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## **The Influence of Western and Indian Writing on Mahatma Gandhi**

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### **Abstract:**

It is crucial to remember that Gandhi did not receive the informal honour of the 'Father of the Nation' all of a sudden. In order to dismantle the imperial regime of the British Empire and resuscitate India with truth and non-violence as weapons of resistance, there was a metamorphosis that this saintly yet controversial figure underwent. A self-transformation on this visionary's part was imperative to the realisation of his grand vision of a national revolution taking place, and it can be traced back to his perusal of the works of a range of philosophical writers from Leo Tolstoy to John Ruskin among the Westerners and from Rabindranath Tagore to Gopal Krishna Gokhale among the Indians. Movements triggered by him such as those of civil disobedience and non-cooperation can be largely attributed to his fervent encounters with works of these seminal writers. This research article, therefore, intends to look at how a multitude of Western and Indian writers have significantly contributed towards shaping the psyche of the 'Mahatma' that this leader of the national independence movement gradually came to be known as. Though remarkable in its own right, this article does not seek to discuss the influence that Gandhi, in turn, had on several prominent writers both Indian and foreign.

**Keywords: Gandhi, Philosophy, Spirituality, Ethics, Religion.**

The plethora of discourses on political ethicist and social activist Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi has ambivalently portrayed him as a protagonist and an antagonist. This predominantly owes to the fact that he introduced religion and ethics into the political arena. Though not a fundamentalist, Gandhi's spiritual stance towards the struggle for independence led him to be construed as 'dangerous' both by people from within and without the nation. Undeniably, he sailed India through the troubled waters of colonialism in an unconventional and non-confrontational manner. Innumerable people around the world have drawn inspiration from Gandhi. Sean Chabot in his paper, "The Gandhian Repertoire as

Transformative Invention,” deliberates at length on the impact he had on another great visionary in history Martin Luther King:

Like many other intellectuals and activists, King recognized that the Gandhian repertoire enabled oppressed people to use familiar understandings of love to guide sustained and widespread movements for social justice. This invention had (and continues to have) transformative consequences for liberation struggles around the world. (332)

Nevertheless, it is crucial to remember that Gandhi did not receive the informal honour of the ‘Father of the Nation’ all of a sudden. In order to dismantle the imperial regime of the British Empire and resuscitate India with truth and non-violence as his weapons of resistance, there was a metamorphosis that this saintly yet controversial figure underwent. A self-transformation of this visionary was imperative to the realisation of his majestic vision of a national revolution taking place, and it can be easily traced back to his perusal of the works of a range of philosophical writers such as Leo Tolstoy and John Ruskin among the westerners and Rabindranath Tagore and Gopal Krishna Gokhale among the Indians to name a few. Movements he triggered such as those of civil disobedience and non-cooperation can be largely attributed to his curious encounters with works of these seminal writers from all across the world.

Rama Jha in her paper “The Influence of Gandhian Thought on Indo-Anglian Novelists of the Thirties and Forties” was of the view that Gandhi was creative enough to draw heavily from the writers of his time and introduce an innovative way of thinking, intensifying the sympathies of those writers while adding new dimensions to their imagination. She opines,

Gandhi said roughly the same thing which was said by Tagore and Vivekananda; but it is Gandhi more than anyone else who made this image vivid and real and gave an insight to the Indian intelligentsia. (164)

This research article intends to look at how a multitude of Western and Indian writers have significantly contributed towards shaping the psyche of the ‘Mahatma’ as this leader of the national independence movement gradually came to be known. Though remarkable in its own right, this article does not seek to discuss the influence that Gandhi, in turn, had on several prominent writers both Indian and foreign. An exegetical study of the man that led

this nation to independence from the Europeans, often also construed as an ideology in itself might reveal that the Gandhian thought was effectively an amalgamation of the East and the West. There was an assimilation of intellect and emotion, of rationality and intuition, of ideology and pragmatism, and of ethics and practicality.

In the paper “Global History of Political Thought: Gandhi as a Lesson on Cross-Cultural Hybridity,” Gray and Hughes advocate the necessity of understanding the history of political thought from a global perspective. Taking Gandhi as an example, they demonstrate how the role of cross-cultural ingenuity cannot be undermined. It is inappropriate to confine “truly dynamic” (Murti 55) and “thoroughly hybrid” (2) thinkers like Gandhi to rigid geographical and cultural niches. Gray and Hughes classify the existing positions on Gandhi’s sources of political identity in three broad categories. First was of those like A. L. Herman (5) who considered Gandhi’s political identity to be fundamentally non-Hindu rooted in Western thought having gathered inspiration from Henry David Thoreau’s *Civil Disobedience* and Leo Tolstoy’s *The Kingdom of God is within You* for his “unprecedented and dynamic methodology of *Satyagraha* founded upon the idealistic principles of Truth (Satya), Love (Prema), Service (Seva), Humanism (sarvodaya), and Nonviolence (Ahimsa)” (24 Naidu). The second category is of the like of A. L. Basham who propounded that Gandhian thought had its foundation in Hindu tradition only. The third and the only position with which the writers nod in agreement is a hybrid of the two individual approaches discussed previously. Bhikhu Parekh in his book *Gandhi's Political Philosophy*, a major proponent of this school of thought says:

Gandhi's political theory cuts across several moral, religious and philosophical traditions and rests on an unusually broad philosophical foundation, showing . . . the rich harvest that can be garnered from . . . cross-cultural dialogue. (qtd. in Gray and Hughes 376)

What was also peculiar about Gandhi being profoundly influenced by writers such as Leo Tolstoy, John Ruskin and Henry David Thoreau is that these writers were not the popular choice of the masses at that time. It was J. S. Mill, T. H. Huxley, Tyndall and Herbert Spencer whom liberal minded and educated Indians like V. S. Srinivasa Sastri were reading. Srinivasan in his paper “Western Influences on Gandhi” explains this phenomenon of preference by claiming that Gandhi was “Jain in his convictions and that, when in the west, he had felt emotionally alienated from the west’s industrial society” (847). He elucidates how

Western ideas came to India in two waves. During the decades of 1820s and 1830s everything western was being admired and everything Indian was being rejected. Raja Ram Mohan Roy and his Radicals fell in this category for being influenced by Thomas Paine, Bentham, the Utilitarians, and the Revolution. The second wave came in 1880s when the writers admitted being influenced by native and foreign thinkers and writers alike. According to Srinivasan, Gandhi had read Ruskin's *Unto This Last* and Thomas Carlyle's *Heroes and Hero Worship* which was evident in his demeanour though he never admitted that he was a man of books. Both of these writers along with Leo Tolstoy were rather pessimists and stern individualists than optimists and socialists who did not much care for the well being of the society. All of these Western writers leaving a mark on Gandhi were staunchly in opposition of the Western tradition of industrialisation and capitalism.

On this note of capitalism and socialism it is interesting to take into consideration A. K. Das Gupta's views expressed in his article "Gandhi on Social Conflict" where he reflects upon "unrecognised" resemblances between Gandhi and Karl Marx. He argues:

Like Marx, Gandhi also recognised the need to invoke the stronger - not merely the higher - forces in human nature for terminating exploitation. But while Marx talked of violent proletariat action in the cities, Gandhi put forth the ideas of non-co-operation and passive resistance by the exploited against the exploiters, and he believed that this would cultivate the idea of "trusteeship" among the owners of land and capital. (1876)

As per Gupta, the use of *Charkha* and other facets of the *Swadeshi* movement are testimony to the fact that Gandhi was undeniably a proponent of self-sufficiency thus being a Marxist in essence. However, he also posits the stance that the process that Gandhi followed was non-violent and did not wage a war on the possessors of means of production. He was not even entirely against factory production. In fact he wanted production to be nationalised.

While in South Africa and Beijing, Gandhi also purportedly (according to Timothy Morton) drew insights from Percy Bysshe Shelley's *Mask of Anarchy*, whose name is often associated with the latent virtue of non-violence manifested as the ideals of passive resistance and civil disobedience, which can be discerned from his student-led protests and practice of non-violence. Borushko reveals that Gandhi had recited Shelley's celebrated poem at a press conference, while arguing that Gandhi believed and also wanted to promulgate the fact that non-violence was capable of exposing that tyrannical power had underpinnings of violence. (96)

In her article entitled “Excursive Discursive in Gandhi's Autobiography: Undressing and Redressing the Transnational Self,” Julie F. Codell attempts to read Gandhi's autobiography in terms of an adaptation of Scottish writer Thomas Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*. She contends that Gandhi made use of his attire to bring about change and symbolise resistance. Codell believes that “*Sartor Resartus* offered Gandhi ideals, themes and metaphors of clothes and wanderings with which to help him fashion an Indian national self as a transnational identity, beyond parochial regional and caste hierarchies inherent in traditional identities” (123). She expounds on how Victorian culture – writing, thinking, science, and religion – was instrumental in constructing and consolidating his identity. Travelling across the world and encountering different religions and world views, his self undressed and redressed accordingly. It was only through Carlyle that Gandhi had become aware of the trials and tribulations faced by Muhammed. Codell argues that reading Carlyle might have stimulated in him the feeling of respect for all kinds of labour.

But Gandhi did not do for Indians what Frantz Fanon did for Africans in terms of the fact that he did not resort to violent resistance till the very end of his life and brought independence to India while staying true to his ideals. In the introduction to Leo Tolstoy's *A Letter to a Hindu*, Gandhi contemplates the idea that there are different ways in which different nationalists have their aspirations in terms of the means they choose to employ to achieve the end. Gandhi's method of *Ahimsa* might have roots in the correspondence that followed this letter falling into the hands of Gandhi while he was working in South Africa. Leo Tolstoy taught him the sublime doctrine of love underlying all major and minor religions throughout the world. It is interesting to note that Leo Tolstoy was the one who drew Gandhi's attention towards Shri Krishna and Swami Vivekananda. The concept of Advaita Vedanta as expounded in the *Vedas* and the *Upanishads*, the oneness of all mankind, the idea “that 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” (3) was sown in the mind of the greatest leader of this nation. He disbursed the wisdom of the *Vedas* in this concise compendium of words and encouraged Gandhi to understand, “The truth was and is that this life should be directed by the spiritual element that is its basis, which manifests itself as love, and which is so natural to man” (4). Tolstoy explained how this truth about love was inherently present in all the traditions but ignorance of it arose due to the misconception that it ought to be followed only as far as one's

private life was concerned and people meted out violence and evil when in public with strangers or even friends.

However, before judging the extent and depth of the inheritance of Western philosophy, it needs to be kept in mind that Gandhi was initially averse to Christian thought. V. Ramana Murthi, on explicating the influence of the Western tradition on Gandhian doctrine in his eponymous paper found this idea articulated in Gandhi's autobiography *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*. In his childhood spent in India, Gandhi had seen Hindus forcefully being converted to Christianity. It was only later in life when he went to England for his education and met a few Christians who were kind to him that he began to appreciate the religion so much so that a particular gospel of 'Sermon on the Mount' from the *Bible* had such a deep impact on him that he came back to it again and again for inspiration. (56) Murthi also warns one to guard against implementing what he calls an independent enquiry taking into consideration the West in isolation from the East. "The role of the West is more appropriately understood if it is concurrently reviewed in the corresponding context of the East" (55).

Prior to engaging with the wisdom of his own land, Gandhi was exposed to "modern, western thought" (Batra 6), he came across the texts of the Indian culture only later in London after his education at Rajkot. When it comes to the influence of texts of Indian origin, the English translation of the *Bhagavad Gita* by Edwin Arnold which he first read in England was held dear by Gandhi. While in the Himalayan station of Kausani, Gandhi completed the preface of a commentary on the *Gita* titled *Anasakti Yog* which can be roughly translated as the Yoga of detachment. He wrote the commentary in order to reach out to the illiterate who were not well-versed in the Sanskrit language as he felt that the teachings of this holy book could help in their emancipation by alleviating their pain and equipping them with wisdom to deal with the everyday troubles of life. (3303)

However, Gandhi was aware that there was a fine line that separated reformers from reactionaries, and belief from blind orthodoxy. He made informed choices in emulating the behaviour as delineated in the texts of every tradition and allowed his psyche to evolve and develop over time thus resulting in his ability to have newer ways of seeing the same things. He pulled out the texts from their ancient context and weighed their practicability in the present time. As an instance, he was initially in favour of the 'varna system' as propagated by some priests with vested interests to have been advocated in the scriptures but later found it

unethical and in the way of human emancipation thus rejecting the practice completely. “Gandhian repertoire at its best synthesizes pragmatic and principled dimensions: what is morally right is not necessarily less realistic or effective” (Chabot 332).

This makes it evident that his love for humanity together with the humility imperative to welcome change was unparalleled. It might hence not be an exaggeration to address Gandhi as quite a ‘humane scholar of humanities.’ This is the reason he is believed to have turned Hinduism into a more tolerant religion than it was earlier. Irfan Habib makes note of this fact in his paper titled “Gandhi and the National Movement” quite clearly:

By attributing all his statements to roots in the Indian civilization, and particularly in Hinduism, he created a picture of Hinduism which made it possible for its followers to accept modern values. It is a religion which has nothing in common with the 'Hindutva' cult. Gandhi's Ram was God, and his Ram Rajya did relate to something that was remotely sectarian. (8)

The Gandhian ideal of *Sarvodaya* roughly translated as the well-being of all, was taken from a Jain thinker Samant-bhadra, and concretised into a weapon to get rid of British dominance. In the course of developing the concept of *Sarvodaya*, Gandhi took to several books and traditions. As per Thomas Joseph Parathara's article “Gandhian Philosophy of Sarvodaya: A Critical Study,” one of these books was John Ruskin's book *Unto This Last*, the life-changing impact of which has been described by Gandhi in a chapter of his autobiography titled as “The Magic Spell of Book.” He went to learn the virtues of truth, simplicity, purity, love and non-violence from Leo Tolstoy's *The Kingdom of God is within You* and his essay “Christianity and Religion.” Henry David Thoreau's *Civil Disobedience* also shaped his political ideas by giving more importance to man. Gandhi referred to the *Bhagavad Gita* as the Eternal Mother and it was his chief inspiration with regards to *Sarvodaya*. The *Isha Upanishad* gave him the ideals of equality, fraternity, renunciation, and service to the society without exploitation. Similarly, Buddhism, Jainism, and Islam taught him the values of universal love, fellow-feeling, peace and equality. (Parathara 560-561)

As far as the Indian tradition is concerned, it becomes important to mention that the edifice of Indian political thought and religious reform movements was perched on Vedic principles. Political science has been held in high esteem in the Indian culture since time immemorial with *Vedas* being considered as the oldest texts belonging to Indian tradition. There are numerous occasions across the length and breadth of these scriptures on which



guidance is given to rulers of a state in order to dispense with their duties with utmost sincerity as well as benevolence. There are also principles for the public to adhere to for the smooth functioning of the state. Based on the fifth *Veda* known as the 'Itihasa' (*Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*) in the ancient tradition, 'Drishtartha' was the name given to the science of politics in those times for "it sought to interpret the world which was visible to the senses" (Chousalkar 56). After the *Vedas*, the next most important work of Indian tradition is believed to be *Manusmriti* in which were outlined political ideas founded on Vedic ideals. It comprises authoritative expositions on such areas as society, religion, polity, administration, kingship, and duties and responsibilities of the king. In the times of British Raj, for restoration and fortification of the ancient Indian tradition and culture, Raja Ram Mohan Roy pioneered the Indian Renaissance thus upholding the ideals of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbam* and *Sarve Jana Sukhino Bhavantu*. However, Indian nationalism was hinged on the ideals of Sanatana Dharma. Gandhi borrowed the values of *satya* (truth) and *ahimsa* (non-violence) from this school. (Rao 106-111) With Swami Dayanand Saraswati came a revival of the Vedic culture. Rao observes how Gandhi's *Swadeshi* movement was influenced by Swami Dayanand Saraswati's dictum:

Swami Dayananda Saraswati's deep study of Vedas and other Sastras made him to discard British rule as unethical and demand Swaraj much before the Indian National Congress accepted this ideal in 1906. It was he who raised the slogan "Swadesi" which at a later stage became a powerful weapon in the hands of Mahatma Gandhi. (111)

With respect to *Sanatana Dharma* and Vedanta, the role of Sri Ramkrishna and his disciple Swami Vivekananda in the history of India cannot be undermined. They are often rightly hailed as the precursors of the spiritual renaissance in this nation. Sri Aurobindo was another leader of the Indian independence movement having been highly political and highly spiritual at different times in his life. He upheld the ideals of sacrifice and suffering. Gandhi brought together "in a unique way, these two streams of political activism and social reform" (Singh 56).

Gandhi was given the title of *Mahatma* by Rabindranath Tagore and Tagore was first called *Gurudev* by Gandhi. Anti-colonialism underpinned the similarity between the artistic nationalist Rabindranath Tagore and the ascetic nationalist Gandhi. Both comprehended colonialism as more of a psychological construct and theoretical formulation than a tangible

reality and firmly held that Indians could be delivered from this “externally superimposed domination” (A. Bhattacharya 101) to a state of freedom from it through the means of educational transformation instead of political emancipation. “Only education, they thought, could deliver the nation spiritually” (A. Bhattacharya 102). However, it is to be remembered that Rabindranath Tagore and Gandhi took slightly different courses of action when it came to propagating as well as promoting education in the country struggling to be freed from the clutches of dominance and disgruntlement. Initially, Rabindranath Tagore was impressed by the reforms brought about by the British occupation of India with regards to administration, education, culture, and religion, so much so that he promoted the Bengal Renaissance with Raja Ram Mohan Roy as its chief proponent. Also, Tagore was an adherent of *Brahmo Samaj*, a monotheistic derivative of Hinduism. However, Gandhi had always been a devout Hindu fervently chanting the *Ramdhun* and looking forward to attaining *Ram Rajya* for India. Gandhi introduced the concept of Basic Education in India. (A. Bhattacharya 110)

Another Indian visionary who exerted a remarkable influence on Gandhi was Gopal Krishna Gokhale. This pioneer of the nation’s freedom struggle sacrificed his life for India’s independence dying out of stress, strain and sleepless anxiety involved in fighting back (Aiyar 4). The article, “The Legacy of Gopal Krishna Gokhale,” draws a true picture of this leader of Indian independence movement and founder of *Hitavada* (The People’s Paper) who not only led India but Gandhi as well by the hand:

“Teacher and educationist, statesman and economist, social reformer and a true Servant of India in the best sense of the word; without vanity of any kind and yet completely free from a pathological obsession with simplicity; modern but not estranged from his people, atheistic – at least, agnostic – and yet (or, therefore?) committed to truth without any subterfuge; devoted to his country’s interests but neither a chauvinist nor lacking in moral courage when the occasion demanded frankness or, even, a public confession of error –” (Shah 4)

Gandhi, in his anthology entitled *Gokhale*, referred to him as “My Political Guru” and “Mahatma” and also likened him to the river Ganges. Their relationship between the teacher and the taught in this case was an extremely cordial one. However, just as Sri Krishna was friendly towards both Yudhishtir and Duryodhana in the epic lore of *Mahabharata*, Gokhale was generous towards both of Gandhi and Muhammad Ali Jinnah in doling out his wisdom to them. He was a role model to Jinnah as well so much so that Jinnah once declared that he

wanted to become “Muslim Gokhale” (Ramachandran). Being guided by him while in South Africa, Gandhi appears to have imbibed from him the values of patriotism, nationalism, leadership, character-building, and of underlining the significance of public education and research, though Gandhi was averse to Gokhale’s method of reforming the social structure and social relationships by being a critical insider, as inspired by his own mentor Justice Ranade. Gandhi spoke of Gokhale in the following words, “pure as crystal, gentle as a lamb, brave as a lion and chivalrous to a fault and the most perfect man in the political field” (qtd. in Tikekar 10).

In the present age, Gandhi is worthy of grateful remembrance for all that he did for this nation as well as for humanity at large. For the current generation, it might become extremely difficult to go back to the idealism of this man who first underwent a metamorphosis himself and then brought about a massive transformation in a world that was at that time as is today loaded with violence and falsity. D. Naidu’s views on Gandhi seem quite agreeable as he writes:

Gandhi disdained pecuniary considerations but he actively carried on a dialogue with his inner voice. While these issues were raised by Gandhi's inner voice to him, the way he amplified them allowed us to enlarge our public lives. So what if we do not accept Gandhi's view on brahmacharya; so what if we find it difficult to return to the charkha; so what if we still have elements of patriarchy in family life; Gandhi helped us to move from tradition to modernity by the very act of bringing up these issues for public debate. (32)

From being an externally erudite man influenced by so many philosophers and thinkers as discussed in this paper to one who became self-realised, this leader of the nation has inspired an excess of literature, Gandhi evolved and gave us motivation to evolve ourselves. Progress, development, change, reform, and transformation were all brought about by this man but without the use of the slightest violence and untruth. It is easy to criticise someone who has had quite a few flaws despite all that he sacrificed for the nation of which we are independent citizens today, but to accept him as he was and learn from his mental strength and his achievements – which were not for himself but for we, the people of India – requires immense courage and a mind willing to learn. For generations to come, Gandhi’s courage and honesty towards himself will remain values to be carried home and ruminated upon in all sincerity.

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