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How Western Thinkers Transformed Gandhi

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Abstract:

Gandhi was an Indian and a steadfast nationalist, yet he was greatly under the influence of Western thinkers and writers. He himself admits that “I have nothing to be ashamed of if my views on Ahimsa are the result of my Western education. I have never tabooed all Western ideas, nor am I prepared to anathematize everything that comes from the West as inherently evil. I have learnt much from the West, and I should not be surprised to find that I had learnt something about Ahimsa too from the West.” (Rajmohan Gandhi, 318) In addition to this, he asserts, “I do not think that everything Western is to be rejected. I have condemned Western civilization in no measured terms. I still do so, but it does not mean that everything Western should be rejected. I have learnt a great deal from the West and I am grateful to it. I should consider myself unfortunate if contact with, and the literature of the West had no influence on me.” (Yogendra Yadav) Thus, he is precisely defined as the successor of the eternal heritage of humanity which is beyond temporal limits. During the year 1903, when Gandhi was practicing law in South Africa he was given a copy of John Ruskin’s *Unto This Last* by one of his friends, Henry Polak.

Introduction: Though Gandhi was an Indian and a steadfast nationalist, yet he was greatly under the influence of Western thinkers and writers. He himself admits that “I have nothing to be ashamed of if my views on Ahimsa are the result of my Western education. I have never tabooed all Western ideas, nor am I prepared to anathematize everything that comes from the West as inherently evil. I have learnt much from the West, and I should not be surprised to find that I had learnt something about Ahimsa too from the West.” (Rajmohan Gandhi, 318) In addition to this, he asserts, “I do not think that everything Western is to be rejected. I have condemned Western civilization in no measured terms. I still do so, but it does not mean that everything Western should be rejected. I have learnt a great deal from the West and I am grateful to it. I should consider myself unfortunate if contact with, and the literature of the West had no influence on me.” (Yogendra Yadav) Thus, he is precisely defined as the successor of the eternal heritage of humanity which is beyond temporal limits.

During the year 1903, when Gandhi was practicing law in South Africa he was given a copy of John Ruskin’s *Unto This Last* by one of his friends, Henry Polak. In Gandhi’s own words, “The book was impossible to lay aside, once I had begun it. It gripped me...I could not get any sleep that night.” (Gandhi, 157) He was truly captivated by this book which in fact provided the incentive for an unexpected change in his way of life. He explains the experience and says, “I believe that I discovered some of my deepest convictions reflected in this great book of Ruskin, and that is why it so captured me, and made me transform my life. A poet is one who can call forth the

good latent in the human breast. Poets do not influence all alike, for everyone is not evolved in an equal measure.” (Gandhi, 157) What he learns from the book is that the good of the individual is contained in the good of all; a lawyer’s work has the same value as the barber’s, because everybody has the same right to earn his livelihood from his work; the life of labour, i.e. the life of the cultivator of the soil and the hand-craftsman, is the life worth living. He transformed his life in the light of these principles and reduced these principles to practice. An immediate effect of this reading was the Phoenix Settlement near Durban in 1904 which was of utmost importance for the Satyagrahis in South Africa. He also translated this book into Gujarati language and gave it the name ‘Sarvodaya’ which means ‘welfare of all’.

How does Ruskin encapsulate his thoughts in *Unto This Last*? He actually bitterly condemns the conventional views on political economy and appeals for a human view of economics. Men are not machines and they need to be treated with affection in order to induce the best from them. Each occupation is to service to mankind and each servant should have the courage to die while safeguarding his occupation from being corrupted. “For truly, the man who does not know when to die does not know how to live!” (Ruskin, 13) He pleads that the true objective of economics is not to amass material wealth or power, but to promote the welfare of people at large. Because, to collect more wealth than necessary is to deny our neighbor his due share. He urges the rich to abandon the luxury life so that all can have their equal share.

While keeping the dignity of man, Ruskin emphasized that whatever hurts must be inexorably rejected. He was of the view that political economy did not consider the spirit of man and only focused on the material sides of human welfare. Therefore he criticized the accumulation of wealth in the society. He thought that riches turns the head of men, and they suppress the poor to acquire more and more riches. He believed that true economics was the economics of justice. He was in favour of eternal superiority of some men to others, in certain cases even of one man to all men and accepted the prudence of appointing such men to guide, lead, or sometimes even to force and subdue their inferiors in keeping with their own letter, their own knowledge and wiser will.

Gandhi has certain similarities with Ruskin. Both of them advocate the supremacy of the spirit and believe in the dignity of human nature, to both character is more vital than acumen, both are in favour of moralizing economics and politics, both lay stress on the importance of social rejuvenation over mere political freedom, both largely distrust machinery and urge that if applied at all, it must be used to free and not to enslave humans, both believed that the capitalist should treat their employees with affection.

Nevertheless, they are different in certain aspects. Contrary to Gandhi, Ruskin was not in favour of non-violence, democracy, equality, etc. Gandhi opposed Ruskin’s distrust of the people and his idea of the rule of the wisest. Both were on the opposite ends regarding nature and works of the State.

Gandhi is indebted to Ruskin for his inspiration on education which has major importance in the constructive programmes of the both. Both share the belief that ed-

education promotes the natural instinct of man. They are of the view that education must begin in the childhood. Ruskin considered individual taste, nationalized character and everything which developed from nationalized character as expressions of home life. Similarly, Gandhi also focused on the home education. Both were equally concerned about the education of boys and of girls. In terms of spirituality, spirit was higher than matter for both and they made efforts to spiritualize the politics, economics and society.

Ruskin's works inspired Gandhi for the dignity of labour and the principle that action for the welfare of all is the most righteous principle. Ruskin's *Unto This Last* touched Gandhi so deeply that he began to experiment its philosophy in his own life, abandon his property, founded socialist colonies, and employed the principle of Sarvodaya. Gandhi was not in favour of differential wages for intellectual work since, according to him, manual work is superior to intellectual labour.

Gandhi owed to Leo Tolstoy the largest part of his philosophy and life principles. He was so much influenced by Tolstoy that the list of twenty books in the Appendix 1 of *Hind Swaraj*, six books are by Tolstoy. Among these, *Letter to a Hindu*, *The Kingdom of God is Within You*, and *What is Art* were so important for Gandhi that he got them translated in Gujarati. His adaptation into Gujarati of *Ivan the Fool* proves his regard for Tolstoy. The study of the Gandhi-Tolstoy relationship is actually the study of a relationship between two cultures as both of them transcend all cultural barriers. Moreover, it also demonstrates how one should go about imbibing ideas derived from other cultures. Gandhi read Tolstoy carefully as well as critically, and he imbibed only those ideals in his works which were essential for the progress of his own philosophy.

Gandhi came to know Tolstoy in 1894 when he was merely an unidentified Indian lawyer in South Africa, while forty one year senior to him Tolstoy had already touched the zenith of his reputation. However, the correspondence began between them a year before Tolstoy's death, i.e. in 1909. They exchanged seven letters in total, four from Gandhi and three from Tolstoy. Tolstoy came to know about Gandhi only through *Hind Swaraj* (1909), as well as from Doke's biography, *M.K. Gandhi: An Indian Patriot in South Africa* (1909). Although their relationship lasted for a very short time, however it proved to be noteworthy. During this relationship, primarily Tolstoy's three books had considerable influence on Gandhi, namely *The Kingdom of God is Within You*, *Letter to a Hindu*, and *What is Art?* These works of Tolstoy inspire three continuing themes in Gandhi's philosophy, which are the need for spirituality grounded on a practical love of God as well as human beings, the issue of violence and how we can resolve it, and the place and purpose of art in life.

Gandhi went through Tolstoy's *The Kingdom of God is Within You* in 1894 and the book overwhelmed him to a large extent. It was a mandatory for members of the Phoenix Settlement and Tolstoy Farm to read this book. The book was his continuous companion during his South African days and he did not separate it even during his three prison stays in South Africa.

The primary theme of the book is violence and its peaceful resolution. It preaches that that peace is a social good, and there can be no peace on earth without a genuine spiritual self-regeneration among individuals, affirmed by a firm public opinion in favour of peace. Spiritual self-regeneration implies a new comprehension of the definition of pure religion. The essence of pure religion is in man's faculty to prophetically envision the real meaning of life. In order to find the resolution of violence, a new meaning of the significance of the ethic of the Sermon on the Mount was required. Further, Tolstoy moved to a discussion of what was pure religion and how it alone could take us to true inner progress. It originates from the unconditional love of God, wherefrom begins the true love of fellow human-beings. Taken at the individual level, human life was a struggle to access the completeness of this love which guides us not by external principles but by "an inward consciousness of the possibility of reaching divine perfection". (The Kingdom of God is Within You, 118) This progress in inner perfection is the mandatory spiritual condition to make life less violent at social and political level. The reality of this growth is, according to Tolstoy, the kingdom of God. It is a new, non-violent system of life. This kingdom is within all human beings and can progress if we live in accordance with the light in us. Its growth is the end of all genuine religions and it can be achieved through human effort to rise above external conditions as well as to follow the truth that illuminates itself within human beings. It can be achieved by all and its achievement is most effective solution to prevent violence.

In the words of Gandhi, "It was forty years back when I was passing through a severe crisis of skepticism and doubt that I came across 'The Kingdom of God is Within You', and was deeply impressed by it. I was at that time a believer in non-violence. Its reading cured me of my skepticism and made me a first believer in Ahimsa. What has appealed to me in Tolstoy's life is that he practiced what he preached and reckoned no cost too great in his pursuit of truth". (Bharathi, 35) Furthermore he says, "He was the greatest apostle of non-violence that the present age has written and spoken on non-violence so fully or so insistently and with such penetrations and insight as he. I would even go further and say that his remarkable development of this doctrine puts to shame the present day narrow and lop-sided interpretation put upon it by the votaries of Ahimsa in this land of ours". (Bharathi, 35)

The intensive study of Tolstoy influenced him to such an extent that he began to comprehend more and more the infinite uses of universal love. He not only appreciated the belief that The Kingdom of God is Within You, but also exercised it in his life by arduous endeavours. His life became an powerful demonstration of the Tolstoy's declaration that the Kingdom of God can only be accessed through continuous efforts.

Besides, Tolstoy's *Letter to a Hindu* also contributed in the transformation of Gandhi. This letter was written in response to two letters of Taraknath Das (1884-1958), a former member of Bengal terrorist organisation, who emigrated to the US in 1906. These two letters described the terrible plight of India under British rule. They were aimed at seeking Tolstoy's supports for the cause of India. Tolstoy's letter

in response to the letters of Das probably would never have become famous, had it not been for Gandhi. Since, a copy of a typescript of the Letter fell into the hands of Gandhi in 1909 who got it published in both English and Gujarati with the permission of Tolstoy.

There are two basic points made in the letter, first being the chief, if not the sole reason of India's enslavement is the lack of a pure religious consciousness in the entire world. Nations no more follow the true spirituality, which is reflected in the love of God and fellow human beings. Second, Indian people are culpably involved in their own enslavement, i.e., according to Tolstoy, they were iterating the remarkable foolishness which was inculcated in them by their European instructors like Herbert Spencer that force could be prevented only with force. It implied that "If the people of India are enslaved by violence, it is only because they themselves live and have lived by violence, and do not recognize the eternal law of love inherent in humanity". (A Letter to A Hindu) Tolstoy was of the opinion that India's freedom is only possible when Indians abandon the belief that violence could liberate them. They should start preferring soul over matter. The idea inspired Gandhi to such an extent that he practised it for whole life and preached other to adopt this idea of nonviolence.

In addition, Tolstoy's *What is Art?* is the most important work for it provides us with an access to Gandhi's mind and feelings. He invented symbols, used them to form public opinion, and to compel people to act. Gandhi was in agreement with Tolstoy's reminder to the mass of humanity, the words of Christ, that "We are all sons of one father, no matter where we live or what language we speak; we are all brothers and are subject only to the law of love, which the common father has implanted in our hearts" (Bharathi, 36). Tolstoy condemned the caste system in human societies, i.e. one group of people is toiling, oppressed, deprived and suffering whereas certain other groups are enjoying a luxury life and oppressing the poor. Gandhi favoured Tolstoy's belief that an ideal society is the one wherein everyone rules himself in such a manner that he never becomes a hindrance in the progress of his neighbours. The basis of his principles of non-resistance and non-cooperation is love. His beliefs of Christian anarchism renounce the authority of the state and private property, because they are based on physical balance. Such a philosophy preaches to to live in peace with all men, to have anger towards none, and to treat all alike with affection.

Tolstoy was an ardent supporter of the principle of *ahimsa*. He believed it to be the most effective tool. There is no individual in the West who understood the concept of *ahimsa* as deeply as he Tolstoy did. However, Gandhi so boundlessly followed the principle of *ahimsa* that J.J. Doke called him a disciple of Tolstoy. He was so influenced by Tolstoy that in 1910, he laid established Tolstoy Farm with an aim that it would become a laboratory for experiments on the philosophy and teachings of passive resistance. Tolstoy criticizes the State and its machinery, police and military, law courts, private property as well as capitalism, including the schools, for these are against the principle of love. He is against the employment of force, taxes, and obligatory military service. Above all, he greatly emphasizes the moral rejuvenation of the individual.

However, in certain respects Gandhi is quite different from Tolstoy. For instance, he is more practical in comparison to Tolstoy. His idea of *ahimsa* is also bit different Tolstoy as for Tolstoy *ahimsa* implies resistance of force in all forms while for Gandhi it means preventing oneself from injuring any creature in any form. Since life involves violence, Tolstoy rejects it. On the contrary, Gandhi believed in the *Gita*'s ideal of action that preaches action without attachment. Sometimes, even killing is involved in *ahimsa*, since life involves certain amount of violence. Hence, Gandhi believes in *Gita*'s ideal of action and prevents evils with the aloofness of spirit. Gandhi did not believe in Tolstoy's idea of reincarnation. He writes, "Reincarnation or transmigration is a cherished belief with millions in India, indeed, in China also. With many, one might almost say, it is a matter of experience, no longer a matter of academic acceptance. It explains reasonably the many mysteries of life". (A Letter to A Hindu) Gandhi finds nothing new in Tolstoy. Consequently he said. "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 practice what he preaches. He preaches to convince. He is sincere and earnest. He commands attention" (A Letter to A Hindu).

Tolstoy had given up the easygoing life and lived as poor peasant, sweeping and cleaning his own apartment. He ploughed with toiled with the fellow peasants and worked for the peasants who were running short of livelihood, and at certain times worked for such a poor widow who could scarcely afford labour against wages. This life of repudiation and dedication to serve the poor and deprived inspired Gandhi to adopt such a life. He renounced his property and voluntarily adopted poverty. Therefore, it is not only the writings of Tolstoy which influenced Gandhi, but also his practical life which made Gandhi to reshape his lifestyle and renounce his property possessions. Tolstoy believed in the worth of manual labour for earning one's livelihood and dedicated his life in promoting the idea of an egalitarian society which would be based on the principles of equality, fraternity, companionship, repudiation, non-exploitation and bread labour. All these ideas and principles were adopted by Gandhi in his life and philosophy. Surrounded with a pluralistic society, Gandhi realized how art could unite diverse people. He invented and made popular the universal symbols of *charkha* and *khadi*. His actions were to strengthen his philosophy and the symbols he used strengthen his meanings. For instance, his bare body and bare and bald head, were signs of mourning for the plight of India. He felt it painful to wear expensive dresses and eat expensive food so long as large number of people does not have enough cloth and food to meet their basic needs. He not only preached his ideas but also exercised them in his practical life which made many people to call him an artist. His idea of practising one's philosophy was indebted to Tolstoy.

Conclusion: Thus to conclude that Gandhi indebted his philosophy and teaching to Western philosophy especially to Tolstoy and Ruskin. However, apart for these two thinkers, Gandhi was also influenced by the writing of Henry David Thoreau from whom he derived the ideas of rejecting such a govt. which fails to establish justice in the land which consequently lead to civil disobedience movement. Had he not come

in touch with the writings of these great writers, he would not have achieved the fame he possesses currently. But, the philosophy and consequent fame of Gandhi is not entirely indebted to these western thinkers. Of course he read them enthusiastically, but he did not adopt their philosophies altogether. He selected among their ideas and chose whatever is applicable to him or whatever he believed in. His fame is not in adopting and preaching the ideas derived from western thinkers, but in the fact that he practised these ideas and transformed his life accordingly. His greatness is not in his philosophy, but in the practice of his philosophy. Whatever he preached, he adopted it in his practical life. That's why he achieved the unmatched zenith of fame.

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