

The Legacy of Gandhi and Tolstoy: A Nonviolent journey fostering Mental Well-being

Shruthi M^{1*}, Dr. S. Kalamani²

¹Ph.D Research scholar, Department of English, Avinashilingam Institute for Home Science and Higher Education for Women, Coimbatore – 641043, India

²Professor, Department of English, Avinashilingam Institute for Home Science and Higher Education for Women, Coimbatore – 641043, India

***Corresponding author: Shruthi M,**

Ph.D Research scholar, Department of English, Avinashilingam Institute for Home Science and Higher Education for Women, Coimbatore – 641043, India

KEYWORDS

Gandhi,
Global, Mental
health,
Nonviolence,
Peace, Russia,
Satyagraha,
Tolstoy

ABSTRACT:

The historical association between, the iconic Indian independence leader, Mahatma Gandhi, and the renowned Russian writer Leo Tolstoy was primarily established through a series of correspondences. This played a pivotal role in shaping Gandhi's philosophical beliefs, particularly in relation to non-violence. The significance of this relationship is emphasized within the framework of Tolstoy's literary piece titled "A Letter to a Hindu." Gandhi held Tolstoy in high esteem, considering him a vital influence on his personal progress and development. Non-violence is not merely a moral stance; it cultivates peaceful cooperation and deep respect for human life. Moreover, there is a correlation between non-violence and health, as it nurtures mental well-being and social tranquillity. This article elucidates the parallelism of Tolstoy and Gandhi with respect to non-violence, which fosters mental health and serves as a key to a healthy and harmonious life.

Introduction:

Tolstoy has seen the adverse effects of the Crimean war and its resultant violence, and he started longing for peace in his life. To achieve this and establish peaceful and a complete society, he felt that people should work towards it and reach out to others. Despite his high status, Tolstoy has been consistently working for the upliftment of society. Tolstoy's words become more than mere philosophy; they manifest into action and inspire others to follow. The events that happened in his life were such that he was forced to have a philosophical outlook on everything in his later days. Though he was a Russian, the Indian literature had a huge impact on him. He read the translated versions of some Indian texts and found solace from them. Tolstoy internalized the values found in them and his life was transformed. Due to this influence, he was able to lead a meaningful life upholding the values of love, compassion, concern, fellow feeling, and other such virtues to create a healthy society.

The exchange of ideas among eminent intellectuals represents significant milestones in the progression of intellectual history. The extent of awareness among the public regarding the correspondence between Mahatma Gandhi and Leo Tolstoy and their mutual admiration for each other's philosophical perspectives on life and the significant impact Tolstoy had on Gandhi is often limited yet number of letters they vividly prove the association of the two. This year-long correspondence between the two was so very influential and worthy that it found history rewritten. In the article, "Why we hate each other: Tolstoy's Letters to Gandhi on Love, Violence and the Truth of the Human Spirit" Popova had also mentioned how Tolstoy's words on spiritual enlightenment and the truth about the order of nature inspired Gandhi:

In every individual a spiritual element is manifested that gives life to all that exists, and that this spiritual element strives to unite with everything of a like nature to itself, and attains this aim through love... The mere fact that this thought has sprung up among different nations and at different times indicates that it is inherent in human nature and contains the truth. But this truth was made known to people who considered that a community could only be kept together if some of them restrained others, and so it appeared quite irreconcilable with the existing order of society. (Popova)

Gandhi's initial encounter with adversity occurred during his journey from Durban to Pretoria, specifically in Pietermaritzburg. As the train was on the verge of departure, a fellow passenger promptly alerted the train attendant, expressing concern regarding the presence of an individual of

colour within the first-class compartment. Gandhi was requested to relocate to the van compartment, but he declined. What followed afterwards is briefly given by Doke: “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” (Doke 37). Gandhi resumed his journey the next morning, only to experience another humiliation as narrated by Doke:

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 to 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 37)

In addition to his individual encounters, Mahatma Gandhi observed instances of racial discrimination against Indians in the Transvaal region, which were justified by the implementation of “disability laws.” In the year 1888, a specific legislation was enacted in the Orange Free State that effectively restricted individuals classified as “coloureds” from pursuing any employment opportunities other than those of a menial nature, typically characterized by low wages. During a critical juncture in Gandhi's life, he confronted the decision of whether to stay in South Africa and confront the prevailing discrimination. It was during this time that he came across an unpublished manuscript titled “A Letter To A Hindu.” Mahatma Gandhi was greatly influenced by the profound principles of love and non-resistance to evil advocated by Count Leo Tolstoy. As a result, Gandhi purposefully decided to engage in correspondence with Tolstoy, respectfully requesting his permission to reproduce the esteemed letter. The serendipitous meeting facilitated through the medium of printed literature had a profound influence on Gandhi leading him to follow the principles of Ahimsa and having a great effect on Indian Independence struggle. In his work, “Ahimsa (Non-Violence), Gandhi and Global Citizenship Education (GCED),” Diop talks about such effect:

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi successfully promoted the principle of Ahimsa to all spheres of life, in particular to politics. His non-violent resistance movement was revolutionary; it was for the first time that ahimsa was used as a political weapon to influence the oppressors. It had an immense impact on India, impressed public opinion in Western countries, and influenced several 20th century leaders of various civil and political rights movements such as Nelson Mandela and the American civil rights movement's Martin Luther King, Jr. and James Bevel. (Diop)

The Gandhian thought and ideology seemed to have been accepted and followed by many people all over the world. The valuable views of Gandhiji inspired many people who tried to adopt it. They also tried to lead a life that comprised of a few principles for a peaceful life. Gandhi’s advice to the people are as follows; i) Not to commit adultery ii) No swearing iii) Not to resist evil by violence and iv) Not hate but rather love the enemies and to bless them. Thus, he had a wide range of followers as expressed by Mochizuki as:

Gandhi had fanatic followers from various spheres of Indian society and from abroad. He had also quite a few supporters of different profiles. As his activities directly concerned the real life and future orientation of the Indian people, nobody could be indifferent to his deeds. The English government was also among his watchers. But precisely because his idea was constantly tested by the unpredictable, real process of history, there is no telling who supported his tactics of nonviolence and who criticized them after all. (Mochizuki 151)

The young mind of Gandhi was inspired by the letter and was determined to know what independence is and how it could be achieved. Tolstoy played an important role in the formulation of Gandhi's principles pertaining to nonviolent civil disobedience, subsequently employed by him during the Indian independence movement. In one particular letter to Tolstoy, Gandhi expressed his profound admiration for his ideas and asked him a thought-provoking question: “How can we bring about a change in men's hearts?” In his response Tolstoy pointed to Gandhi Thirukkural, a classic Tamil text that espouses moral teachings and principles. He had read the translated version of the text. This response further solidified the bond between the two visionaries, as Gandhi recognized the universality of Tolstoy's ideas and their alignment with Indian philosophies, literature, scriptures, and

diverse religious traditions. The association of the two people is expressed by Mochizuki in the following manner:

...Gandhi's concept that "nonviolence is the law of our species as violence is the law of the brute" seems an anti-human prejudice or monomaniacal senselessness. This reminds us of the Russian criticisms of Tolstoy's "dogmatism" in moral judgment, "self-righteousness," which is blind to the anguish of the blameless victims of aggression, "ignorance" of the duality of the human mind, religious "nihilism," moral "utilitarianism," lack of a practical approach to real life, and so on. (Mochizuki 164 – 165)

The exchange of letters between Mahatma Gandhi and Leo Tolstoy continued until the demise of Tolstoy in 1910. During his residence in South Africa, Gandhi was profoundly impacted by the contents of Tolstoy's letters. The depth of their friendship was such that Tolstoy faced considerable difficulty in maintaining their correspondence, even amidst his final days marked by illness and suffering. In the article, "Nonviolence by Tolstoy & Gandhi: Toward a Comparison through Criticism," Mochizuki talks about the similarities between Tolstoy and Gandhi:

Both thinkers share the basic image of this "truth" so that the cores of their thoughts are quite similar. Their thoughts are equally based on a kind of anti-modernist or anti-modern-European sense of values, that is, they attach greater importance to spiritual, inner values than to material values, prefer a simple or ascetic life (sexual abstinence, vegetarianism, labor, diligence, and self-help) to an abundant or convenient urban life. They both regard any violence or power as absolute evil and reject fighting against evil using the same means as does evil. (Mochizuki 149)

The political trajectory of Mahatma Gandhi can be categorised into two distinct phases. The initial phase covering the period during which he resided and engaged in professional activities in South Africa, while the subsequent phase pertains to his repatriation to India, where he assumed the role of a prominent advocate for independence. Most of the literature on Gandhi tends to highlight his repatriation to India, his empirical pursuits in the quest for truth, and his endeavours to liberate his nation from British colonialism. Nevertheless, the fundamental basis of Gandhi's religious and political ideology can be attributed to his formative encounters in South Africa. Any individual's convictions and values are significantly influenced by the intellectual, moral, and spiritual support rendered by friends, admirers, and supporters. Gandhi engaged in a process of intellectual refinement, whereby he elucidated his ideas and subsequently proceeded to implement his principles in practical contexts. Gandhi went so far as to describe Tolstoy as "the preeminent advocate of non-violence in the contemporary era." He also spoke highly of Tolstoy and this was mentioned in the article, "How Leo Tolstoy Influenced Mahatma Gandhi" of Nadine Bjursten:

Tolstoy was the very embodiment of truth in this age. He strove uncompromisingly to follow truth as he saw it, making no attempt to conceal or dilute what he believed to be the truth. He stated what he felt to be the truth without caring whether it would hurt or please the people or whether it would be welcome to the mighty emperor. . . I know no one in India or elsewhere who has had as profound an understanding of the nature of nonviolence as Tolstoy had and who has tried to follow it as sincerely as he did (Bjursten)

A broad range of tactics can be used to characterize non-violence as a type of socio-political practice. As with many other concepts, non-violence is a social construct that is primarily mental in nature. As such, it can take on multiple meanings and interpretations. Because of this nature, it is frequently connected to myths and falsehoods in unfavorable situations. Among these misconceptions is the idea that non-violence is an idealized, unachievable state that is wholly unrealistic. There is also a myth that links it to the idea of passivity. Following the introduction of the idea of passive resistance, this association developed. It denoted a stubborn refusal to cooperate or to obey persons or institutional authority in power. Violence only creates more commotion but does not give solution to any problem. Choosing peace and spreading love is the essence of nonviolence.

The convergence of two individuals, a youthful Indian lawyer, and an elderly Russian writer, despite their considerable disparities in terms of geographical location, cultural background, and age, presents a captivating subject of observation. Mahatma Gandhi ardently embraced the teachings of Leo Tolstoy and assumed the arduous pursuit of "Truth" that had captivated Tolstoy throughout his lifetime. Mahatma Gandhi exhibited a notable inclination towards the literary works of Leo Tolstoy, particularly those pertaining to the concept of non-resistance. Doke writes in his biography of Gandhi,

“Undoubtedly Tolstoy has profoundly influenced him. The old Russian reformer, in the simplicity of his life, the fearlessness of his utterances, and the nature of his teachings on war and work, has found a warm-hearted disciple in Mr. Gandhi.” (Doke 88)

Tolstoy’s famous religious book, *The Kingdom of God is Within You*, intrigued Gandhi, as his autobiography attests, “Three moderns have left a deep impression on my life and captivated me; Raychand Bhai — by his living contact, Tolstoy — by his book *The Kingdom of God is Within You* and Ruskin — by his book *Unto This Last*.” (Gandhi 112). According to Martin Green, Tolstoyans consider that Tolstoy had influenced Gandhi so much that ideas and views of Tolstoy have been passed on to him considering him as a spiritual heir, “To ideological Tolstoyans, his spiritual heir would not be the Nobel laureate in literature, Boris Pasternak, but Mahatma Gandhi, who, in turn, influenced Martin Luther King.” (Green 166). The views of Tolstoy and Gandhi coincided in many respects. The worldview of each of them was based on religion, which, according to their conviction, like religious scriptures, could not be approached dogmatically. They considered true religiosity not ritualism, but righteous behaviour. Both rejected violence, negatively related to what they called modern civilization, called for simplification, and manual labour.

The principles espoused by Mahatma Gandhi, namely love, truth, non-violence, non-possession and bread labour, stemmed from his distinctive amalgamation of Western concepts, traditional Hinduism, and Indian philosophy. Both Mahatma Gandhi and Leo Tolstoy were renowned for their extensive intellectual acumen. Both of them derived their inspiration from renowned religious philosophers, including Confucius, Buddha, Socrates, Mohammed, Zoroaster, and Jesus, besides drawing insights from prominent religious scriptures such as the Vedas, Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita, and the Bible. Both visionaries articulated a transcendent significance within religion that extends beyond personal salvation. As Prabhu and Rao have brought in the similarities of the two writers with regard to Truth: Tolstoy puts it, “The heroine of my writings is She, whom I love with all the forces of my being, she who always was, is and will be beautiful, is Truth,” Gandhi echoes the same idea, “I am devoted to nothing but truth and I owe no discipline to anybody but Truth” (Prabhu and Rao 23).

Both Leo Tolstoy and Mahatma Gandhi were ardent proponents of the concept of human brotherhood and the interconnectedness of all beings. Tolstoy frequently espoused the notion that the concept of brotherhood encompasses individuals who occupy the lowest rungs of society and are economically disadvantaged. Gandhi exemplifies a similar concept. According to Tolstoy, religion encompasses an individual's connection with the entirety of the universe, in which humanity is but a constituent element. Gandhiji’s assertion is also very much similar as he says, “I am an integral component of the collective and I am unable to perceive Him in isolation from the entirety of humanity” (Tendulkar 418). Love was the fundamental essence of religion for both Tolstoy and Gandhi. Love serves as the conduit through which the essential qualities of humanity, such as mutual trust and non-violence, facilitate the establishment of global brotherhood and unity. These two persons always had an interconnectedness and similarity in many aspects and seemed to travel in the same wavelength of thoughts. The spiritual oneness of both is expressed by Green as:

Tolstoy and Gandhi were born in countries with cultural-spiritual traditions and social-historical circumstances that were immensely to the advantage of anti-modern reformers. They found to hand strong traditions of a cultural life quite unlike that emanating from England, and including forms of literal nonviolence. They were born into spiritual treasure houses, or better, into houses with attics full of such treasure, into which they had to find their ways. (Green 154)

Tolstoy emphasized love as the highest path to God. “He who lives in love, lives in God and God in him, for God is love” (Zweig 124). In his literary work titled “*The Law of Violence and the Law of Love*,” as well as in his essay entitled “*The Only Commandment*,” penned shortly prior to his demise, Tolstoy delves into the rationales behind the disregard exhibited by educated individuals and even those professing religious beliefs towards the enduring and all-encompassing principle of love.

According to Tolstoy, the concept of love serves as a means of purification for the individual and is fundamental to the essence of life. The experience of happiness is not solely derived from an individual's affection for his fellow human beings, but rather from his devotion to the ultimate origin of all existence, namely the divine entity commonly referred to as God. The concept of divinity is

inherent within every individual, leading to the recognition of the divine presence within oneself through the expression of love. This love is then extended to encompass all of humanity. It is imperative for individuals to embrace love and expel feelings of hatred, deceit, and vengeance from their inner selves. Tagore, one of the world's renowned poets also dreamt of "a heaven of freedom" devoid of disparities and "narrow domestic walls". His prayer for love for fruitful service to humanity aligns with the ideas of Tolstoy and Gandhi:

This is my prayer to thee, my lord—strike, strike at the root of penury in my heart.
Give me the strength lightly to bear my joys and sorrows.
Give me the strength to make my love fruitful in service.
Give me the strength never to disown the poor or bend my knees before insolent might.
Give me the strength to raise my mind high above daily trifles.
And give me the strength to surrender my strength to thy will with love. (Gehlot)

Tolstoy passionately sought a practical way of life based on reason and conscience in his quest for truth. Gandhi's view on Tolstoy and his life is very aptly brought forth by Tendulkar: "His life was a constant endeavour, an unbroken tide of strivings to seek the truth, and to practice it as he found it. He never tried to hide or tone it down but set it before the world in its entirety without equivocation or compromise, undeterred by the fear of any earthly power" (Tendulkar 418).

Tolstoy envisioned a healthy society - one that promotes equality, fraternity, and spiritual enlightenment. He advocated for the reconstruction of society with the aim of eradicating economic and social inequality, utilizing his doctrines of non-resistance and love. He held the belief that the elimination of the State as an institutional entity was imperative in order to actualize this concept. The dissolution of the State would occur in an automatic manner when individuals adhere to the principle of each according to his ability and each according to his needs. Tolstoy is credited with popularizing the concept of "bread labour." The term "bread labour" was initially introduced by Boudaref, a Russian peasant, to express the notion that engaging in physical labour is essential for securing sustenance. It is imperative that individuals contribute their fair share of physical labour before being entitled to consume sustenance. Non-violence establishes circumstances that promote comprehensive well-being for both individuals and communities.

The cultivation of spiritual discipline and moral fortitude that Gandhi fostered during his time at Tolstoy Farm endowed him with unwavering bravery to persist in the arduous pursuit of truth and justice in the subsequent years. The principles and practical contexts of non-violence together have a combined shelter for the poor and needy. Gandhi puts forward ideas and shows how his experiments on himself also had its effect on the people that came forward that is the young men and women who stayed at the Tolstoy Farm. What Zubacheva, in his article "What Mahatma Gandhi Learned from Russia's Leo Tolstoy," states about Tolstoy's influence on Gandhi is worth mentioning here:

Tolstoy's philosophy inspired Gandhi so much that he and his friend Hermann Kallenbach named their farm in South Africa after him. The residents of the "Tolstoy Farm" lived self-sufficiently devoting their bodies to hard manual labor and their minds to the ideals of truth, love, non-possession, non-violence, and chastity. Gandhi's experience at the Tolstoy Farm subsequently contributed to his Swadeshi movement based on the principle of using goods which are made in one's own country. (Zubacheva)

Conclusion

The enduring relevance of Tolstoy and Gandhi's message focuses in addressing contemporary global challenges, just as it did during their respective lifetimes. The persistent challenges of hunger, social injustice, and political and economic oppression continue to afflict the global population in several ways. Communist nations have effectively extended their sphere of influence in developing countries through methods such as coercion, propaganda, and the exploitation of individuals residing in impoverished, desolate, and resentful conditions. The impoverished individuals are assured of a utopian existence on this planet, contingent upon the alteration of external conditions exclusively. Lenin unequivocally articulated the principle that the attainment of revolution's objectives warranted the utilization of any available methods. The life of the two legends had been exemplary and their great life worthy of emulation by the following generations. The principles and ideas followed by them have an impact on the present society beset by so many problems and challenges. In the current

scenario, with the erosion of values, there is so much of violence and hatred among people. The lines from W.B. Yeats's poem, "*The Second Coming*" bring out the condition of the present world:

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity. (Yeats)

People should strive hard to eradicate social evils like violence, dishonesty, discrimination, and subjugation, realizing that all are one. They should try to understand the purpose of human life and try to uphold the values that would help them lead a meaningful life. Treating fellow beings with love, dignity, and respect, one can contribute his mite towards establishing and maintaining a non-violent, peaceful, and just society, which had been the dream and vision of both Tolstoy and Gandhi. With the prevalence of all-encompassing love, all individuals will act with humanity. The pursuit of truth, love towards fellow beings and acts of humanity are very much needed to bring back the lost values and the essential elements for the restoration of a healthy society. The establishment of such society will be a cure for the disturbed minds of people who are physically and mentally unhealthy so that they could join the others and lead a peaceful life. This brings about a society that is endowed with peace and good mental health. It is worthwhile to make a note of Herman Melville's quotation in this context: "We cannot live only for ourselves. A thousand fibers connect us with our fellow men; and among those fibers, as sympathetic threads, our actions run as causes, and they come back to us as effects." (Melville)

Reference

1. Anand, Y. P. "A Relationship between Leo Tolstoy and Mahatma Gandhi: A Historical Review." *Dialogue*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2010.
2. Bjursten, Nadine. "How Leo Tolstoy Influenced Mahatma Gandhi." *Illumination's Mirror*, 29 Apr. 2022, medium.com/illuminations-mirror/how-leo-tolstoy-influenced-mahatma-gandhi-c006ff5b63dd.
3. Diop, Mame Omar. "Ahimsa (Non-Violence), Gandhi and Global Citizenship Education (GCED)." June 2020.
4. Doke, J. Joseph. *M.K. Gandhi: An Indian Patriot in South Africa*. G.A. Natesan & Co., 1919.
5. Gandhi, M. K. *An Autobiography*. Beacon Press, 1957.
6. Gehlot, Mukesh. "The Heaven of Freedom Poem - Rabindranath Tagore." *Shayari Thoughts*, 16 Jan. 2024, www.theshayarthoughts.com/2021/10/heaven-of-freedom-by-rabindranath-tagore.html.
7. Green, Martin. "Tolstoy as Believer." *The Wilson Quarterly* (1976-), 1981, p. 166. JSTOR, doi:10.40256117.
8. Melville, Herman. "A Quote by Herman Melville." *Goodreads*, www.goodreads.com/quotes/156835-we-cannot-live-only-for-ourselves-a-thousand-fibers-connect. Accessed 18 Feb. 2024.
9. Mochizuki, Tetsuo. "Nonviolence by Tolstoy & Gandhi: Toward a Comparison through Criticism." *Research Publications*, www.srch.slav.hokudai.ac.jp/rp/publications/no11/11-12_Mochizuki.pdf. Accessed 23 Jan. 2024.
10. Murthy, Srinivasa. "Mahatma Gandhi and Leo Tolstoy Letters." *Mahatma Gandhi eBooks*, www.mkgandhi.org/ebks/MG_Tolstoy_Letters.pdf. Accessed 23 Jan. 2024.
11. Popova, Maria. "Why We Hurt Each Other: Tolstoy's Letters to Gandhi on Love, Violence, and the Truth of the Human Spirit." *The Marginalian*, 20 Oct. 2017, www.themarginalian.org/2014/08/21/leo-tolstoy-gandhi-letter-to-a-hindu/.
12. Prabhu, R. K., and U. R. Rao. *The Mind of Mahatma Gandhi*. Oxford University Press, 1945.

13. Sangiovanni, Francesca. "The Concept of Non-Violence." *Meer*, 30 Dec. 2022, www.meer.com/en/71732-the-concept-of-non-violence.
14. Shukla, Rajesh. "Tolstoy, Gandhi, and the Art of Life." *Philosophy, Culture, and Traditions*, 2011, pp. 146–50.
15. Tendulkar, D. G. *Mahatma*. Vol. 2, Publications Division, Government of India, 1960.
16. Yeats, William Butler. "The Second Coming by William Butler Yeats." *Poetry Foundation*, www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43290/the-second-coming. Accessed 15 Feb. 2024.
17. Zubacheva, Ksenia. "What Mahatma Gandhi Learned from Russia's Leo Tolstoy." *Russia Beyond*, 30 Jan. 2024, www.rbth.com/history/331145-gandhi-tolstoy.
18. Zweig, Stefan. *The Living Thoughts of Tolstoy*. Fawcett Publications, 1963.