Gandhi’s Understanding and Interpretation of Non-violence

To-day, man instead of finding ways and means of peace and progress from his knowledge of science, is busy in developing the means of his own destruction. The devastating power of the atom, the far reaching flights of the missiles and the conquest of the planets are becoming a hazard to the security of the human race. Above all, the increasing selfishness, vanity and worship of mammon (wealth regarded as a God or as an evil influence) are perplexing the hard core of realities. We can fight this danger only by following the doctrine of Ahimsa (non-violence) — a word most dearest to Gandhi. To him, the cult of love, sacrifice, and truth can save the human race from annihilation and through this faith alone can man elevate his character to lofty heights and convert this hell of a world into heaven. As a matter of fact, non-violence practically has been preached and practised in every country and by the people everywhere, it has been taught by many thinkers and founders of great religions that violence cannot be overcome by violence or by evil. Surprisingly, Mahatma Gandhi was the man, who laid down his life for spreading the message of love and Ahimsa.¹

Making of Gandhi’s Non-violence: Evolution and Influences:

We all know that Ahimsa and Satya (Non-violence and Truth) are twin basic principles of his mainstream thought. It was his firm conviction that the tendency towards violence is still a powerful impulse in man. It is the residue of his evolution through animal ancestors.

Spiritual non-violence which is devoid of all hatred and ill-will, is the hallmark of a fully developed human being. Though he had a lot of opponents, he still hungered the hope that non-violence would surely be crowned by victory in the end. Nonviolent struggle is a peaceful means of political and social change. It is democratic, the essence of democracy is to give up violence and adopt the methods of persuasion. According to Gandhi, love and persuasion, not hatred, should be the means of change. He asserted that in democratic societies non-violence is the only means available to settle social, racial and national problems.²

Nonviolent action, Gandhi believed, does not seek to punish the opponent or to inflict injury upon him. Even while non-cooperating with him, “we must make him feel that in us he has a friend and we should try to reach his heart by rendering him humanitarian service.”³ This formulation is “orthodox” Hinduism, particularly in the notion of ahimsa, i.e., non-injury or non-killing.⁴ For Gandhi the real meaning of sacrifice was, “Sacrifice that causes pain is no sacrifice at all. True sacrifice is joy-giving and uplifting.”⁵ Further he says, “He who has not in him infinite patience, cannot observe non-violence.”⁶ At another point he further

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⁶ Ibid., p. 127.
adds, “Everyday I see the importance of silence. It is good for all, but for
him who is deeply absorbed in work, silence is indeed golden.”

As a matter of fact, Ahimsa (Non-violence) has been considered as
a highest virtue and recommended by the Indian teachers of morality and
religion. The Jains, Buddhist and Hindu traditions have formulated
various theoretical bases for its practice. The great teaching of non­
violence and friendship towards all human beings and all other creatures
as a corollary from the world-view contained in the “Iso Upanishad”, the
“Gita”, the “Puranas”, the “Yoga Sutras”, etc., which have influenced
Gandhi a lot. For example, the “Iso Upanishad” teaches us that one who
views all beings as belonging in the ‘Atman’, and also sees the Atman in
all the beings, such a person ceases to have hatred towards any being.
Gandhi had learnt in his childhood from his mother, Putli Bai, and his
neighbours two Indian maxims: “There is nothing higher than Truth” and
“Non-violence is the highest virtue” (Ahimsa Parmo Dharmah).

In this respect, if we want to give more instances, we can recall
when devotee Prahalad says to his tyrant father: “Within the being of
Lord Govinda, who constitutes the soul of all beings, who is the Lord of
the world and also one with the world, where is scope for making
distinction between friend and foe?”


Further, it mentions: “I do not, desire, do or speak evil, thinking all
along of the Lord’s presence in all beings and in myself… Knowing that
the Lord is involved in all beings, wise men should extend unqualified
love and service to all living beings.”

- Vishnu-Purana, I.19.7-9.

7. Ibid., p. 129.
Similarly, the Jaina works abound in exposition of Ahimsa. Sri Vijaya Dharma Suri quotes a significant line in Ahimsa – Digdarsana (Bhavanagar, Samvat, 1984, p. 37):

“along the bank of the great river of pity or compassion like the different creeds that are comparable to grass, sprouts, etc., if that river of compassion goes dry, how long can the latter prosper?” To the Jainas is the primal among the five-fold virtues so the Buddhists regard is as one of the Five Codes (Pancha/Sila). The Yoga Sutras count Ahimsa among the five great rules of conduct (Yama). The Vyasa Bhasya and then Vachaspati Misra says that all other rules (Vratas) or dispositions follow from the injunction or practice of Ahimsa. In the Catuhsataka we read: “The Buddhas briefly characterize dharma as consisting in Ahimsa.”

In the rich fabric of Gandhian Philosophy of non-violence practically every strand of thought present in the Indian tradition may be found under a new synthesis. Ahimsa to Gandhi means love and service of the whole creation. It means the attainment, through complete selflessness and the spirit of service, of a state of equilibrium, equanimity and prefect harmony in relation to the universe. Ahimsa is the cultural heritage of our country.

Apart from Indian heritage, Gandhi was also influenced by Socrates, Lord Jesus and in modern times by Tolstoy, Ruskin, Carlyle, Kropatkin and Henry David Thoreau. He was indebted to Edwin Arnold

9. Chapter VIII, 120.
whose ‘The Light of Asia’ gave a touching impression of the life of Buddha and his English translation of the Bhagwad Gita, entitled “The Song Celestial”, which converted him to the teaching of the Gita. He plodded through the ‘Old Testament’ and read the ‘New Testament’, which produced a different impression, especially ‘The Sermon on the Mount’ went through his heart. Further, in South Africa, he came into contact with many good Christians, Quakers and others and read more of Christianity. He studied the new spiritual interpretation of Christianity by Tolstoy and Ruskin, and its application by them in individual and social life. Tolstoy’s book “The Kingdom of God is Within You” brought Christianity nearer to the Vedantic idea of man; his emphasis on Sermon on the Mount and the “Conquering of hatred by love” and “evil by non-resistance” seemed to Gandhi to be like the Buddhist and Jaina teachings of Ahimsa put into social practice. Non-resistance by Quakers and other Christians in America greatly strengthened Gandhi’s faith in non-violence. Thoreau’s Civil Disobedience influenced Gandhian Theory and practice of Satyagraha. The vegetarian movement in England had also its impact on Gandhi although it was a creed of his homeland Gujarat and specific instructions of his mother.

Even Islam had an impact on Gandhian non-violence. According to Gandhi, the “chief contribution of Islam is brotherhood of man. The very word ‘Islam’ means ‘peace’, ‘safety’ and ‘salvation’. Hence, the common Muslim salutation as ‘Salamalaikum’ means “peace be on you”. The Quran prefers non-violence to violence. References abound regarding the virtue of non-violence in Quran.10

10. Quran, VII. 199-201; 23.96-98; 24.22; 68.8-14.
To Gandhi, non-violence is not the peculiarity of one race, creed or country. It is the heritage of the whole of mankind. There is great element of non-violence in the three religions of China – Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism. As for Judaism, the Old Testament abounds in passages that are related to non-violent movements.\textsuperscript{11} Professor W.E. Hocking tries to show the non-coercive spirit of Judaism.\textsuperscript{12}

Thus, Gandhi does not discover the concept of non-violence but renovates the age-old philosophy of non-violence. He rightly explains that: “Non-violence is a universal law acting under all circumstances.”\textsuperscript{13} Besides, Gandhi’s Satyagraha is inseparable from non-violence.

**Influence of Jainism:**

Out of all the religions of the world, Jainism has laid greatest emphasis on non-violence. It has been included among the five cardinal virtues of Jainism, viz., Ahimsa, Satya, Astaya, Brahmacharya and Aprigraha. Jainism holds fast to the five moral principles for the achievement of the purification of mind. Accordingly, Ahimsa occupies the first place and the four other principles are subservient to it. They are only duties and could be adjusted in the interest of non-violence. On the other hand, any of the four moral principles could be disregarded if such disregard was necessitated by the principle of Ahimsa.\textsuperscript{14} It was non-violence which led the Jains to the philosophy of Anekântvâd, non-absolutism, which, in essence, is a persistent search after truth and a dispassionate evolution of conflicting metaphysical theories. Thus non-

\textsuperscript{11} Exodus, XXIII. 4.
\textsuperscript{12} Hocking, W. E., Man and the State, Yale University Press, p. 93.
\textsuperscript{14} Jain, M. K., Jain Darshan, Varanasi, 1966, pp. 48-67.
See Also: Asha Rani, Gandhian Non-violence And India’s Freedom Struggle (Delhi: Shree Publishing House), 1981, p. 3.
violence becomes the fountain head of all other principles and theories of Jainism. In this way three things in the Jain system, influenced Gandhi’s outlook most. These were Ahimsa on the religious side, anekāntvāda or syādvād on the philosophical side, and the institution of vows on the ethical side.\textsuperscript{15}

Gandhi had grown up under the influence of the absolute non-violence of Jainism. To him, Lord Mahavira, the last of the Thirthankaras of Jainism, was an incarnation of compassion and non-violence. He ardently wished that Lord Mahavira’s votaries were votaries of non-violence also.\textsuperscript{16}

The Jain philosophy of anekāntvāda or “manyness” of Truth or Reality exercised profound impact on Gandhi’s thought and action. Reality, according to this view, has a very complex structure. Every proposition may be true, but only from a particular standpoint. Since the same thing may be regarded from different standpoints, which is true from one standpoint may not be true from another. For example, to a person sitting on a running car, the trees appear to be moving in an opposite direction but to a man standing outside these would appear stationary. Truth being relative to our standpoints, to hold to one standpoint is not to deny other standpoints.\textsuperscript{17}

The doctrine that all truth is relative to our standpoint also became the basis of Gandhi’s non-violence and Satyagraha. He claimed to be a

\textsuperscript{17} Asha Rani, Op. Cit., pp. 4-5.
believer in Syādvād but his Syādvād differed, somewhat, from the Syādvād of the learned as it bore peculiarly Gandhian mark.

In this respect, Gandhi expressed: “I am an Advaitist (non-dualist) and yet I can support Dvaitism (dualism). The world is changing every moment, and is therefore, unreal, it has not permanent existence. Though it is constantly changing, it has something about it which persists and is, therefore, to that extent real. I have, therefore, no objection to calling it real and unreal, and thus being called an anekāntavādi or a Syādvādi… it has been my experience that I am always true from my point of view and am often wrong from the point of view of my honest critics. I know that we are both right from our respective points of view. And this knowledge saves me from attributing motives to my opponents or critics… I very much like this doctrine of manyness of reality.”

Accordingly, there was much impact of Jainism especially the idea of anekāntvād on Gandhi’s ideas and thought.

**Influence of The Gita, The Ramayana and The Mahabharata:**

The Bhagwad Gita had also an indelible impact on Gandhi’s mind so far the making of his notion of non-violence was concerned. The Bhagwad Gita says:

“Given over to egoism, use of violent force, insolence, passion and anger, these malicious persons hate me who dwell in the bodies of others as well as in their own.”

-The Bhagwad Gita, XVI. 8.

Similarly, at another place, Lord Krishna declares:

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“That devotee who is free from the feeling of hostility towards all the creatures is friendly and compassionate, is dear to me”.

-The Bhagwad Gita, XII. 13-14.

Mahatma Gandhi writes in “The Message of The Gita”, “even in 1888-89, when I first became acquainted with the Gita, I felt that it was not a historical work, but that under the guise of physical warfare, it described the duel that perpetually went on in the hearts of mankind, and that physical warfare was brought in merely to make the description of the internal duel more alluring. This preliminary intuition became more confirmed on a closer study of religion and the Gita.” He further writes, in Hinduism, incarnation is ascribed to one who has performed some extraordinary service of mankind. All embodied lie is in reality an incarnation of God, but it is not usual to consider every living being an incarnation. Further, generations pay this homage to one who, in his own generation, has been extraordinarily religious in his conduct. I can see nothing wrong in this procedure; it takes nothing from God’s greatness and there is no violence done to Truth. There is an Urdu saying which means, “Adam is not God but he is a spark of the Divine”. And, therefore, he who is the most religiously behaved has most of the divine spark in him. It is in accordance with this train of thought that Krishna enjoys, in Hinduism, the status of the most perfect incarnation.21

Though Gandhi’s mind is fertilized by numerous streams but Hinduism, the religion of his birth provided him with the maximum spiritual satisfaction. The traditional values of Hinduism, according to

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20. Ibid., p.8
him, are sound and adequate. He himself has admitted that he has not formulated any new principle or value but has just restated and reinterpreted the old principles. Gandhi presents a continuation of the ancient Indian traditions of renunciation and asceticism. His Satyagraha stands on the foundation of the five disciplines of Hinduism – ahimsa, truth, non-possession, non-stealing and Brahmacharya, essential in the pursuit of self-realisation.

Actually, the Gita and the Ramayana greatly moulded his thought. He stated that Gita opened to him ‘a new view of life’. It gave him the light he needed. It made him to act as a practical person in every sphere of life. Determination, firm conviction, righteous action and above all, other virtues necessary for a good human being were learnt by him through these scriptures.

Besides, in relation to the concept of Swadeshi, the Gita too gives a meaningful message, “it is best to die performing one’s own duty or svadharma: paradharma or another’s duty is fraught with danger.” Interpreted in terms of one’s physical environment, this gives us the law of Swadeshi. What the Gita says with regard to svadharma equally applies to Swadeshi, for Swadeshi is svadharma applied to one’s immediate environment.

The Mahabharata as considered to be the Fifth Veda, is one of the finest flowers of the world literature. The Bhagavad Gita finds a place in this stupendous record of human activities, aspirations and achievements. The philosophy of the Gita, explained and expanded, becomes the

23. Ibid.
Mahabharata. Conversely, Mahabharata condensed into philosophy becomes the Gita. What the heart is to human body, the Gita is to this Great Epic.\textsuperscript{24} The author of the Epic has fully demonstrated the futility of the war and violence. The victors have been left with empty glory, like the victors of the Second World War and other battles, where the end result led to death of millions, who had to face enormous burdens of economic reconstruction, repatriation and demobilization. Out of the millions who participated in the great battle, only a handful of persons were left to mourn and lament over the bloody carnage. The saint Ved Vyas has “made the victors shed tears of sorrow and repentance”\textsuperscript{25} after the struggle which left nothing behind but “a legacy of miseries.”\textsuperscript{26} The devilish and demoralizing influence of violence over men and morals are revealed. All sorts of debasement and trickery are let loose, and even the great Dharamrajaya had to resort to untruth to save his side. There are stories, fables and maxims in support of non-violence scattered throughout the Mahabharata. Non-violence is extolled as the highest form of religion. Bhisma, the old hero and the statesman, exalted non-violence in his consolatory preachings to Yudhisthira, “Non-violence is the highest religion. It is the highest penance. It is also the highest truth from which all duty proceeds.”\textsuperscript{27} Kapila also holds the moral principles of kindness, forgiveness, peacefulness, non-violence, truth etc. as the road leading to Brahman (Self-realisation). Again in the Vanaparva it is said, “The hard

\textsuperscript{24} Swami Chidbhavanda, The Bhagavad Gita, Madras, 1971, p. 4.
\textsuperscript{25} Gandhi, M. K., Gita Mata (New Delhi: Gandhi Sahitya), 1950, pp. 545-564.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{27} Asha Rani, Op. Cit., pp. 15-16.
and the soft yield alike... there is nothing impossible for the soft, hence the soft is more powerful than the hard."^{28}

According to Lord Krishna, “Renunciation and performance of action both lead to freedom of the two, performance of action is superior to the renunciation of action.”^{29} The lord himself is active in creating and maintaining the universe. Krishna preaches the maxim of action without the lust for fruit thereof.^{30} Duty, pleasant or unpleasant, must be performed for its own sake. It is an imperative and hence Albert Schweitzer observes: “Kant is not the first to lay down the doctrine of categorical imperative. It had already been preached by Krishna.”^{31} The concept of non-violence assumes a peculiar character in the Gita. Non-violence or violence depends wholly upon the circumstances. The decision between two is a thorny problem, for “Kim Karma Kim Akarme, ti Kavavo, py atra mohitah” (sages too are perplexed as to what is action, what inaction).^{32} Right sense of action is clouded with the conflicting duties raging in the mind of the doer. Ahimsa has been accepted as a moral principle but moral principles are not an end in themselves. It is only through religious devotion to one’s duty, that one can attain the highest bliss.

In fact, the Gita presents before us the picture of an ideal man. The ideal man is he who is a true Karmayogi (Man of action) or Sthitaprajna of the Gita, unaffected by the pairs of opposites, pleasure and pain, good

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28. Ibid., p. 16.
See Also The Bhagavad Gita, Chapter V, Verse 2.
30. The Bhagavad Gita, Chapter 2, Verse 47, Chapter 4, Verse 20, Chapter 6, Verse 1.
31. Schweitzer, Albert, Indian Thought and Its Development (London: Hodda and Stroughton Ltd.), 1936, p. 188.
32. The Bhagavad Gita, 4-16, p. 287.
and evil, success and failure. It is this balanced personality performing detached action with which Mahatma Gandhi was particularly influenced. He is an ideal man of non-violent conception, achieves the balance of mind by killing all passions and attachment and by renouncing desires rather than objects. Without detachment a man could neither tread the path of the truth nor Ahimsa. He is humble. Compassionate, free from joy and sorrow, fear and hatred, honour and shame, and unconcerned with good and bad results.

The second chapter of Sir Edwin Arnold’s translated book —‘The Song Celestial’ made a deep impression on Gandhi’s mind. He wrote: “The book struck me as one of priceless worth. The impression has ever since been growing on me that with the result I regard it today as the book par excellence for the knowledge of truth.” Therefore, it gave him invaluable help in his moments of gloom. By 1903, the Gita became an infallible guide of conduct for Gandhi. “It became”, said he, “my dictionary of daily reference. I turned to this dictionary of conduct for a ready solution of all my troubles and trails. Words like Aprigraha (non-possession) and sambhava (equability) gripped me.” It must be kept in mind that these two are the constituent elements of non-violence. He set to thinking how to cultivate the virtues like equability and non-possession?

33. Ibid., 2-58, 56., pp. 182-185.
35. Ibid., Bapu’s Letters to Meera, p. 574.
37. Ibid.
38. Ibid., p. 221.
In fact, Gandhi moulded his life in accordance with the basic teachings of this scripture. Gita says, “He alone can be called a seer, he alone can be called learned, who sees himself in others and others in himself.” This sustained his non-violence and humanity. He was a true Karmayogi, who cushioned pleasure and pain alike, as described in the Gita. In accordance with its teachings he held that good works must be performed in the spirit of sacrifice to the God of humanity especially in serving Daridranarayan (the God of the poor and the down-trodden).

Srimad Bhagavad Gita has listed twenty eight characteristics of a true devotee, and some of them can be listed as under:

1. to be compassionate to all,
2. devoid of ill-will,
3. forgiving or unrevengeful,
4. truthful,
5. pure-hearted,
6. impartial,
7. wishing good of all,
8. free from desire,
9. restraint,
10. simplicity,
11. sweet-tempered,
12. humble and non-possessed,
13. Detached etc.

Further, one is temperate in eating and recreation; in one’s sleep and wakefulness; engaged in the welfare of all beings (sarvabhuta hite ratah); everywhere even-minded (sarvatra sambhuddhaya), friendly and compassionate (maitri karunah) to all, without pride and egoism and balanced in pleasure and pain (nir mamah ahamkarah sama duhkha sukhah). In short, he is the perfect man, a man of steadfast mind.

From the point of view of non-violence, self-surrender and self-dedication to God can be considered of immense significance. “Ahimsa is soul force.” The soul derives its strength from self-surrender and self-dedication to God. A devotee of Ahimsa does not fear death. He has only one fear, that of God. He who seeks refuge in God ought to have a glimpse of the Atma that transcends the body; and the moment one has a glimpse of the imperishable Atma (soul), one sheds the love of the perishable body. He who has not overcome all fear can’t practise ahimsa to perfection. The votary of non-violence has to cultivate the capacity of sacrifice of the highest type in order to be free from fear. The “possession of unadulterated fearlessness” comes from the realisation of God. Thus, Gandhi’s ahimsa drew its inspiration and nourishment from spiritualism and, therefore, it was not merely passivity, or the weapon of the weak but a virtue of the brave, compassion of the strong towards the weak.

42. Ibid., XII-4, p. 644.
43. Ibid., XII – 13, p. 657.
46. Ibid.
47. Ibid.
48. Ibid.
From the marks of a Vaishanava described by Narasinh Mehta we see that he is a man who-

1. is ever active in bringing relief to the distressed,
2. takes no pride in doing so,
3. is respectful to all,
4. speak ill of none,
5. is self-controlled in speech, and
6. in action,
7. and in thought,
8. holds all in equal regard,
9. has renounced desires,
10. is loyal to one woman, his wife,
11. is ever truthful,
12. keeps the rule of non-stealing,
13. is beyond the reach of money,
14. is, in consequence, free from all desires,
15. is ever absorbed in repeating Rama’s name,
16. and, as a result, has been sanctified,
17. covets nothing,
18. is free from guilt,
19. from the urge of desire and
20. From anger.49

Here Narasinh has given pride of place to non-violence.50 This means that a man who has no love in him is no Vaishanava. One who

50. Ibid., p. 73
does not follow truth and has not acquired control over all his senses is not a Vaishanava.

**Influence of Buddhism:**

Along with other religions, Gandhi was also influenced by Buddhism. In fact he was very much impressed by the motto of Buddhism, “Charaha Bhikkhaya Charikam Bahu-jana-hitaya Bahu-jana-sukhaya” (greatest good of the greatest number) was literally translated into action in the realms of active politics and social reform by Gandhi. It was the social side of Buddha, a man and a teacher, not a God or a Saviour, a man concerned with the sorrows of men, eager to enter their lives, heal their injuries and spread his message for the good of many,\(^{51}\) that held special message and meaning for the Mahatma. The synthesis is embodied in his discovery of the “Middle Path”. Buddhism is a religion of kindness, humanity and equality. The keynote of Buddha’s character and preaching was compassion (Karuna) which was meant for the welfare of ‘sentient being.’ The friendliness (Maitri), compassion (Karuna), pure joy (Mudita) and forgiveness (Upeksha) are the necessary ingredients for the tranquility of mind. For the attainment of equanimity of mind and virtuous life the inculcation of truth, virtue, non-violence, restraint and control was enjoined.\(^{52}\)

The Buddha unambiguously preached as it is clear from the following verses of Dhammapada: “Let a man overcome anger by loving kindness; let him overcome evil by good; let him overcome misery by liberality; let him overcome the liar by truth.” \(^{53}\) For, “Hatred never ceases

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51. Bapat, P. V. (ed.), 2500 Years of Buddhism (New Delhi: Publications Division), 1956, p. VIII.
by hatred in this world; through non-enmity it comes to an end. This is the eternal law."  

It was this abiding sense of happiness of all that makes Gandhi a perfect humanitarian and a humanist. He himself said, “A Votary of ahimsa... will strive for the greatest good of all and die in the attempt to realize the ideal.”  

It was for this reason that he did not seek India’s freedom out of Britain’s ruin. “I do not want the freedom of India”, said he, “if it means the extinction of England or the disappearance of Englishmen.”  

It was due to this philosophical background that he was misunderstood by his detractors and earned the epithet of “friendly foe” from his sympathetic critics. Thus the spirit of the Buddha moulded the great minds of modern India. The influence that the life of the Master (The Buddha) exercised on Mahatma Gandhi, commented Prof. Bapat, “is self-evident. He turned the principle of Satyagraha into action in his private and public life and some of the present Indian leaders are the direct heirs of their Master, the Father of the Indian Nation.”  

The principle of Satyagraha, implicit in Buddhism was applied by Gandhi to secular and political fields. Satyagraha can be called the conscious application of Buddha’s teaching in public life.

54. Ibid., Verse 5, p. 60.
56. Ibid, p. 158.
58. Ibid., Vide Article of S. R. Mehrotra, p. 73.
Influence of Islam:

We must keep in our mind that apart from the Gita and other religious books and scriptures, he was very much influenced by the teachings of Islam and it too had a considerable role in the formation of a complete Satyagraha. For Gandhi, basically, Islam is not religion of violence, neither violence is integral to it. The very word “Islam” is the very negation of the concept of violence. Islam means surrender to the will of God on the one hand and establishing peace on the other. The word for peace in Arabic is “salaam”. When Muslims greet each other, they invoke peace – Salamalaikum (peace be on you). Not only Muslims, all human beings could be greeted with these words. Violence and mercy and violence and compassion cannot go together. One who is merciful and compassionate cannot issue any commandment for needless violence. A compassionate being could permit violence at best only to remove suffering and injustice. Also, Allah is just – Adil – and he commands others to do justice. He commands in the Holy Quran: “Be just, that is nearer to observance of duty” (5:8). He also requires that hatred of others should not motivate you to do injustice to them. It would be unjust. Thus in the same verse it is said: “Oh, you who believe, be upright for Allah, bearers of witness with justice, and let not hatred of a people incite you not to act equitably.”

Following the example of the prophet of Islam, Mahatma Gandhi has never for a moment separated the political from the spiritual, or failed to deal directly with the social evil, which stood out before his eyes. Thus

the Prophet’s supreme, practical instinct as a reformer, combined with his intense faith in God as the sole Creator and Director of the Universe, has been a great source of constant strength and support to Mahatma Gandhi himself, in his own struggle.\(^61\) That Gandhi finds Islam inspiring can also be substantiated by the fact that, as suggested by William L. Shirer, an American historian, he reads the Quran for inspiration.\(^62\)

The compatibility between Islamic teachings and Gandhi’s concept of Ahimsa finds one of its most concrete manifestations in the life and struggle of Khan Abdul Gaffar Khan, the Frontier Gandhi. He writes:

“There is nothing surprising in a Muslim or a Pathan like me subscribing to the creed of nonviolence. It is not a new creed. It was followed fourteen hundred years ago by the Prophet all the time he was in Mecca, and it has since been followed by all those who wanted to throw off an oppressor’s yoke. But we had so far forgotten it and when Gandhi placed it before us, we thought he was sponsoring a novel creed.”\(^63\)

Thus, Gandhi’s Ahimsa is a rich and complex concept. Ms. Joan Bondurant, for example, suggests that the term expresses an ancient Hindu, Jain and Buddhist ethical precept. Accepting the fact that the wording is negative, she contends that in Hindu and Buddhist traditions, it implies much more which remains unexpressed. It is basically an action based upon refusal to do harm.\(^64\) Apart from the Indian culture and heritage, he was also influenced by Socrates, Lord Jesus and in modern times by Leo Tolstoy, John Ruskin, Carlyle, Kropotkin and Henry David Thoreau.


Influence of Christianity:

Judaism, the parent religion of Christianity, had also preached non-violence. The Old Testament abounds in passages preaching the supremacy of positive love over revenge: “If thou meet thy enemy’s ox or his ass going astray thou shalt bring it back to him again.”65 Similarly “If thine enemy be hungry, give him bread to eat and if he be thirsty, give him water to drink”66 Further, “Rejoice not when their enemy faileth, and let not thine heart be glad when he stumbleth.”67 In addition “Hatred stirreth strifes, but love covereth all sins.”68 Accordingly, Christianity had a considerable impact on the making of Gandhi’s view of non-violence as the Ten Commandments in themselves contain the seed of non-violence both in personal as well as social relations. The injunctions: “Thou shalt not kill. Thou shalt not commit adultery. Thou shalt not steal. Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour. Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour’s house, wife, servant etc.”69 are in other words the commands to practise Ahimsa, Brahmacharya, Asatya, Satya and Alobha. A society which erects its superstructure on such a foundation will not be anything but non-violent, Jesus Christ is ‘the Prince of Peace and Love’ who condemned the use of physical force and preached the law of love and non-resistance. Acknowledging this, Gandhi wrote, “Christianity’s particular contribution is that of active love. No other religion says so firmly the God is love and the New Testament is full of the word.”70 He bemoaned: “Christians, however, as a whole have denied the principle

65. Exodus, XXIII-4.
67. Ibid., XXIV-17.
68. Ibid., X-12.
69. Ibid.
with their wars." The entire teaching of Christ emanates from his conception of the universal, loving fatherhood of God, and brotherhood of man. Jesus cites two Commandments of the Old Testament: “You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.” and “And the second is like it: You shall Love your neighbour as yourself.” The two commandments, told Jesus, are like one another and “On these two commandments hang all the law and the Prophets.” Jesus made his valuable contribution to these Ten Commandments when he said: “You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.” “But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you.” He sermonized “You have heard that it was said, “An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.” “But I tell you not to resist an evil person. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also.” Gandhi wrote to S. K. Rudra, “Jesus had the power to consume his enemies to ashes but he refrained and permitted himself to be killed for he so loved, etc.” He revolutionized the law of love by transforming and raising it from the level of reciprocity to that of non-retaliation and creative purpose. Further, he propagated the revolutionary doctrine of returning good for evil for the establishment of Kingdom of God on earth. His plan was that the Jesus should renounce violence and convert foes into friends by his

71. Ibid.
73. Ibid., St. Mathew, V: 43-44, p. 7.
technique of love and non-violence and thus help in realizing the
kingdom of his conception.

When we go into the background or the influence of Christianity,
we find that Gandhi had read Bible at the instance of “a good Christian
from Manchester in a vegetarian boarding house.”76 He plodded through
the book of the Old Testament which sent him invariably to sleep.77 But
the New Testament produced a different impression, especially the
‘Sermon on The Mount’ which went straight to his heart. He likened it to
the Gita.78 “The Spirit of the Sermon on the Mount”, said he, “competes
almost on equal terms with the Bhagavad Gita for the domination of my
heart.”79 The principle of non-violence in Old Testament and its
extension by Jesus Christ in his life and preachings shows how a religious
doctrine could be applied to the social and national problems. Christ’s
non-violence is more positive than that of Mahavira or even the
Buddha’s. Mahatma Gandhi’s non-violence appears to be more
comprehensive in as much as it embraces all spheres of activities, social,
economic, political and religious. The scope of Christ’s non-violence has
got to be necessarily limited for he lived in different world with different
political and economic outlook. Non-violence being the expression of
love is a universal virtue and not the peculiarity of any race, creed or
country.

According to Gandhi love cannot be destroyed and eulogized its
efficacy, thus: “Love is a rare herb that makes a friend even of a sworn

77. Ibid.
78. Ibid.
enemy and this herb grows out of non-violence. What in a dormant state is non-violence becomes love in the waking state. Love destroys ill will."\(^80\)

**Influence of Raychandbhai:**

According to Gandhi, three moderns left a deep impress on his life, and captivated him: Raychandbhai by his living contact; Tolstoy by his book, ‘The Kingdom of God is Within You’; and Ruskin by his ‘Unto This Last’.\(^81\) When Gandhi listed the names of the people who most profoundly influenced him, he would usually place Shrimad Raychandbhai at the head of the list. There was something about this young man which inspired in him a kind of reverential awe. Raychandbhai spoke with authority about matters which were eternally in dispute; about God; about the life of the spirit; about the nature of the world and the universe. It opened the gates of Heaven and returned to earth to report faithfully on what he had seen. An inner light glowed in him, and he walked with a strange assurance.\(^82\)

Gandhi expressed his opinion about Raychandbhai as such, “Though I was then groping and could not be said to have any serious interest in religious discussion, still I found his talk of absorbing interest. I have since met many a religious leader or teacher. I have tried to meet the heads of various faiths, and I must say that no one else has ever made on me the impression that Raychandbhai did. His words went straight home to me. His intellect compelled as great a regard from me as his moral earnestness, and deep down in me was the conviction that he would never

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willingly lead me astray and would always confide to me his innermost thoughts. In my moments of spiritual crisis, therefore, he was my refuge."\(^{83}\)

However, in spite of this regard for him, Gandhi admitted that he could not enthrone him in his heart as his Guru. Thus, though Gandhi could not place Raychandbhai on the throne of his heart as Guru, but he was, on many occasions, his guide and helper.\(^{84}\)

**Influence of Leo Tolstoy:**

Gandhi vividly expressed his thoughts about the Raj in the Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule and his idea did attract teeming millions of India. Gandhi wrote on 19th November, 1909, about the force with which the dogma of truth was preached by Tolstoy. When a man like Tolstoy, one of the clearest thinkers in the western world, one of the greatest writers, one who as a soldier had known what violence was and what it could do, condemned Japan for having blindly followed the law of modern science, falsely so called, and fears for that country “the greatest calamities”, it was for us to pause and consider whether, in our impatience of English rule, we did not want to replace one evil by another and a worse. India, which was the nursery of the great faiths of the world, will cease to be nationalist India, whatever, else she might become, when she went through the process of civilization in the shape of reproduction on that sacred soil of gun factories and the hateful industrialism which had reduced the people of Europe to a state of slavery, and all but stifled

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84. Ibid., p. 75.
among them the best instincts which were the heritage of the human family.”85

It was Michael Coates, who provided the book of Tolstoy to Gandhi. Infact, he was especially persistent in attempting to covert Gandhi in to Christianity, and Gandhi also kept a religious diary in which he recorded his impressions of Christianity and his perplexities concerning the behaviour of Christians. Service, duty, God – these words were never far from Gandhi’s lips. He had ample leisure to pursue his inquiries, and with the help of Michael Coates he began to accumulate a small library of religious books which would help him to discover the true meaning of those words. He read about eighty books during that year, all of them concerned with religion. There was Sale’s translation of the ‘Koran’, various books by Edward Maitland and Anna Kingsford, and Tolstoy’s ‘The Kingdom of God is Within You’, which profoundly moved him, so that he would say that all the other books which Michael Coates lent or gave to him paled into insignificance compared with this one. He also read Nietzsche’s ‘Thus Spake Zarathustra’ which appears to have left him unmoved.86

Gandhi’s feeling for Tolstoy was such that he genuinely desired to avoid importuning him. He wanted to write often, but wrote very rarely. He had written ‘Hind Swaraj’ very largely under the influence of Tolstoy’s ‘Letter to a Hindu’, and it had appeared in an English edition in Bombay in January 1910. It was immediately banned, but a number of copies remained in Gandhi’s hands and he sent one to Tolstoy in April with a letter asking for the master’s blessing. “I am most anxious not to

worry you,” he wrote, “but, if your health permits it and if you can find the time to go through the booklet, needless to say I shall value very highly your criticism of the writing.”  

A month passed before Tolstoy was well enough to reply. He wrote from Yasnaya Polyana on May 8, 1910.  

“Dear friend,

“I just received your letter and your book ‘Indian Home Rule.’

“I read your book with great interest because I think that the question you treat in it: the passive resistance – is a question of the greatest importance not only for India but for the whole humanity.

“I could not find your former letters, but came across your biography by J. Doke (Joseph Doke – M. K. Gandhi: An Indian Patriot in South Africa, published in London) which too interested me deeply and gave me the possibility to know and understand you better.

“I am at present not quite well and therefore abstain from writing to you all what I have to say about your book and all your work which I appreciate very much, but I will do it as soon as I will feel better.

Your friend and brother,

L. TOLSTOY”

87. Ibid., p. 236.
It was not only Tolstoy’s ideas that influenced him; there was the example of the man himself, his way of looking at life, his passionate intensity, even his willfulness. Even when professing the utmost humility, Tolstoy remained the grand seigneur, proud and intolerant of all opposition. Tolstoy’s aristocratic temper found its equal in the aristocratic temper of Gandhi. They were kindred spirits, and saw life in very much the same terms. Though they were both essentially humble, they were both possessed of a towering pride.

So deeply had Gandhi studied Tolstoy’s writings that he seemed to have modeled his style on Tolstoy’s prose? There are many passages in Tolstoy’s works which could be inserted in the works of Gandhi without anyone detecting a change of mood or pace; the ideas are expressed in the same way, and they are the same ideas. Nevertheless there is a great difference between the two men, for while Tolstoy contented himself during his later years with writing sermons and edicts, rarely descending into the marker place, speaking like a disembodied voice from a mountaintop, Gandhi spoke with the far greater urgency of a man determined upon action at all costs, and it was always necessary for him to write in such a way that his words would become acts. Tolstoy could afford the luxury of being the pure moralist; Gandhi could not.89

However, Tolstoy gave much significance to the experiments that Gandhi was conducting in South Africa by launching the Satyagraha campaign. The reply of Tolstoy to Gandhi’s letter amply bears out the testimony in which the Russian sage remarked: “Your work in Transval which seems to be far away from the centre of four world is yet the most fundamental and important to us, supplying the most weighty and

practical proof in which must participate not only the Christian but all the people of the world.”90

**Influence of John Ruskin:**

Gandhi in his Autobiography explains how he was influenced by the writings of Ruskin. He explains, “During the days of my education I had read practically nothing outside text-books, and after I launched into active life I had very little time for reading. I cannot, therefore, claim much book knowledge.”91 John Ruskin’s ‘Unto This Last’, which Polak gave to Gandhi, brought “an instantaneous and practical transformation”92 in the life of the Mahatma. This was the first book of Ruskin, Gandhi had ever read. His mind was gripped by the book and he could not sleep that night. He discovered some of his “deepest convictions”93 reflected in the book. He said, “However, I believe I have not lost much because of this enforced restraint. On the contrary, the limited reading may be said to have enabled me thoroughly to digest what I did read. Of these books, the one that brought about an instantaneous and practical transformation in my life was ‘Unto This Last.’ I translated it later into Gujarati, entitling it ‘Sarvodaya’ (The Welfare of All).”94 And moreover, the reference of this book is also known by the name “The Magic Spell of a Book.”95 ‘Unto This Last’ is a book of about eighty pages originally published in 1860 as a series of articles in the Cornhill Magazine. Ruskin’s chief contention was that theories of social economy always excluded the principle motive that rules a man’s life, his desire to

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92. Ibid., p. 250.
93. Ibid.
94. Ibid.
95. Ibid., Chapter No. XVIII of Part IV, p. 248.
maintain human relationships with his fellow man. Social relations can’t be determined on a basis of expediency; the relationship between the employer and the employee must be a human one deriving from “social affection,” otherwise it is meaningless. Not only money but also an invisible wealth must be paid to the labourer for his hire. 96 “A man’s hand may be full of invisible gold, and the wave of it, or the grasp, shall do more than another’s with a shower of bullion.” 97 Ruskin was demanding that the wealthy should regard themselves as the servants of the poor, abandoning luxury so that the poor might benefit and placing their wealth at the service of the community. The argument led by devious ways to the discovery that the state would eventually have to posses a far greater share of authority over its citizens if all its children were to be properly clothed, fed, housed and educated. 98

Indeed Gandhi discovered some of his deepest convictions reflected in this great book of Ruskin, and that is why it so ‘captured’ him and made him transform his life. A poet is one who can call forth the good latent in the human breast. Poets do not influence all alike for every one is not evolved in an equal measure. 99 The teachings of Unto This Last, he understood to be:

1. That the good of the individual is contained in the good of all;
2. That a lawyer’s work has the same value as the barber’s in as much as all have the same right of earning their livelihood from their work, and;

97. Ibid., p. 147.
98. Ibid.
3. That a life of labour, i.e., the life of the tiller of the soil and the 
handicraftsman is the life worth living. 

According to Gandhi, “The first of these I knew. The second I had 
dimly realized. The third had never occurred to me. Unto This Last made 
it clear as daylight for me that second and the third were contained in the 
first. I arose with the dawn, ready to reduce these principles to 
practice.”

Small ‘Unto This Last’ covers a great deal of territory, for it is 
intended as a preliminary sketch of the entire financial, moral and 
spiritual economy of a nation. Gandhi may have found some of it heavy 
reading.

According to John Ruskin, “There is no wealth but life. Life, 
including all its powers, of love, of joy, and of admiration.” This is the 
greatest truth which is at the root of Ruskin’s all diatribes. He exposed 
the great criminality of “modern luxury” and pleaded for the simple 
life; all sharing in quiet pleasures, not competing in a miserable struggle 
for subsistence, or for extravagant luxury. Violent inequality and 
unbrotherliness lead to pain and misery among all but the selfish—even 
among those who “have”, while, among those who “have not”, it leads to 
stunted souls and a degrading search after forgetfulness. He 
recommended the worship of “the Lord of Toil” and exhorted men to 
seek not “great wealth, but simpler pleasure; not higher fortune, but

100. Ibid.
101. Ruskin, John, Unto This Last And Other Essays (London: George Allen & Unwin 
Ltd.), 1909 reprint, p. XIV.
102. Ibid., p. 301.
deeper felicity; making the first of possession; and honouring themselves in the harmless pride and calm pursuits of peace."  

However, Gandhi himself described how he translated instantaneously the newly imbibed ideas into practice. "I arose with the dawn," he wrote, "ready to reduce these principles to practice." He purchased a farm near Phoenix, renamed it Tolstoy Farm, established a settlement, and shifted the office and the press of the Indian Opinion. All the workers drew an equal amount of 23 irrespective of their colour and nationality. The experiment of making a "living by manual labour" was initiated without any delay.

If we see the comparison between the two, then we will find that although the teachings of Ruskin do not include non-violence, as such, these are based on an unconscious presumption of it. There are striking similarities in the thinking and approach of both these savants. Both preach the supremacy of the spirit and trust in the nobleness of human nature, both are votaries of truth; to both character is more important than intelligence; both seek to moralise politics and economics; both accord priority to social regeneration to more political reform; both plead that character-building is more important than mere information giving to students; both greatly distrust machinery and plead that, if employed, it should be so used as to free rather than enslave men; both insist upon the adoption of paternal attitude by the capitalists in relation to their employees. Ruskin’s approach was consistent with truth and non-violence, although he did not attempt their scientific elaboration.

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103. Ibid., p. XV.
105. Ibid., p. 251.
Mahatma Gandhi readily accepted him as one of his teachers owing to the confirmation that he found in him for his ideals.

Gandhi explained his ideology in ‘Hind Swaraj’ thus, “...The force of love is the same as the force of the soul or truth. We have evidence of its working at every step. The universe would disappear without the existence of that force.... You cannot expect Silver ore in a Tin mine. History, as we know it is a record of the wars of the world... How kings played, how they became enemies of one another, how they murdered one another, are found accurately recorded in history, and if this were all that had happened in the world, it would have been ended long ago. If the story of the universe had commenced with wars, not a man would have been, found alive today.... The fact that there are so many men still alive in the world shows that it is based not on the force of arms but on the force of truth or love.”

Therefore, the greatest and most unimpeachable evidence of the success of this force according to Gandhi is to be found in the fact that, in spite of the wars of the world, it still lives on.

**Influence of Henry David Thoreau:**

Gandhi was greatly influenced by the words and actions of Thoreau, a rare American in whose breast raged a conflict between conventionalism and idealism. When human spirit “staled by custom” loses its vitality, it seeks to make up for its loss by adopting impressive externalities, material comforts, gorgeous dress, show of power and stereotyped code of morals. But when its hollowness becomes clear a reaction sets in which takes the form of a “renaissance of wonder,” a search for what Thoreau called the “everlasting something,” that would

The transcendentalist movement in America embodied such a reaction. Emerson and Thoreau, two great literary leaders and men of character, were its spokesmen.

Thoreau turned away from politic artificiality of materialistic civilisation to a life of simplicity in natural surroundings. In 1845, he launched on an experiment in extra ordinary "simplicity" in living, borrowed an axe build for himself a hut on the shores of Walden Pond. He lived there self-contained and joyous life by his body labours for two years, from July 4, 1845 to September 6, 1847, and gave in his Walden an account of experiment. This book and 'A Week On The Concord And Merrimack Rivers' delineate the practical philosophy of rebellion against world's artificial and cowardly way of life. In his experiments, one was of becoming the vegetarian, not by compulsion but by conviction. He described how this conversion came about. "The carcasses of some poor squirrels, however, the same that frisked so merrily in the morning, which we had skinned and emboweled for our dinner, we abandoned in disgust... as too wretched a resource... with a sudden impulse we threw them away, and washed our hands, and boiled some rice for our dinner. Behold the difference between the one who eat the flesh and... to whom it belonged! The first hath a momentary enjoyment, whilst the latter is deprived of existence." In fact, Gandhi was also influenced by the same English vegetarian movement with which he came in contact in England in eighties was part and parcel of a bigger movement of

renaissance and idealism – the same that found expression in America in the Transcendentalism of Emerson and Thoreau. He did not become acquainted with Thoreau’s writings till 1907, but thoughts of the ‘saint of Walden pond’ percolated down to him indirectly through the English vegetarians. The well from which Gandhi imbibed the philosophy of vegetarianism in the eighties was the one in which the buckets of both the East and the West had often dipped and granted together, and in which as Thoreau said, “The pure Walden water is mingled with the sacred water of the Ganges.”

Thoreau’s belief in the supremacy of the individual judgement was unshakeable. The individual was responsible for his intellectual and moral integrity. Thoreau believed in the supremacy of the intuitive judgement of a moral being. Right moral conduct and scrupulous obedience to law would automatically impart the power of judgement in a man. Similarly, Gandhi too believed in the supremacy of ‘the intuitive judgement’, which he often called ‘inner voice’, so necessary for lighting the path in the encircling gloom and conflicts. Thoreau realized that “there will never be a free and enlightened state, until the state comes to recognise that individual has a higher and independent power, from which all its own power and authority derived and treats him accordingly.” Gandhi also took a similar stand, “if the individual ceases to count, what is left of society? Individual freedom alone can make a man voluntarily surrender himself completely to the service of society. No society can possibly be built on a denial of individual

113. Gandhi Marg, January 1964, p. 64.
Like Thoreau, to Gandhi the “supreme consideration was man.” Thoreau was the champion of the lowly and the lost. His revolutionary essay on “Civil Disobedience” was written in an intense outburst of moral repugnance to Negro slavery. The essay was a call to disobey tyrannical laws that erode the moral nature of man, to follow the higher law rather than be “forced to live this way or that by masses of man.” It was inconceivable that any Government which sanctioned slavery had a moral right to exist. Therefore, declared Thoreau, “I can’t for an instant recognise that political organisation as my Government which is the slave’s Government also.” He himself refused to pay taxes for six years, and faced imprisonment. Thoreau opened his essay on “Civil Disobedience” with “I heartily accept the motto, “that Government is best which governs least;…” He further says: “The only obligation which I have a right to assume is to do at any time what I think right.” He further wrote: “All men recognise the right of revolution, that is, the right to refuse allegiance to and to resist the government, when its tyranny or its inefficiency is great and unendurable.” Gandhi’s indebtedness to Thoreau is great; but the admirers of both have imprecisely dealt with the origin, nature and extent of latter’s influence upon the former. Both in India and America the influence of Thoreau’s ‘Civil Disobedience’ on Gandhi’s Satyagraha is more or less assumed.

114. Ibid.
117. Ibid.
120. Ibid., p. 225.
121. Ibid., p. 227.
casually discussed and conclusion summarily drawn. Errors in the date of Gandhi’s discovery of the Thoreau’s essay on civil disobedience have been unwittingly perpetuated and allowed to assume authenticity, further confusing the nature of Yankee’s influence. Louis Fisher dated Gandhi’s discovery of the essay between October-December, 1908.\textsuperscript{122} Gandhi certainly took a copy of the essay to jail and read it minutely during the forced leisure, but this was not the first time he had laid hands on it. Arthur Christy took for granted that Gandhi adopted Thoreau’s principles in the cause of Indian independence.\textsuperscript{123} However, to be safer side, it can be assumed that first of all he interacted with the essays by 1907, as the first reference to the essay, from which he reproduced copious extracts, appeared in Indian Opinion of September 7, 1907.\textsuperscript{124} He was so impressed with Thoreau’s essay that in the next issue of Indian Opinion he further reproduced extensive selections from it. As a matter of fact, Gandhi had already launched civil disobedience even before he came in contact with Thoreau’s sustaining essay. On September 11, 1906, Gandhi had stirred the Assembly of Indians by his historic Empire Theatre speech. He exhorted Indians to shed fear, the root of their sniveling acquiescence in tyrannical laws. “...there is one course open to the like of me”, proclaimed the later day Gandhi, “to die but not to submit to the law (Asiatic Law Amendment Ordinance).”\textsuperscript{125} This was civil disobedience. Caught in the thick of struggle, he poured forth his soul, week after week, in Indian Opinion. In it he was later on sustained by the study of Thoreau’s essay.

\textsuperscript{123} Asha Rani, Op. Cit., p. 46.
\textsuperscript{125} Ibid., pp. 217-18, 228-30.
In one of his letters on October 12, 1929, to Henry S. Salt (Thoreau’s Biographer), Gandhi had mentioned that, “My first introduction to Thoreau’s writing was, I think in 1907 or later when I was in the thick passive resistance struggle.”\(^{126}\) He wrote that Thoreau was so convincing and truthful that he felt drawn towards him.\(^{127}\) In a letter to P. Kodanda Rao, dated September 10, 1935, Gandhi wrote, “The statement that I had derived my idea of Civil Disobedience from the writings of Thoreau is wrong. The resistance to authority in South Africa was well advanced before I got the essay of Thoreau on Civil Disobedience. But the movement was then known as passive resistance. As it was incomplete I had coined the word Satyagraha for the Gujarati readers, when I saw the title of Thoreau’s great essay, I began to use his phrase to explain our struggle to the English readers.”\(^{128}\) However, Thoreau encouraged Gandhi to persevere, inspiring him to hold on to his innovation in practical politics.\(^{129}\) Gandhi quite often looked to other quarters to sustain him in his faith. He would test a truth in the practical laboratory of life, but for theoretical confirmation he would look to some superior intellect than his own. In the fateful days of August, 1942, Gandhi wrote an open letter to his American Friends, “… 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.”\(^{130}\)

The philosophies of these two great thinkers were analogous, if not identical. They were not identical, for Thoreau had decidedly and forcefully approved of violence as a way out of the tyranny of the majority if the peaceful and non-violent way failed. John Reid, therefore, constructed it a mistake to rake the soil around Walden Pond to find the seeds of Satyagraha. But Prof. Reid also admitted that Gandhi’s spirit and outlook were akin to Thoreau. The ‘peaceable revolution’ through civil disobedience and other like methods leavened the mind of Gandhi but he could not sanction violence ordinarily for it constituted the very antithesis of peaceable revolution.

**The Meaning and Interpretation of Gandhi’s Non-violence:**

There is so much misunderstanding about Gandhi’s views on non-violence that it is often equated with cowardice, although Gandhi had said: “Where there is a choice between cowardice and violence, I would advice violence.”\(^\text{131}\) According to him, non-violence and cowardice go ill together.\(^\text{132}\) On the other hand, it is the virtue of the strong and is the extreme limit of forgiveness.\(^\text{133}\) Infact, we must distinguish between true and false non-violence.

Literally, Ahimsa means non-injury, and hence non-killing in the Upanisads, Buddhism and Jainism and also in the orthodox Hinduism. However, Jainism stretches this principle of non-injury or non-killing not only to the mankind but to all species of life, while Manu permitted killing of animals for sacrifice and even of men in self-defence and war.

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Like a practical idealist, although Gandhi struck to the absolute ideal of non-violence but he realized the weakness of the flesh. He says, “Man can not for a moment live without consciously or unconsciously committing outward Himsa. The very fact of living, eating, drinking, and moving about – necessarily involves some kind of himsa, destruction of life, be it ever so minute.” However, Gandhi could not allow pests and vermin to thrive at the cost of men. He supported and even shocked the conscience of many orthodox devout Hindus when he allowed to administer poison through some injection when the doctor had declared the disease as incurable, a mortally sick calf groaning under unbearable excruciating pain. Similarly, he helped war efforts of the British on some occasions, while advised the Poles, the Czechs, the Norwegians, the French and the English to fight Hitlerism through “non-violence”. His letter to Chiang-Kai-Shek and his appeal to every Japanese are worth reading and very significant.

It seems that Gandhi’s doctrine of Ahimsa is more than men’s arithmetic calculations. It is as indefinable as God. Non-violence is not an easy thing to understand, still less to practice it, weak as we are, says Gandhi.

Negatively and therefore literally, non-violence means non-killing. But Gandhi is not a literalist in his conception of non-violence. Non-violence to be non-violence, has to be in word, deed and thought. Hence, negatively, Gandhi’s non-violence is freedom from lust and anger, greed and infatuation, pride and falsehood – the ‘six deadly enemies’ within us.

Furthermore, it is constituted by the negative virtue of non-anger, non-stealing, non-possession, non-attachment, non-fear, non-taste, non-hurting and finally non-killing. That is why the supreme virtue has been defined negatively as Ahimsa.

However, the meaning of ‘non-violence’ in real sense is not negative, static or passive. In the positive sense, non-violence means ‘active love’. Hence, positively it is a dynamic concept. It is not simply ‘love for love’ or ‘reciprocal love’ but unilateral and most aggressive love – love of God’s entire creation, from the meanest flower to the mightiest man. Hence dynamic ahimsa means ‘direct action’ or ‘silent and selfless suffering’. Like Jesus, Gandhi came into a violent world which treated him violently from his infancy to his crucifixion. He remained till the last moment of his life as “suffering servant” of humanity and mankind. He lived and died for humanity.

The following lines depict the actual scene Gandhi faced many times in his life:

Like a sheep that is led to the slaughter-house,
Like a lamb that is dumb in front of its shearers,
Like these he never opens his mouth,
He has been humiliated and had no one to defend him.\(^{138}\)

He became the Mahatma, a guide, a leader of the masses, and gave his life while teaching the eternal lesson of non-violence. Furthermore, Gandhi’s non-violence is to establish the Kingdom of God, which can only be hastened by the interior transformation of man’s heart through love. That anyone who loves God must also love his brother.\(^{139}\) This ethics of love moves basically in the direction of non-violence, non-

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\(^{139}\) Ibid., John, 4:21.
resistance to evil, i.e., love for all creatures. He followed the teachings of the Bible: “Give to everyone who asks you, and do not ask for your property back from the man who robs you.” The most important point to note is that the main spring of ahimsa is love and therefore its test lies in the inner feeling in the heart. If we do not ignore the inner call of the love, we are obliged to desist from any act of harm being done to living beings as far as possible. However, perfect non-violence is impossible so long as we exist physically, for we would want some space to occupy. It is impossible to sustain one’s body without the destruction of other bodies to some extent. All have to destroy life:

(a) For sustaining their own life,
(b) For protecting those under their care and shelter or
(c) Sometimes for the sake of those whose life is taken.

Here (a) and (b) means himsa to a greater or lesser extent, however to Gandhi, (c) means no himsa and is therefore ahimsa. Himsa in (a) and (b) is unavoidable. Hence, Gandhi believed in the Progressive Non-violence. We cannot live even for a moment without consciously or unconsciously committing outward himsa. Here perfect non-violence, therefore, is only a theory like Euclid’s point or straight line. But this does not mean that we can not minimize the extent of violence. Hence perfect non-violence can only mean progressive non-violence. A progressive Ahimsaist will try his level best to avoid as much as himsa as humanly possible.

140. Ibid., 11:9.
143. Ibid.
Accordingly, the concept of progressive non-violence involves both realism and idealism. On the one hand he would not allow pests and vermin to thrive at the cost of men in the name of non-violence, on the other hand, he would not allow anyone to pluck the green leaves of a neem tree more than the bare necessity. All this means that he recognises the grades of life and grades of non-violence. This rational and humanistic attitude makes Gandhian non-violence more acceptable and practical. The more we try to practice love and compassion, the more can we increase them and can become morally elevated and virtuous. However, it will be wrong to argue that since we can not practice absolute non-violence, we should try to observe the little we can. Rather we should think that determination can lead a man to a great height and since practice makes man perfect, so the more we try to practice love and compassion, “the more we can increase them and can become morally elevated.”  

Gandhian non-violence, as we have said, is not only avoidance of external and overt physical injury, it must be removal of ill-will, anger, hatred and jealously from our heart, for “there is nothing unqualified good but the good will.” The real test of our non-violence is to be judged by the goodness of our will or intention, for success or result depends upon many circumstances beyond our control. Hence, good-will and struggling for the ideal is all that is given to man. Hence, non-violence means “the largest love and greatest charity,” or as Gandhi would say ‘infinite patience and infinite love’. Thus anger, hatred and the spirit of revenge are incompatible with Ahimsa, since they are subtler and

more dangerous forms of himsa. So Gandhi rightly says: “we can not be really non-violent and yet have hate in us.”

Even non-cooperation of Gandhi had its roots not in hatred, but in love. The positive ahimsa means friendliness (maitri) and compassion (karuna) of the Buddhists, four fold Jaina virtues of friendliness (maitri), compassion (karuna), respectful affection (pramoda), and equitable attitude (madhyastha), and the Hindu concept of compassion for living beings (Jiva daya or bhuta daya). Gandhi remembers Christian dictum “Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you.” We are asked to treat all beings as one’s very self (atmavat sarvabhutesu) by our great scriptures, and this provides a metaphysical basis of non-violence, which needs thorough examination for understanding and practicing it properly.

**Psychological and Sociological Non-violence:**

It must be clarified here that Gandhi’s non-violence is not simply the contrary of violence, but it goes beyond violence. Therefore, all urge to violence within the self must be destroyed. He says: “Forgiveness adorns a soldier.” He who “returns good for evil” conquers the world. Gandhi’s non-violence is defined as opposition to fear: “Ahimsa is incompatible with fear.” Non-violence and cowardice go ill together. True non-violence is an impossibility without the possession of unadulterated fearlessness. It is the summit of bravery. Non-violence of the strong is infinitely brave than their violence. It requires more than

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150. Ibid., 11-08-1920, Vol. II, No. 32, p. 3.
152. Young India, 04-11-1929, Vol. II.
the courage of the soldier of war. It admits no fear, no weakness. It is the virtue of the manly, the coward is innocent of it.\textsuperscript{155} Gandhi had made it clear that Non-violence should never be used as a shield for cowardice as it is a weapon of the brave.\textsuperscript{156} Besides, it is the greatest force at the disposal of mankind.\textsuperscript{157} As mentioned earlier, Gandhi admitted that, “Where there is choice between cowardice and violence, I would advise violence.”\textsuperscript{158} In this respect, Gandhi opined: “I want both the Hindus and Mussulmans to cultivate the cool courage to die without killing. But if one has not that courage, I want him to cultivate the art of killing and being killed, rather than in a cowardly manner flee from danger. For the latter in spite of his flight does commit mental himsa. He flees because he has not the courage to be killed in the act of killing.”\textsuperscript{159} He further said: “I would risk violence a thousand times than risk the emasculation of a whole race.”\textsuperscript{160} He further added at another point that, “I would rather have India resort to arms in order to defend her honour, than that she should in a cowardly manner become a helpless witness to her own dishonour.”\textsuperscript{161}

According to Gandhi, strength does not come from physical capacity. It comes from an indomitable will. In most cases, violence is the expression of fear. It is due to fear complex that man arms himself or attacks others. Left to himself, he likes to live and let others live in peace. Thus at bottom, violence is really the expression of an inner sense of

\textsuperscript{158} Young India, 11-08-1920, Vol. II, No. 32, p. 3.  
\textsuperscript{159} Ibid., 20-10-1921, Vol. III, No. 42, p. 335.  
\textsuperscript{160} Ibid, 4-08-1920, Vol. II, No. 31, p. 3.  
\textsuperscript{161} Ibid., 11-08-1920, Vol. II, No. 32, , p. 3.
weakness. One who is strong in heart has no fear and therefore he naturally loves all and hates none. And when he develops the love-attitude, he “can not deceive the loved one, he does not fear or frighten him or her.” He has then no fear, suspicion or hostility. He must therefore become fearless. Gift of life is the greatest of all gifts and when he is prepared to give it, the hardest heart and the greatest ignorance are bound to disappear before his self-suffering which is without any malice or anger.

Moreover, non-violence to Gandhi was not a conceptual conundrum but the law of our species and the law of our society, as violence is the law of the brute. Hence non-violence must serve as the panacea for our ills – social and political, economic and educational, and not only moral and spiritual. As a matter of fact, Gandhi’s credit lies in extending the principle of non-violence to the social and political fields. He developed the non-violent method of social change called Satyagraha for attaining social and political justice apart from religious and moral perfection. For example, Ahimsa means love, it can never be compatible with possession or exploitation in any shape or form. Therefore, he says, “Love and exclusive possession can never go together.” Similarly, “frightfulness, exploitation of the weak, immoral gains, insatiable pursuit after enjoyments of the flesh are utterly inconsistent with soul force” Therefore, Gandhi’s concept of Rām-

163. Ibid.
Rajya or Vinoba’s concept of Gram-Swaraj was a picture of an exploitation free society based on maximum decentralisation of political and economic powers. He, therefore, like Henry David Thoreau, advocated the idea of “the least government.” To him, centralization implies exploitation and “exploitation is the essence of violence.” Exploitation is “the evil genius of the whole age”, for exploitation does not mean only deprival and expropriation but also a conscious seeking of such attitudes and norms which give a pride of place to several social mechanism of doubtful values, e.g., conflict, competition, hatred and force. Gandhian critique of modern civilization, is in fact, a critique of violence, which is sustained by a typology of exploitation whether it is over-organisation of modern government equipped with terrific nuclear power or the increasing power of the soulless state machine, or large-scale mechanization, automation, in short, concentration of wealth, power and privileges. All these lead to disintegration of the individuals and a total withering away of some of our basic values and last but not the least to the pathetic deprivation of man’s right of self-actualisation. This is all bred by violence, which has become synonymous with exploitation. Violence is defined as causing pain, or wishing ill to, or taking the life of any living being out of anger or a selfish intent.\textsuperscript{168} Gandhi, thus gives a very wide meaning to the word violence, basing its origin in anger or selfishness. On the other hand the creed of non-violence is the creed of non-exploitation.

According to Gandhi, the first condition of non-violence is justice all round in every department of life. To effect a state of non-violence is to have a rule of justice for one and all. If there is no justice, there is no non-violence. Similarly, where there is discrimination, non-violence go a begging. If murder and bloodshed is violence, exploitation, oppression and corruption too are different forms of violence. Gandhi’s motivations in his ruthless attack on Western Civilization is that it is based and maintained on violence – which emanates from unwieldy industrialization, leviathan type of states having concentration of power, and a craze for armaments.

Moreover, the alphabets of non-violence are best learned in the domestic school and in the cares of the mother and kisses of the father. Accordingly, non-violence demands a new culture, a new asceticism and a new way of life. The very first step in non-violence is the cultivation in our daily life of truthfulness, humility, tolerance, loving kindness. Besides, Non-violence is no make-belief. Mere belief in non-violence will not do. It should be both intelligent and creative. Furthermore, Non-violence is not a cover or shield for cowardice nor of hypocrisy. It is free from all alloys and taints. It is impossible without utter selfishness. In activising non-violence, it is the force of goodness and not of self-interest that is generated. Hence, it is attached to the force of the heart than that of the mind.

171. Ibid., pp. 290-291.
Similarly, non-violence is not merely a personal virtue.\textsuperscript{172} It is also a social virtue to be cultivated like other virtues.\textsuperscript{173} The days of individual non-violence have been the glorious pages of human history but that is not enough today. Our society has become complex and it is sick of tensions and disorders. If disorders take place, our attempt to handle them will be a test of non-violence. If non-violence can not serve the cause of peace, it is no non-violence. If non-violence cannot fight immoralities, wickedness, the tragic insolvency of military science, it is worthless. Hence, Gandhi always fought against racial discrimination, both in South Africa and in India, against many social evils like child marriage, untouchability, dowry, prostitution, and Hindu-Muslim fanaticism. His non-violence is neither of the ascetic nor of cave-dweller in utter isolation from society but it is social, practical and relevant today.

\textbf{Axioms of Non-violence:}

However, non-violence has its own technique as there is technique in the conduct of violence. Gandhi lays down five simple axioms of non-violence as follows:

1. Non-violence implies as complete a self-purification as is humanly possible.
2. Man for man the strength of non-violence is in exact proportion to the ability, not the will, of the non-violent person to inflict violence.
3. Non-violence is without exception superior to violence.
4. There is no such thing as defeat in non-violence. The end of violence is surest defeat.
5. The ultimate end of non-violence is surest victory.

\textsuperscript{172} Ibid., p. 181.
\textsuperscript{173} Ibid.
However, Gandhi’s contribution lies in developing the technique of non-violence and not in discovering it, as according to him, truth and non-violence are as old as the hills. But Gandhi applied non-violence to change our society. Hence non-violence became a dynamics of social change. To him, it was a misconception to think of any real social change through violence. Real social change implies change in our values and ethos, ideas and ideologies and it is sheer non-sense to think that we can change any body’s ideas by external physical force. In fact, physical force creates reaction and its result becomes counter-productive. Hence, we can say that the more of violence, the less of revolution. The history is a proof that there are hazards of violent revolutions. It extirpates the vanquished and divides the survivors and the atmosphere of the whole society is surcharged with hate, jealousy, fear and desire to revenge. There is no peace and no progress and no development. Then there is no individual freedom. The power also does not come to the people, instead it goes either to a single powerful individual like Napoleon after the French Revolution, Cromwell after the British Upsurge, Stalin after the Russian Revolution etc. or in the hands of a powerful cruel Junta. In case of violent revolution, mass-participation becomes possible only to a limited extent. On the other hand, in the non-violent struggle of Satyagraha, an old, a child, and even women can participate, violent revolution leads to counter-revolution which never ends. Hence, non-violent revolution is not only the nobler way but also the swifter and the safer way, because it is the surest approach to success. On the other hand, nothing permanent, nothing good can come out of violence.

Making non-violence its base, Gandhi has developed a science of Satyagraha which includes its several forms like Civil-Disobedience,
Non-cooperation, strike, picketing, fasting, no-tax campaign etc. However, Satyagraha requires adequate preparation. It has a discipline of its own – more vigorous than that of war. It needs a new leadership with moral and spiritual qualities. It has its timings and its own strategy. In fact, it is a moral equivalent of war, non-violent social change requires total transformation – change of heart (Hrdaya Parivartana), change of ideas (Vichara Parivartana) and change of circumstances (Parishthiti Parivartana). It is both individual and social change.

As we know, Gandhi was not only a great social and political leader but also a man of action who struggled for the freedom of the masses and fought against racial indiscrimination, imperialism, injustice and all kinds of exploitation. Besides, he was the man who emancipated the masses from political, social and economic bondage. What is more interesting, is the fact that the modus operandi of the Mahatma was non-violence (Ahimsa).

Although non-violence practically has been preached and practiced in every country and by the people everywhere and it has been emphasised that violence cannot be overcome by violence but Mahatma Gandhi was the distinguished personality who laid down his life to spread the message of love, truth and non-violence (Ahimsa). Professor Ninian Smart appreciates his technique of non-violence when he reminds that Gandhi “exemplified in his life his teaching of non-violence.” Similarly, the Encyclopaedia of Britannica attributes the greatness of the Mahatma to non-violence in the following words:

"Gandhi was one of the very few who have set the stamp of an idea on an epoch. That idea is non-violence."\textsuperscript{176}

Besides, to the historians also the greatness of Gandhi is located in his approach to non-violence. An eminent historian rightly depicts:

"The Indians found two mighty aids in their struggle (for freedom): a marvelous new weapon, and a very able leader... The new weapon the Indians found was suggested by Gandhi and his strong leadership made its use possible. It was the weapon of... non-violence."\textsuperscript{177}

As a matter of fact, non-violence was the first article of his faith and the last article of his creed.\textsuperscript{178} According to him as noted earlier, non-violence was the greatest force at the disposal of mankind and it was mightier than the mightiest weapon of destruction devised by the man.\textsuperscript{179} Accordingly, non-violence (Ahimsa) is a cardinal virtue around which the whole life and all the activities of the great man revolve.

To Gandhi, Non-violence is a universal phenomenon having its relevance and significance for the past as well as the present and the future. It has been very effective and instrumental in solving many conflicts in society. However, its result depends upon its understanding and proper application. The present scenario of violence and exploitation all over the world has raised a very pertinent and important issue, which needs a thorough investigation and logical analysis regarding its significance and utility to meet the challenges of violent world.

\textsuperscript{176} The Encyclopaedia of Britannica (Chicago: William Benton Publisher), 1950, Vol. 10, p. 15.
\textsuperscript{178} Young India, 23-03-1922, Vol. IV, No. 12, p. 165.