

The Personalities Associated with M. K. Gandhi's Philosophical Thought and Action

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Abstract

Truth occupies an important place in M. K. Gandhi's philosophy. Gandhi asserted that "Truth is God" and added a new facet of Ahimsā or non-violence to the world of philosophy to find the path of truth. He developed the technique of Ahimsā and adopted Satyagraha as a technique. Moreover, he emphasized on economic equality, decentralization of power, bread labour etc. to create a non-violent society full of love. It should be noted here that various personalities had influenced Gandhi's philosophical thinking. Russian author Leo Tolstoy's emphasis on the power and dignity of suffering inspired Gandhi to develop his own concept of Satyagraha. Similarly, American philosopher Henry David Thoreau's idea of civil disobedience revealed to Gandhi the possibility of using non-violence as a strategy to solve the major problems of social and political life. Gandhi was also greatly influenced by British philosopher John Ruskin's book "*Unto the Last*" which served as a basis of his political philosophy and actions. Besides these personalities Gandhi also was influenced by a Jain man named Raychandbhai and recognized him as his friend, philosopher and guide. Just as Gandhi was influenced by different personalities, later on various personalities, that include Gandhi's contemporaries and various post-Gandhi figures such as Maganlal Gandhi, Acharya Vinoba Bhave, Narhari Parikh, Mahadev Haribhai Desai, Kishorelal Mashruwala, Ravishankar Vyas, Dr. Rajendra Prasad, Mirabeau, Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela, HH Dalai Lama, Vandana Shiva, Medha Patkar, Aung San Suu Kyi and many others, were influenced by Gandhi's philosophical thought and its implementation and adopted Gandhi's techniques..

Index Keywords: Satyagraha, Leo Tolstoy, Henry David Thoreau, Civil Disobedience, Unto the Last.

Introduction

Gandhi was firm believer in truth and his entire philosophy centered on Ahimsā or non-violence through which one can reach truth. In Gandhi's opinion, truth is not just a cognitive notion. His concept of truth has Relative and Absolute dimensions. Relative truth is what we consider to be true and thus is only the truth as is perceived by the individual. On the other hand, the Absolute truth is God, the eternal principle. Gandhi called Absolute truth as "neti neti" (not this, not this), which is recognized in Vedas as Brahman. Thus, considering Absolute truth as our ideal, Gandhi recommended clinging to Relative truth to reach the Absolute truth. Basically, one of the important theme of Gandhi's philosophical thought is "Truth is God." According to him, truth is nothing different from

moral values. Thus, he relentlessly searched for truth and in 1929 he reversed his initial statement “God is truth” to “Truth is God”, as the previous statement eliminated the atheists who were staunch votaries of truth. Moreover, since nothing can exist in reality except ‘Truth’, the word ‘Truth’ or ‘Satya’ can be considered as right name of God, the fundamental reality.

Gandhi considered non-violence as the path to realize truth. In a word, truth is the goal or end and non-violence is the means to attain it. Non-violence does not just indicate negative aspect; it also has a positive aspect. It does not just mean non-killing or non-infliction of physical harm on others. Positively it would involve love, compassion, benevolence and good will towards others. Gandhi firmly believed that non-violence cannot be off beam or unsuccessful as it is the law of the universe and of every species. Thus, non-violence is our highest duty which automatically flows from truth. It is the moral way to achieve a relative truth. Non-violence as a means of truth is based on twin principles – Firstly, the truth seeker must be humble and non-violence represents love, compassion and humanity. Secondly, as non-violence is in conformity with the law of universe and is bound to be successful, it is the only way to reach the truth. It is to be mentioned here that Gandhi adopted Satyagraha as a practical tool for implementing the doctrine of non-violence. Satyagraha which means “eagerness for truth” includes non-violence, truth and self-suffering as the basic elements. It is translated as non-violent direct action or non-violent resistance or passive resistance. For the first time in South Africa Gandhi invented and successfully implemented the technique of Satyagraha against racial policies persuaded by colonial rulers. No physical force and no weapon were allowed in Satyagraha, no matter how bad the situation was. The follower of Satyagraha had to refrain from uttering ruthless word about anyone, from ill-will towards anyone, from harming anyone and from destroying the opponent. Any deviation from these was named by Gandhi as Duragraha. Some prominent kinds of Satyagrahas are Non-cooperation, Civil disobedience, Agitation and Demonstration, Economic Boycott, Non-payment of taxes, Strike, Fasting etc. Indeed, the idea of non-violent resistance against oppression proved to be a powerful weapon of the Gandhi era. Moreover, to create a non-violent society Gandhi advocated Savodaya (the welfare of all) and emphasized on decentralization of power, bread labour, equality of wages etc. while maintaining equality in society. Objectives of the research paper are to show how Gandhi’s philosophical thought was influenced by different personalities and also how different personalities were influenced by Gandhi’s thought and action.

Influence of different personalities on Gandhi

We know that M.K. Gandhi’s philosophy was influenced by various religions such as Vaishnavism, Jainism, Buddhism, Islam, Christianity and also by various ancient texts such as Ramayana, Mahabharata, Bhagavad Gita, Upanishads. But apart from that various personalities such as Leo Tolstoy, Henry David Thoreau, John Ruskin and Raychandbhai influenced Gandhi.

Henry David Thoreau was an American transcendentalist philosopher who, like M.K. Gandhi, was inspired by the Bhagavad Gitā. As M.K. Gandhi believed in the superiority of interactive judgment of moral entities, he also believed in the superiority of individual judgments. As Thoreau thought:

“... that government is best which governs the least.”¹

Thoreau was not a philosophical anarchist as with the goal of establishing morality he advocated disobedience to tyrannical government, not all authority. He raised slogans of Civil Disobedience against the unjust government apparatus in support of Negro slaves. He refused to pay state poll tax in protest against the slavery, the dispossession of Native Americans and the Mexican war. Although Gandhi’s activities of civil disobedience as a resistance to authority in South Africa originated before he became familiar with Thoreau’s essay “*Resistance to Civil Government*”, also known as “*On the Duty of Civil Disobedience*” or “*Civil Disobedience*” for short, his familiarity with Thoreau’s essay made his ideas firm and well-furnished. Later he led non-cooperation movement and no-tax campaigns in India. In a letter to the American friends in 1942, M.K. Gandhi mentioned:

“...you have given me a teacher in Thoreau, who furnished me through his essay “On the Duty of Civil Disobedience” scientific confirmation of what I was doing in South Africa.”²

M.K. Gandhi’s movement which started in Johannesburg, South Africa in 1907 was known as “Passive Resistance”. Later he used the phrase “Civil Resistance” instead as he felt that the term “Civil Disobedience” failed to convey the full meaning of the movement.

British Philosopher John Ruskin believed in humanizing economic relations and hence the application of non-violence in the economic sphere was central to his economic ideas. John Ruskin’s critical essay on economics named “*Unto This Last*” particularly influenced Gandhi. In a chapter of his Autobiography titled “The Magic Spell of a Book” Gandhi mentioned: “Of these books, the one that brought about an instantaneous and practical transformation in my life was *Unto This Last*.”³

It was through Henry Salomon Leon Polak, a British-born lawyer, journalist and South African activist, that M.K. Gandhi became acquainted with the book “*Unto This Last*”. When Gandhi left for Natal, Mr. Polak had come to the station to see him off and gave him this book to read during the journey. Among the three teachings from this book the first one - the good of the individual lies in the good of all – was of particular importance in Gandhi’s philosophy and he admitted it that it was as clear to him as daylight that the other two teachings belonged to the first. He also admitted that this book brought about a real transformation in his life. In his Autobiography M.K. Gandhi wrote: “I arose with the dawn, ready to reduce these principles to practice.”⁴

Later Gandhi translated the book “*Unto This Last*” into Gujarati and named it “*Sarvodaya*” (the welfare of all). Leo Tolstoy, known as the greatest writer of all time, was a Russian writer. It was during his service in the army that he realized the ultimate worthlessness of violence. The discrepancy between the message of Christ and the way of life of men filled his heart with anguish. He tried to live according to the teachings of Christ. According to him, love is the core of Christ’s teaching and an adequate solution of human problems. This is the only remedy and the only Christian way to resolve conflict. He said that since all forms of violence are equally evil, the true Christian must refrain from participating in them. He also said that opposing the state through violence is also evil because it cannot lead to a better life. So, a revolutionary activity can be based on good feeling of love. Tolstoy was an advocate of passive resistance and defied the Czars of Russia with great courage. M.K. Gandhi’s quote about Tolstoy’s passive resistance is: “He not only expounded it, but lived according to it.”⁵ In fact, Gandhi was greatly influenced by Tolstoy’s writings. In a letter to Tolstoy on 1st October, 1909 Gandhi wrote: “I had the privilege of studying your writings also, which left a deep impression on my mind.”⁶

Gandhi also said that after a deep study of the books written by Tolstoy, he began to realize the infinite possibilities of universal love. In his Autobiography he mentioned: “I made too an intensive study of Tolstoy’s books. *The Gospels in Brief*, *What to Do?* and other books made a deep impression on me. I began to realize more and more the infinite possibilities of universal love.”⁷

M.K. Gandhi acknowledged the influence of Tolstoy’s book “*The Kingdom of God Is Within You*” on his life and said that it made him a firm believer in the principles of non-violence. In his words: “It was forty years back, when I was passing through a severe crisis of scepticism and doubt that I came across his book “*The Kingdom of God is within You*”, and was deeply impressed by it. I was at that time a believer in violence. Its reading cured me of my scepticism and made me a firm believer in ahimsa.”⁸

Tolstoy began with self-purification as, according to him, self-purification is the gate way to self-realization and self-realization is the realization of the kingdom of God within oneself. At the age of fifty five he gave up a life of luxury and adopted a simple life. His way of life was planting with peasants, walking barefoot, eating vegetarian food etc. He called the person who avoids labors as a thief of society. It was his doctrine that influenced the importance of bread labor in Gandhi’s mind. In Gandhi’s words:

“The law, that to live man must work, first came home to me upon reading Tolstoy’s writing on bread labour.”⁹

According to M.K. Gandhi, great nature wants everyone to earn bread through work. In fact, the lazy person is a burden to his neighbor. So to be lazy is to violate the first lesson of non-violence. He called Tolstoy a great promoter of bread labor.

Apart from the above mentioned personalities, Gandhi was also influenced by Jain man Srimad Rajchandra whom he named Raychandbhai in his autobiography. On his way back from London Gandhi met a diamond merchant in Bombay named Srimad Rajchandra who was also a poet and philosopher and known as *Shatavadhani* that means the person having the capacity of remembering or attending to hundred things simultaneously. In the first meeting Gandhi was convinced that Rasichandbhai was a man of great character as well as learning and he also had the capacity of reproduce anything accurately. Raichandbhai was a jeweler and in spite of being connoisseur of pearls and diamonds, after finishing his business he used to busy with religious books as well as diary. Much of published writing was reproduction from his diary. Seeing his absorbance in Godly persuade in the midst of business Gandhi considered him a real seeker after truth. Whenever Gandhi met Raichandbhai, he would engage Gandhi in conversation of a serious religious matter and according to Gandhi, no religious leader or teacher had ever made on him the impression that Raichandbhai did.

Raychandbhai had a vast knowledge of the scriptures. To him God is self and self is God and thus had a burning passion for self realization. Although the philosophical thinking of Raychandbhai and Gandhi was different, Raychandbhai had tremendous influence on Gandhi's life. At the time when Gandhi was exhausted both mentally and physically on account of his mother's death, Raychandbhai cast a mystical spell over Gandhi. Moreover, while Gandhi was undergoing some sort of spiritual crisis, the correspondence with Raichndbhai was very much helpful for him. Although Raychandbhai was not guru for Gandhi, Gandhi recognized him as his friend, philosopher and guide. According to Jalandhar Paul, Raichandbhai acted as a midwife of Gandhi to deliver his own being. In his autobiography Gandhi mentioned:

“Three moderns have left a deep impression on my life and captivate me: Raychandbhai by his living contact; Tolstoy by his book, *The Kingdom of God within you*; and Ruskin by his *Unto This Last*.¹⁰

The personalities influenced by M.K. Gandhi

This is an indubitable fact that M.K. Gandhi's philosophical thought with action of non-violence for peace has created important impacts on the minds of many great personalities of India in particular and the world in general. The first disciple of M.K. Gandhi was Maganlal Gandhi who modeled his life very much on the pattern of his master. He created hermitage atmosphere at the Satyagraha Ashram where non-violence was explored as an alternative way of life and so he was called the heart and soul of the Āshram. He used to perform his daily tasks like sweeping, farming, spinning etc. punctually. M.K. Gandhi in his autobiography mentions Maganlal Gandhi while taking about the Phoenix settlement that started in 1904. In his words:

“Maganlal Gandhi left his business for good to cast in his lot with me, and by ability, sacrifice and devotion stands foremost among my original co-workers in my ethical experiments.”¹¹

It may be appropriate to mention here that Acharya Vinoba Bhave, known as the spiritual successor of M.K. Gandhi, after joining Gandhi's Āshram adopted an austere life. By that time he studied philosophy of *Gītā* and Upaniṣads, worked in the kitchen, cleaned toilets and spent most of his time to spinning. He believed that universal spinning was the way to eradicate poverty in the villages. Moreover, he considered the spinning wheel as the most suitable external symbol of non-violence. Talking about his attainment from the Āshram, Vinoba said that his initial desire was to serve the country through violent acts, but Bapu (M.K.Gandhi) freed him from that desire and extinguished the volcano of anger and other emotions. He also said that he found in Gandhi not only the peace of the Himalayas but also the fiery fervor of Bengal's ideal revolution. Vinoba travelled to different parts of the country to spread the message of love, mercy and compassion. He eradicated untouchability from his heart and believed in communal unity. Gandhian Vinoba Bhave initiated Bhoodan movement (Bloodless Revolution) in April 1951 and soon after that he became a world figure.

It is to be stated here that noted freedom activist as well as social reformer Narhari Parikh joined Gandhi's Ashram in April 1917. He was one of Gandhi's admirers. During Dharasana Satyagraha he was arrested and imprisoned in Nasik Jail. He ran various institutions like Satyagraha Ashram, Rashtriya Vidyalaya, Gram Seva Vidyalaya, Gandhi Seva Sangh, Gujarat Vidyapith, Goseva Sangh and many others based on Gandhi's life styles and materialized Gandhi's non-violence principle and ideas with dedicated efforts.

Mention may be made here that Mahadev Haribhai Desai, known as India's freedom fighter and a noted writer, was M.K. Gandhi's personal secretary. From 13 November 1917 he started recording all Gandhi's activities in his diary and in twenty volumes he presented the smallest details of M. K. Gandhi that was a very difficult task. It can be said that he was playing the role of a bridge between the world and M. K. Gandhi. He was special companion of Gandhi's thoughts and various non-violent programs till August 14, 1942, the day before his death. He accompanied Gandhi in the Ahmadabad mill-labour strike of 1918. In 1919, when Gandhi was arrested for defying the ban on entering Punjab, he nominated Mahadev as his successor, and Mahadev followed his path with great devotion. Mahadev was arrested and imprisoned for participating in the Salt Satyagraha in 1930. Moreover, he accompanied Gandhi in other programmes, Round Table Conference and Gandhi's meeting with Emperor George V.

It may not be out place to state here that Indian freedom fighter Kishorelal Mashruwala was a classmate of Gandhi's eldest son Harilal during his school days and thus knew Gandhi's name since then. Later, when he wished to participate in the Champaran Satyagraha, noting his poor health Gandhi advised him to work for the Āshram school instead of the Champaran Satyagraha and as per Gandhi's wish he joined the Satyagraha Ashram's Rashtriya Shala. During the Salt Satyagraha of 1930 when the Rashtriya Shala was soon converted into a Satyagraha camp, Kishorelal along with other Satyagrahis was arrested and sentenced to two years imprisonment for violating the Salt Act. Kishorelal was a worshiper of non-violence and truth like Gandhi and was deeply

influenced by him. He had the opportunity to publish two issues of the Harizan magazine in which he gave the best advice for conducting the movement within the bounds of non-violence. He candidly admitted that he learned a lot from Gandhi and wrote *Gandhi Vichar Dohan* (Essence of Gandhi's Thoughts).

It is a fact that social worker as well as an independence activist Ravishankar Vyas, also known as Ravishankar Maharaj, was a Gandhian from Kheda district in Gujarat. Reading a short biography of Mahatma Gandhi by Mohonlal K. Pandey, Ravishankar Vyas developed love for Gandhi. Later in 1916 when he attended public meeting addressed by Gandhi at the Prembhai Hall in Ahmedabad, Gandhi's magical words impressed him and he admired the speaker's candor and courage. At the end of the meeting, on the same day, like Mahadev Desai and Narahari Parikh, he also chose the company and path of his new found master. Since then on he accompanied M.K. Gandhi in various Satyagraha movements, social constructive work, and other non-violent programmes.

Historically speaking, Dr. Rajendra Prasad, the first president of India, was a freedom fighter as well as a follower of M.K. Gandhi. He was greatly inspired by Gandhi's conduct, devotion, philosophical thought and energetic leadership in the Champaran Satyagraha. He gave up his law practice in 1920 to join the Non-Cooperation Movement. He was supporter of Gandhi's idea of Swadeshi and Gandhi's call to boycott British-sponsored educational institutions. He participated in various non-violent movements such as the Salt Satyagraha of 1931 and the Quit India movement of 1942.

It may be appropriate to mention here that Mirabehn alias Madelein was one of Gandhi's followers. When she met Romain Rolland in Villeneuve, Romain mentioned India and M.K. Gandhi in the context of a small book and called Gandhi another Christ. It struck a deep cord in Madelein's mind. She later bought this book from a bookstore and read it, and that was the call to approach Gandhi. Deciding that she had to put herself through rigorous training to be accepted, she went through the activities of spinning, becoming a vegetarian and teetotaler, learning the speech, teaching herself to squat and sleep on the floor. Even while spending part of her training programme in Paris, she read both the *Bhagvad Gitā* and *Rigveda* in French. She immediately subscribed to *Young India* to study. Moreover, Gandhi's successful twenty one days fast for Hindu-Muslim unity had a profound effect on her. She sold a small diamond brooch gifted by her grandfather on her twenty-first birthday and sent 20 pounds to Gandhi, and this was the beginning of their acquaintance. Gandhi was impressed and gratefully accepted the receipt. Inspired by this experience, Madelein wrote a letter to Gandhi seeking his consent to stay at the Sabarmati Ashram and with Gandhi's permission reached Bombay on 6th November 1925 and Ahmadabad on 7th November 1925. Through Ashram life, Gandhi wanted to create personalities on the path of search for truth and non-violence, and Mirabehn excelled at this.

It is worth noting that Sarojini Naidu, the first women governor of Uttar Pradesh (an Indian State) in free India, the great freedom fighter as well as the first women president of Indian National Congress in 1925, led the Salt Satyagraha movement at Dharsana in 1930. During the Satyagraha campaign two Thousand Five Hundred volunteers were asked by her to proceed with M. K. Gandhi's inspiration and remain free from violence. In 1920 in her letter from Scandinavia to M.K Gandhi and Mahadev Desai respectively she wrote that her tour had been very successful and she had preached universal Satyagraha to Europe.

It is known that a close associate of M. K. Gandhi named Dr. Jakir Hussain, the third president of India from 13th May 1967 to 3rd May 1969, was also an Indian educationalist. During his M. A. Studies in the Anglo-Oriental College on 12 October 1920 Gandhi accompanied by Ali brothers visited the college which was a part of countrywide non-cooperation campaign against the British ruler and expressed his intention to boycott British-run educational institutions in the Union Hall of this college and Jakir Hussain responded to it. Later on responding to Gandhi's non-violent movement he played the role of a profound member of Jamia Milla Islamia, an independent national university. Indeed, he recognized Gandhi as his Guru.

History bears witness to that the notable Indian independence activist as well as a politician Professor Jivatram Bhagwandas Kripalani, also known as Acharya Kripalani participated in the Champaran movement with Gandhi. The practice of non-violence under Gandhi's leadership changed him and in his book "*Gandhi His Life And Thought*" he mentioned that Gandhi's non-violence was not negative. He considered Gandhi's constructive programme as initial preparation for the non-violent struggle for freedom and thus conducted it from village to village. He built the Shri Gandhi Ashram on a self-supporting economic basis and got used to Gandhi's lofty ideals and simple life style there.

Apart from these personalities, various other personalities of that time such as J.C. Kumarappa Kaka Kalekar, Jayaprakash Narayanan, Badsha Khan, Dada Dharmadhikari, Shankerrao Deo, Jugatram Dave, Dharendra Mazumder and many other followed Gandhi's non-violent policies and became collaborators in the peaceful non-violent movements. In addition to them, Albert Einstein, a German-born theoretical physicist contemporary with Gandhi, was an admirer of Gandhi and considered Gandhi's views the most enlightened of all political figures of that time.

In the post-Gandhi period we also notice some special personalities who were influenced by Gandhi's thought and chose the path of non-violence to reach the goal. Martin Luther King Jr. who led the civil rights movement in the United States through non-violence and civil disobedience from 1955 until his assassination in 1968, came to know about Gandhi through Gandhi's writings and his visit to India in 1959. He was greatly attracted by the Gandhian concept of non-violence and referred to Gandhi as his inspiration. Another non-violent activist named Nelson Mandela, who led the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa, was influenced by Gandhi and recognized Gandhi as his role model. The spiritual leader HH Dalai Lama was so inspired by Gandhi's

thought that he is regarded as the spiritual successor of Gandhi's non-violence. Moreover, various social activists like Vandana Shiva, Medha Patkar, Sundarlal Bahuguna, Baba Amte, Chandi Prasad Bhatt, Sunita Narain, Anna Hazare, Aung San Suu Kyi and many more tried to solve various problems by adopting Gandhi's non-violent peace process and promoted the world peace

Conclusion

Summing up it can be said that Gandhi's principle of non-violence is the mainstay of his philosophy and the road to truth. In fact Gandhi's philosophical thought was shaped and influenced by various personalities and his program of non-violence was developed which led his contemporaries and subsequent generation to the path of non-violence.

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