over land and sea, was to form the backbone of Leo's 1861 novel *The Cossacks*. Tolstoy became a soldier and stayed in the Caucasus for three years, where he wrote his first novel, *Childhood*, in the winter of 1851-1852. It was published in a leading St. Petersburg review, *Sovremennik*, in September 1852. The review would also serialize some of Tolstoy's later works, including *Boyhood and Youth*.

When the Crimean War broke out in 1853, Tolstoy was transferred to the front. During his experience with the War in Sebastopol, he had the first of many religious awakenings, believing that he needed to "create a new religion corresponding to the development of mankind." After Sebastopol capitulated in August 1855, he went to St. Petersburg to report on the battle, and then he left the army for good. In St. Petersburg, Tolstoy was well-received by



the literary community, but he also often fought with many of them, including disagreements with the great author Turgenev (*Fathers & Sons*). He was elected a member of the Moscow Literary Society in February 1859.

When Tolstoy's beloved brother Nicolas died of consumption on September 20, 1860, he turned his focus towards his religious feelings and his desire to do good works. He toured Europe, studying its educational systems in the hope of starting new schools in Russia. When the serfs were liberated on February 19, 1861, he hurried back to Russia in order to mediate between them and their former masters. Unfortunately, because he frequently sided with the serfs, he was forced out of his mediator position. This conflict between Tolstoy's status as a wealthy landowner and his desire to help the poor would cause him problems for the rest of his life.

On September 23, 1862, at the age of 34, Tolstoy married 18-year-old Sophia Behrs, the youngest daughter of a wealthy family which he had known for many years. During their early days of marriage, he conceived the idea of a novel based on the Decembrists, a group of noble families who attempted to bring the idea of a constitution to state attention in December 1825.

As soon as he started doing research on their work, however, the whole period of the Napoleonic wars unfolded. The novel was to eventually become Tolstoy's great epic, *War and Peace*. The novel was serialized over a period of five years, 1864-1869, and at first, the critics were completely baffled by it. Even Turgenev was unsure of the novel's importance. It did not gain critical adoration until several years after it was completed.

Anna Karenina, Tolstoy's next work, was based on the real-life case of a young woman whom Tolstoy knew. She was a young society woman who threw herself under a train over what was then called "a romance." The novel was serialized during 1873-1876, and was widely regarded as a triumph. At the time of *Anna Karenina's* composition, Tolstoy was undergoing another important stage in his religious process. He was questioning the integrity of the Greek Orthodox Church and the morality of Russian

high society; those questions are brought to the fore in this work.

Throughout the composition of *Anna Karenina* and later writings including *Resurrection* (1899) and the masterful short novel *The Death of Ivan Ilyitch* (1886), Tolstoy was heavily involved in public works. His work in the 1880s, for example, mostly involved a stream of pamphlets and didactic articles concerning religion, educational instruction, economics, and lifestyle. He wrote articles praising vegetarianism, temperance, chastity, and wealth redistribution through collective ownership of land. He underlined the importance of these lessons through personal example. When a series of famines struck Russia in the early 1890s, for example, he and his family moved deep into the countryside in order to set up soup kitchens - 246 of them by July 1892.

By the turn of the century, Tolstoy was universally loved and respected by all classes of people except for the very wealthy and powerful. In part to mediate some of his influence, the Russian Church (Greek Orthodox) excommunicated him in March 1901. He was also denounced by the state as an anarchist in 1891, and he increasingly had to publish his works abroad because of censorship. These measures failed to lessen Tolstoy's popularity with the working class - on the day after the Church's excommunication announcement, students and workers paraded in public squares and accosted Tolstoy with such support and sympathy that he was forced to run back into his house.

Though his health began to fail in 1901, Tolstoy continued his writing and his public work until the end of his life. In his final years, he became more fixed on spiritual ideas and moral perfection. Desiring complete freedom from social responsibilities, he left his wife on November 10, 1910 in order to live in a hut in the woods and concentrate on spiritual matters. It was during this final journey that he died, on November 21, 1910, in a village near the Shamardin Convent. Appropriately, peasants brought his body to Yasnaya Polyana. (enotes.com)



GANDHI AND TOLSTOY: THE BIRDS OF THE SAME FEATHERS MUTUAL INSPIRATION:

Tolstoy's famous religious book, *The Kingdom of God is Within You*, intrigued Gandhi, as his autobiography attests. The fundamental unity of all religions is another common theme. Gandhi said, "I believe in the fundamental truth of all great religions of the world. ... They were at bottom all one and were all helpful to one another." Tolstoy and Gandhi were staunch advocates of human brotherhood and the unity of all creations. Tolstoy often wrote that brotherhood extends to the lowest and the poorest of creation. Gandhi mirrors the same idea, "My religion has no geographic limits, I have a living faith in it; it will transcend my love for India herself." For Tolstoy, religion encompasses one's relation with the whole universe, of which man constitutes only a part. Religion is a relationship man sets up between himself and the infinite universe. In the same vein Gandhi states, "I am a part and parcel of the whole and I cannot find Him apart from the rest of humanity." The core of religion for both Tolstoy and Gandhi was primarily love. Love is the channel through which humanness, mutual trust, and non-violence pave the way for world brotherhood and unity.

(Tolstoy, 1934)

Mahatma Gandhi established Tolstoy Farm in 1910, both as a tribute to Leo Tolstoy and as a practical way of practicing the ideals set forth in Tolstoy's philosophy. The members of this commune, known as *Satyagrahis* (non-violent resisters), lived on an eleven hundred acre, self-sufficient farm. They devoted their bodies to the discipline of hard manual labour and devoted their minds to the ideals of truth, love, non-possession, non-violence, and chastity. Many different religious faiths were honored and practiced by the *Satyagrahis*. After Gandhi returned to India, he perfected and expounded the *Swadeshi* (the principle of using goods which are made in one's own country) movement, which had its foundation in the Tolstoy Farm experience. Between 1919 and 1948, Gandhi wrote on the beauties of a village-oriented society. The spinning wheel became a popular *Swadeshi* symbol throughout India (Gandhi, 1957).

Gandhi Quotes: "Upon the farm, oranges, apricots and plums grew in such abundance that during the season the *Satyagrahis* could have their fill of the fruit and yet have a surplus besides. The spring was about 500 yards away from our quarters, and the water had to be fetched on carrying poles. Here we insisted that we should not have any servants; not only for the household work but as far as may be even for the farming and building operations. Everything, therefore, from cooking to scavenging was done with our own hands. As regards accommodating families, we resolved from the first that the men and women should be housed separately. The houses therefore were to be built in two separate blocks each at some distance from the other. For the time it was considered sufficient to provide accommodation for ten women and sixty men. Then again we had to erect a house for Mr. Kallenbach and by its side a school house, as well as a workshop for carpentry, shoemaking, etc.

The settlers hailed from Gujarat, Tamilnadu, Andhra Pradesh and North India, and there were Hindus, Muslims, Parsis and Christians among them. About forty of them were young men, two or three old men, five women and twenty to thirty children of whom four or five were girls. The Christian and other women were meat-eaters. Mr. Kallenbach and I thought it desirable to exclude them from the farm. But how could we ask people who had no scruples in the matter, who had been habituated to taking meat since childhood, and who were coming over here in their days of adversity, to give up meat even temporarily? And if they were given meat, would not that swell our cost of living? Again should those who used to take beef be given that too? How many separate kitchens must be run in that case? What was my duty on this point? Having been instrumental in giving monetary help to these families, I had already accorded support to meat-eating as well as beef-eating. If I made a rule that meat-eaters should not be helped, I would have to prosecute the *Satyagraha* struggle through vegetarians only, which was absurd as the movement had been organised on behalf of all classes of Indians. I did not take long clearly to visualize my duty in these circumstances. If the Christians and Muslims asked for even beef, that



too must be provided for them. To refuse them admission to the farm was absolutely out of the question. But where love is, there God is also. The Muslim friends had already granted me permission to have a purely vegetarian kitchen. I had now to approach Christian sisters whose husbands or sons were in jail. I had often come in such intimate contact with the Christian friends who were now in jail and who had on like occasions consented to having a vegetarian diet. But this was the first time that I had to deal at close quarters with their families in their absence. I represented to the sisters the difficulty of housing accommodation as well as finance and my own deep-rooted sentiment in the matter. At the same time I assured them even beef would be provided for them if they wanted. The sisters kindly consented not to have meat, and the cooking department was placed in their charge. I, with or without another man, was detailed to assist them. My presence acted as a check upon petty bickering. The food was to be the simplest possible.

As I have already stated, we wanted to be self-reliant as far as possible even in erecting buildings. Our architect was Mr. Kallenbach, of course, and he got hold of a European mason. A Gujarati carpenter, Narayandas Damania, volunteered his services free of charge and brought other carpenters to work at reduced rates. As regards unskilled labour, the settlers of us who had supple limbs literally worked wonders. A fine *Satyagrahi* of the name of Vihari did half of the carpenter's work. The lion-like Thambi Naidoo was in charge of sanitation and marketing for which he had to go to Johannesburg. The weak became strong on Tolstoy Farm and labour proved to be a tonic for all" (Murthy, 1987).

TOLSTOY'S A LETTER TO A HINDU AND ITS IMPACT ON GANDHI

Gandhi implies the following from Tolstoy's Letter: "The letter printed below is a translation of Tolstoy's letter written in Russian in reply to one from the Editor of *Free Hindustan*. After having passed from hand to hand, this letter at last came into my possession through a friend who asked me, as one much interested in Tolstoy's writings, whether I thought it worth publishing. I at once replied in the

affirmative, and told him I should translate it myself into Gujarati and induce others to translate and publish it in various Indian vernaculars. The letter as received by me was a typewritten copy. It was therefore referred to the author, who confirmed it as his and kindly granted me permission to print it. To me, as a humble follower of that great teacher whom I have long looked upon as one of my guides, it is a matter of honour to be connected with the publication of his letter, such especially as the one which is now being given to the world.

It is a mere statement of fact to say that every Indian, whether he owns up to it or not, has national aspirations. But there are as many opinions as there are Indian nationalists as to the exact meaning of that aspiration, and more especially as to the methods to be used to attain the end. When a man like Tolstoy, one of the clearest thinkers in the Western world, one of the greatest writers, one who as a soldier has known what violence is and what it can do, condemns Japan for having blindly followed the law of modern science, falsely so-called, and fears for that country 'the greatest calamities', it is for us to pause and consider whether, in our impatience of English rule, we do not want to replace one evil by another and a worse. India, which is the nursery of the great faiths of the world, will cease to be nationalist India, whatever else she may become, when she goes through the process of civilization in the shape of reproduction on that sacred soil of gun factories and the hateful industrialism which has reduced the people of Europe to a state of slavery, and all but stifled among them the best instincts which are the heritage of the human family.

If we do not want the English in India, we must pay the price. Tolstoy indicates it. 'Do not resist evil, but also do not yourselves participate in evil—in the violent deeds of the administration of the law courts, the collection of taxes and, what is more important, of the soldiers, and no one in the world will enslave you', passionately declares the sage of Yasnaya Polyana. Who can question the truth of what he says in the following: "A commercial company enslaved a nation comprising two hundred millions. Tell this to a man free from superstition and he will fail to grasp what these words mean. What does it



mean that thirty thousand people, not athletes, but rather weak and ordinary people, have enslaved two hundred millions of vigorous, clever, capable, freedom-loving people? Do not the figures make it clear that not the English, but the Indians, have enslaved themselves?

One need not accept all that Tolstoy says—some of his facts are not accurately stated—to realize the central truth of his indictment of the present system, which is to understand and act upon the irresistible power of the soul over the body, of love, which is an attribute of the soul, over the brute or body force generated by the stirring up in us of evil passions. There is no doubt that there is nothing new in what Tolstoy preaches. But his presentation of the old truth is refreshingly forceful. His logic is unassailable. And above all he endeavours to practise what he preaches. He preaches to convince. He is sincere and is earnest. He commands attention” (TCWM).

Gandhi even wrote an Obituary of Leo Tolstoy in Indian Opinion (1910): “Tolstoy is not dead; he lives through the lives of his innumerable followers throughout the world. We firmly believe that, as time rolls on, his teaching will more and more permeate mankind. Though a devout Christian, he truly interpreted not only Christianity, but he likewise gave a realistic presentation on the substance underlying the great world religions, and he has shown as no other teacher, at any rate in Europe, has shown how present-day civilization, based as it is on brute force, is a negation of the divinity in man, and how, before man can realise his manhood, he must substitute brute force by love in all his actions”.

Tolstoy in an exchange of letters with Gandhi says the following: “I have received your Journal Indian Opinion and I am happy to know all that is written on non-resistance. I wish to communicate to you the thoughts which are aroused in me by the reading of those articles. Love is the aspiration for communion and solidarity with other souls, and that aspiration always liberates the source of noble activities. That love is the supreme and unique law of human life which everyone feels in the depth of one's soul. We find it manifested most

clearly in the soul of the infants. Man feels it so long as he is not blinded by the false doctrines of the world”.

In reality as soon as resistance is admitted by the side of love, love no longer exists and cannot exist as the law of existence; and if the law of love cannot exist, there remains no other law except that of violence, that is, the right of the mighty. It was thus that the Christian Society has lived during these nineteen centuries. It is a fact that all the time people were following only violence in the organisation of society. But the difference between the ideals of Christian peoples and that of other nations lies only in this: that in Christianity the law of love had been expressed so clearly and definitely as has never been expressed in any other religious doctrine; that the Christian world had solemnly accepted that law, although at the same time it had permitted the employment of violence and on that violence it had constructed their whole life.

This spring in the religious examination of a secondary school for girls in Moscow, the Professor of Catechism as well as the Bishop had questioned the young girls on the Ten Commandments and above all on the sixth “Thou shalt not kill.” When the examiner received a good reply, the Bishop generally paused for another question: Is killing proscribed by the sacred Law always and in all cases? And the poor young girls perverted by their teachers must reply: No, not always; killing is permitted during war and for the execution of criminals. However one of those unfortunate girls, (what I relate is not a fiction but a fact that has been transmitted to me by an eyewitness) having been asked the same question, “Is killing always a crime?” was moved deeply, blushed and replied with decision “Yes, always.” To all the sophisticated questions habitual to the Bishop she replied with firm conviction: killing is always forbidden in the Old Testament as well as by Christ who not only forbids killing but all wickedness against our neighbours. In spite of all his oratorical talent and all his imposing grandeur, the Bishop was obliged to beat a retreat and the young girl came out victorious.

Socialism, Communism, Anarchism, Salvation Army, the growing criminalities, unemployment and absurd luxuries of the rich,



augmented without limit, and the awful misery of the poor, the terribly increasing number of suicides—all these are signs of inner contradiction which must be there and which cannot be resolved; and without doubt, can only be resolved by acceptance of the law of Love and by the rejection of all sorts of violence” (Murthy, 1987).

CONCLUSION

Mahatma Gandhi's theory of non – violence is no doubt a direct adoption of Leo Tolstoy's non – resistance. Leo Tolstoy, though being a writer was successful in guiding many freedom fighters into the abode of peace. He was instrumental in taking out Extremism single handedly and made a revolutionary slide in establishing peaceful fare into resistances both in Literature and in then Contemporary situation. He shaped Mahatma's ideology in such a way that he successfully ousted apartheid out of South Africa and entered India only to repeat his performance. British never expected the freedom fighters to be so soft and smooth in their approach and this method of resistance succeeded in freeing India from the clutches of British rule and made Gandhi a Mahatma. The underlying fact here is that Leo Tolstoy had a virtually sound hand in invoking the idea of peace and non-violence in Gandhi and even Gandhi himself admitted to this. Leo Tolstoy may be a page in Gandhi's life but that page helped in making an entire history book for 'Mahatma'.

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