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Tolstoy and Gandhi

Undoubtedly the dialogue between Gandhi and Tolstoy was not only a correspondence of letters but also a correspondence of minds. Gandhi's reading of Tolstoy's writings can be dated back to the year 1894. Significantly the young lawyer first read Tolstoy's *The Kingdom of God is Within You* after humiliating experiences of racial discrimination in South Africa. Thus Gandhi was not attracted by Tolstoy the famous novelist, but by the Tolstoy who expounded the doctrine of Non-resistance in his three essays of confessions *My Confession*, *My Religion*, *The Kingdom of God is within You or Christianity Not as a Mystic religion but as a New Theory of Life*. Tolstoy had found a way out of his mid-life crisis through a new understanding of the Christian Gospel. Assisted by a Rabbi, Tolstoy had found a clue to a new understanding of the Gospel and of his life in a radical interpretation of Matthew's verse (5;38,39): "You heard that it was said: an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. But I tell you not to resist the evil person." This Non-resistance however, according to Tolstoy, does not mean the victory of evil accepted with fatalism, but on the contrary, its destruction by the refusal to cooperate with injustice. According to the doctrine of Non-resistance it is necessary to struggle using just means against injustice in all social, political and economic fields of human life.

Gandhi did not however initiate the correspondence with Tolstoy until some years later. But as early as 1901 Tolstoy responded to the request of the Indian journalist, A. Ramaseshan, to take a stand and find encouraging words against the British colonial power.

In his letter responding to Ramaseshan, Tolstoy recommended refusal of military service and service within the colonial administration – resistance not as an armed uprising in the form of revolutionary struggle – but by "non-doing", "non-participation" in the political administration. Tolstoy combined his statement with a vehement rejection of the unjust caste system in India which he considered to cause disharmony between the ethnic groups and oppression of one group by another.

In 1903 in correspondence with the Muslim Mufti Muhammed Sadiq who wanted to confront Christian missionaries with Muslim missionaries in India, Tolstoy clearly stated that he disapproved of the activities of Muslim priests in India, because they might also contribute to communal disharmony.

In 1905 the famous Indian philosopher and pupil of Vivekananda, Baba Premananda Bharati (Surendranath Mukherji), sent a pamphlet from his exile in the USA to Tolstoy warning against the "White Danger" (adapted from the hypothetical "Yellow Danger" of Chinese and Japanese supposedly threatening European civilisation) as a reaction to the Russian-Japanese War. Tolstoy was not only concerned about the corrupting influence of the British rule in India, but also about the passionate tone of the letter addressed to him. Bharati sent, along with a second letter of 7 January 1907, his book *Shri Krishna - the Lord of Love*. Tolstoy was so fascinated by Krishna's philosophy of benevolence and love that he introduced each of his chapters of his *Letter to a Hindoo* (which he wrote in 1909) with a quotation from the Krishna book. Gandhi asked for permission to reprint Tolstoy's *Letter to a Hindoo* in his weekly *Indian Opinion*. That is why this *Letter to a Hindoo* will be quoted without denying that Tolstoy considered the miraculous legends, the cosmological myths and historical legends about the origin of the world to be fanciful. Bharati always published Tolstoy's letters of response in his magazine *The Light of India* so that another Indian contemporary, the journalist and sociologist Taraknath Das, took note of this correspondence and sent a letter to Tolstoy.

Letter to a Hindu

On 22 May 1908 the Bengali journalist, Taraknath Das, sent two issues of his magazine *Free Hindustan* to Tolstoy from his Canadian exile together with a letter in which the social revolutionary from Vancouver conveyed something of the Indian situation to Tolstoy. Taraknath Das pointed out that during the years 1891 to 1900, 19 million Indians had starved to death, whereas in the wars from 1792 to 1900 only 5 million people had died:

"You hate war, but hunger in India is more terrible than any war. It occurs in India, not due to shortage of food, but because of the plundering of the people and by the ravaging of the country by the British Government. Is it not a shame that millions of people in India are hungry, while the English traders export from India thousands of tons of rice and other foodstuffs?"¹

In the name of the millions of Indians starving to death, Taraknath Das asked Tolstoy for support. Tolstoy started writing his letter of reply to Taraknath Das on 7 June 1908; but it took half a year, 29 versions and 413 manuscript pages, which are kept in one of Moscow's museums on Tolstoy, before Tolstoy had composed his *Letter to a Hindoo* in December 1908 after having informed himself in more detail about the social, economic and political situation in India. Only the additional letter of an Indian teacher (G.D.Kumar) dated 21 August 1908, and further information which Tolstoy asked Taraknath Das for, enabled Tolstoy to write his statement.

Tolstoy started his article by expressing his deep concern about the misery of the oppressed Indians:-

The reason for the astonishing fact that a majority of working people submit to a handful of idlers who control their labour and their very lives is always and everywhere the same – whether the oppressors and the oppressed are of one race or whether, as in India and elsewhere, the oppressors are of a different nation.

This phenomenon seems particularly strange in India, for there more than two hundred million people, highly gifted both physically and mentally, find themselves in the power of a small group of people quite alien to them in thought, and immeasurably inferior to them in religious morality.²

Tolstoy saw the reason for this unnatural and inconceivable phenomenon in the fact that the enslaved do not look for an indigenous means of liberation from the intolerable oppression but rather assimilate "the anti-religious and deeply immoral social disorder in which the English and other pseudo-Christian peoples live". Science as a substitute religion was as much castigated by Tolstoy as the obedience to authorities like Tzars, Sultans, Rajas, Shahs and other heads of state who claim privileges for themselves.

Among the pseudo-legitimations of the ruling class Tolstoy first discovered the scientific justification for using violence as a 'law of history' in Darwin's theory of the survival of the fittest transferred from the world of animals to the social sphere (Social Darwinism):

The only difference in this justification by pseudo-science consists in the fact that, to the question why such and such people and not others have the right to decide against whom violence may and must be used, pseudo-science now gives a different reply to that given by religion – which declared that the right to decide was valid because it was pronounced by persons possessed of divine power. 'Science' says that these decisions represent the will of the people, which under a constitutional form of government is supposed to find expression in all the decisions and actions of those who are at the helm at the moment.³

This scientific superstition criticised by Tolstoy would however conquer even Japan and India and would make the oppressed commit the same mistakes as their oppressors so that Tolstoy doubts the truth of *Free Hindustan's* thesis: "Resistance against aggression is not only justified but demanded: Renunciation of resistance harms altruism as much as egotism". And Tolstoy replies to Taraknath Das:

You say that the English have enslaved your people and hold them in subjection because the latter have not resisted resolutely enough and have not met force by force.

But the case is just the opposite. If the English have enslaved the people of India it is just because the latter recognised, and still recognise, force as the fundamental principle of the social order. (...)

A commercial company enslaved a nation comprising two hundred millions. Tell this to a man free from superstition and he will fail to grasp what these words mean. What does it mean that thirty thousand men, not athletes but rather weak and ordinary people, have subdued two hundred million vigorous, clever, capable and freedom-loving people? Do not the figures make it clear that it is not the English who have enslaved the Indians, but the Indians who have enslaved themselves?⁴

Tolstoy finishes his *Letter to a Hindu* on 14 December 1908 with a comprehensive criticism of civilisation:-

What are wanted for the Indian as for the Englishman, the Frenchman, the German, and the Russian, are not Constitutions and Revolutions, nor all sorts of Conferences and Congresses, nor the many ingenious devices for submarine navigation, and aerial navigation, nor powerful explosives, nor all sorts of conveniences to add to the enjoyment of the rich, ruling classes; nor new schools and universities with innumerable faculties of science, nor an augmentation of papers and books, nor gramophones and cinematographs, nor those childish and for the most part corrupt stupidities termed art – but one thing only is needful: the knowledge of the simple and clear truth which finds place in every soul that is not stupefied by religious and scientific superstitions – the truth that for our life one law is valid – the law of love, which brings the highest happiness to every individual as well as to all mankind. Free your minds from those overgrown, mountainous imbecilities which hinder your recognition, and at once the truth will emerge from amid the pseudo-religious nonsense that has been smothering it: the indubitable, eternal truth in man, which is one and the same in all great religions of the world. It will in due time emerge and make its way to general recognition, and the nonsense that has obscured it will disappear of itself, and with it will go the evil from which humanity now suffers.⁵

Gandhi in South Africa

When Gandhi took up his correspondence with Tolstoy from London, he had gathered experience as a lawyer and political advocate of the Indian minority in South Africa for more than 15 years. With his wife Kasturba he had four children (Harilal, Manilal, Ramdas, Devadas) before he decided in 1906 to live his marriage in celibacy. Gandhi became a *brahmachari*, a seeker for truth in renunciation, through his experiences in a stretcher-bearer corps. He no longer dressed as an English gentleman but began to appreciate his Indian origin. From an assimilation always compromised by racist oppression he proceeded to the laborious work for the emancipation of ostracised Indian indentured labourers. His path and that of numerous seekers for truth, *satyagraha*, led to prison because they deliberately broke humiliating and unjust laws. In January 1908 Gandhi was in a Johannesburg prison for 20 days because he disobeyed an order to leave the Transvaal. An agreement with General Smuts did result in a preliminary release from prison at the end of January 1908; Gandhi however took up the campaign of civil disobedience again when General Smuts broke his promise. In October 1908

Gandhi was in Volksrust and Pretoria prison for about two months, in prison clothes, together with black jail inmates and ordinary criminals.

Satyagraha campaigns in South Africa started in 1906 in Johannesburg. An amendment bill to the so-called Asiatic laws was drafted to curtail the rights of Asiatic settlers. About 3,000 delegates of Indian settlers then held a meeting in Johannesburg and pledged "with God as witness" to resist the bill by non-violent means in the event of it being passed. 200 *satyagrahi* were sentenced to various prison terms because of their non-violent resistance. The *satyagrahi* expected mass arrests, fines and prison sentences. The Transvaal Indian struggle for emancipation led by Gandhi was the starting point for the first letter to Tolstoy.

In addition, Gandhi had edited the weekly magazine of the Indian minority in South Africa, *Indian Opinion*, during his farm experiment, Phoenix Settlement near Durban, an ashram where Gandhi practised his own life reforms with *satyagrahi* families. Gandhi was strongly influenced by John Ruskin's ideas whose plea for manual labour, handicrafts and agriculture as 'good labour' had impressed him. Similar ideas by the Russian peasant writers Bondarew and Sjutajew were borrowed by Tolstoy who propagated them as "bread labour" in his pamphlets. Gandhi was attracted by Tolstoy's *The Kingdom of God*:

Tolstoy's *The Kingdom of God is Within You* overwhelmed me. It left an abiding impression on me. Before the independent thinking, profound morality, and the truthfulness of this book, all the books given me . . . seemed to pale into insignificance⁶.

In addition he read Tolstoy's writings on social ethics, *What is Art?*, *The Slavery of Our Time*, *The First Step*, *What Shall be Done?* and *the Letter to a Hindoo*.

Tolstoy and Gandhi

While in London for negotiations about the withdrawal of the so-called Black Act, Gandhi sent a letter to Tolstoy on 1 October 1909 giving an account of the situation of the Indian minority in Transvaal. He told of racial discrimination against 13,000 Indians and how half of them withdrew from the Transvaal so as not to bow to the unjust law, with 2,500 *satyagrahi* going to prison, some more than five times. The prison sentences were from four days to six months, in most cases with hard labour. The sentences also meant financial ruin for many of the prisoners. The delegation from the South African Indians hoped to publicise these facts in Britain.

Gandhi asked Tolstoy for permission to publish a translation of his *Letter to a Hindoo* with a certain modification, namely deleting a passage in which Tolstoy refuted the belief in reincarnation and transmigration, because millions of Indians and Chinese set great store by this religious conviction. This concept of rebirth was taught and affirmed not by scientific proof but by experience, and would thus explain some

mysteries of life. To many a *satyagrahi* who was detained in the Transvaal prisons this belief had been a comfort. Gandhi did not want to persuade Tolstoy of the validity of this belief, but only asked for permission to remove the passage. In addition, Gandhi asked Tolstoy the title of the book from which he quoted Krishna.

On 7 October 1909, Tolstoy responded to Gandhi from Yasnaya Polyana:

May God help all our dear brothers and co-workers in the Transvaal. This fight between gentleness and brutality between humility and love on one side, and conceit and violence on the other, makes itself ever more strongly felt here to us also – especially in the sharp conflicts between religious obligations and the laws of the State – expressed by the conscientious objection to render military service. Such objections are taking place very frequently.⁷

Tolstoy gave Gandhi permission to publish his letter, even with changes, but pointed out that the immortality of the soul and the belief in divine truth and love would be more deeply rooted within a universal religion than the belief in rebirth. In addition, religious enterprises should be free from financial matters. That is why Tolstoy did not want to accept a fee for the publication of his letter.

On 10 November 1909, Gandhi thanked Tolstoy in another letter from London in which he added Joseph Doke's biography of Gandhi and stressed the importance of the Transvaal struggle in which half of the activists had to endure much suffering and hardship because of their principles. In this letter Gandhi pointed out that one of his sons had been arrested for the fourth time and had been sentenced to six months forced labour. In another letter of 4 April 1910, Gandhi reminded Tolstoy of a reply and also sent him his dialogue *Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule*, his radical criticism of modern civilisation.

Hind Swaraj

In the seventeenth chapter of *Hind Swaraj* which Tolstoy appreciated most and which Gandhi translated from Gujarati into English in 1909, Gandhi, in his dialogue, stresses the superiority of "soul force" over "brute force". In his plea for the power of truth and love, Gandhi criticises history as record of an unbroken chain of wars; historical description was nothing other than a report of the interruption of the natural path, the interruption of the power of soul force. In this chapter Gandhi elaborates the method to secure innate rights by voluntary suffering, as an alternative to armed resistance. He describes the calculated breach of law as "soul force", eg the prison term which the *satyagrahi* endures as "self-sacrifice". Instead of sacrificing other people, self-sacrifice was superior to any other sacrifice. Even if the issue proves to be unjust and a mistake, no one else has to suffer irreparable damage by this way of solving a conflict. Conscience does not allow submission to unjust laws.

Gandhi stresses the principle of 'home rule' or 'self-rule' in opposition to tyranny. Gandhi criticises the principle of decisions of majorities against minorities, because the majority might be "a gang of thieves" and the minority "a pious man". Gandhi also asks: who has got courage? The violator or the person who refuses to bow to violence? Equanimity and control over passions decide. The nonviolent resistance of a truth seeker was "a sword to all sides" which calls forth far-reaching results without blood shedding. The search for the truth of a situation leads on to a continuous quest for truth. Truthful people do not follow unjust laws eg peasants ignore unjust political restrictions and abandon them by non-cooperation. Special physical exercise for such a kind of resistance was not necessary, but weakening of the physical condition by a luxurious life style and child-marriage was unreasonable. Such "soul-force" was for the sick and frail as well as for the healthy. Complete liberation from sexual passions, voluntary poverty and cultivating fearlessness are preconditions for *satyagraha*. A celibate life, even in marriage, prevents men and women from being weak and cowardly. No financial ambitions but indifference to money shall be combined with the search for truth. One should be free of concern about relatives. A fearless person does not need a sword:

A man with a stick suddenly came face to face with a lion and instinctively raised his weapon in self-defence. The man saw that he had only prated about fearlessness when there was none in him. That moment he dropped the stick and found himself free from all fear.⁸

Meanwhile Gandhi had published Tolstoy's *Letter to a Hindoo* in which he calls himself a modest and humble follower of Tolstoy. Following the comprehensive information Gandhi had sent Tolstoy, the latter replied from Yasnaya Polyana on 8 May 1910 that the biography of Gandhi had fascinated him and had given him the opportunity to know Gandhi better. On 23 April 1910, according to the diary of Tolstoy's doctor, Dushan P. Makovitzki, Tolstoy had said that *Hind Swaraj* had been of exceptional interest to him, being a thorough condemnation of modern European civilisation from a religious Hindu. In a letter, 22 April 1910, to his secretary Vladimir G. Chertkov, Tolstoy said that Gandhi was very close to him. Tolstoy wrote to Gandhi, 25 April 1910, concerning *Hind Swaraj* that "the question you are dealing with in this book – passive resistance – . . . is a matter of utmost importance not only for Indians but for the whole of mankind". Gandhi replaced the term "passive resistance" with *satyagraha* about this time.

Tolstoy Farm

Meanwhile the nonviolent resistance of the Transvaal Indians escalated. Hundreds of Indian families who did not want to bow to the colonial administration were ruined and deprived of their property. Gandhi, together with his German-Jewish friend and architect Hermann Kallenbach, had acquired a piece of land near Johannesburg for cultivation. Kallenbach had bought the land, a settlement with agriculture, fruit trees and gardens, for the Indian refugees. Kallenbach had been impressed by Tolstoy's

Confession which concerned Tolstoy's mid-life crisis and spoke to his own situation. Kallenbach asked Tolstoy for permission to name the settlement after him since he hoped to develop a community life according to Tolstoy's ideals. In a letter of 15 August 1910, Gandhi also asked Tolstoy the same and expressed his deep friendship with Kallenbach. Through the name Tolstoy Farm, Gandhi gave Tolstoy the opportunity to participate in the campaign of noncooperation and nonviolent resistance of the Transvaal Indians.

Tolstoy's Legacy

In a letter sent by Kotschety on Tolstoy's behalf and dated 7 September 1910 (the letter was received by Gandhi after Tolstoy's death) Tolstoy revealed his thoughts arising from his reading of Gandhi's letters and reports:

The more I live – and specially now that I am approaching death, the more I feel inclined to express to others the feelings which so strongly move my being, and which according to my opinion, are of great importance. That is, what one calls non-resistance, is in reality nothing else but the discipline of love undeformed by false interpretation. Love is the aspiration for communion and solidarity with other souls, and that aspiration always liberates the source of noble activities. That love is the supreme and unique law of human life, which everyone feels in the depth of one's soul. We find it manifested most clearly in the soul of the infants. Man feels it so long as he is not blinded by the false doctrines of the world.⁹

In his last letter Tolstoy gives the example of conscientious objection to military service and points to the 'manifest outrageous contradiction' between Christian teaching and political logic by ending his letter as follows:

That contradiction is felt by all the governments, by your British Government as well as by our Russian Government; and therefore, by the spirit of conservatism natural to these governments, the opposition is persecuted, as we find in Russia as well as in the articles of your journal, more than any other anti-governmental activity. The governments know from which direction comes the principal danger and try to defend themselves with a great zeal in that trial not merely to preserve their interests but actually to fight for their very existence. With my perfect esteem, Leo Tolstoy.¹⁰

Notes and References

1. Letter from Taraknath Das to Leo Tolstoy (22/5/08). Quoted from Alexander Shifman: *Tolstoy and India*, New Delhi 1978. p.71.
2. Leo Tolstoy: *Letter to a Hindoo* (1908). Documented by Kalidas Nag: *Tolstoy and Gandhi*, Patna 1950, p.82.

3. Leo Tolstoy: *Letter to a Hindoo* (1908). Documented by Kalidas Nag, p. 90.
4. Leo Tolstoy: *Letter to a Hindoo* (1908). Documented by Kalidas Nag, p. 92f.
5. Leo Tolstoy: *Letter to a Hindoo* (1908). Documented by Kalidas Nag, p. 98.
6. M.K.Gandhi: *An Autobiography* or *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, Ch. 15.
7. Letter from Leo Tolstoy to M.K.Gandhi (7/10/09). Documented by Kalidas Nag, p. 63.
8. M.K.Gandhi: *Hind Swaraj* (1908). Ch. 17.
9. Letter from Leo Tolstoy to M.K.Gandhi (7/9/10). Documented by Kalidas Nag, p. 71.
10. Letter from Leo Tolstoy to M.K.Gandhi (7/9/10). Documented by Kalidas Nag, p. 75.