



Leo Tolstoy: Gandhi's Inspiration for Non-Violence

Debashish Bera

Assistant Professor, Department of History, Saheed Anurup Chandra Mahavidyalaya, under University of Calcutta, Burul, South 24 Parganas, West Bengal, India.

Email: beradeba@gmail.com

ARTICLE DETAILS

Research Paper

Accepted: 18-02-2025

Published: 14-03-2025

Keywords:

Mahatma, Non-Violence, Social Worker, Humanist, British Raj, Non-Cooperation Movement.

ABSTRACT

The famous Russian writer Count Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910) and India's Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869-1948) were the pioneers of peace in human history in the 19th and 20th centuries. This article will introduce us to two great minds, who lived in two different centuries but were similar in thought and mentality. Although the two great social reformers and thinkers lived in different geographical regions and had different cultures, traditions, religions, both shared common values, principles and doctrines. They preached non-violent resolution of conflicts between individuals, groups and nations. Both are also considered great humanitarians for their true service, who always raised their voice against the evils of nature and came forward without personal ambition for the salvation of the exploited, downtrodden and weak sections of society. Their main aim was to create a feeling among the people that they could change their own destiny. Although Gandhi considered himself a disciple of Tolstoy, they influenced each other equally. In this article, we have tried to show how Tolstoy's principles and ethics changed Gandhi's life and helped him become not just a great leader or freedom fighter, but the Father of the Nation and a Mahatma. Uncovering the great aspects of both their lives is still a mystery to us.

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15031861>



INTRODUCTION

Leo Tolstoy, the renowned Russian novelist and philosopher, is widely regarded for his moral teachings and his advocacy for non-violence, which would eventually inspire one of the most influential leaders of the 20th century—Mahatma Gandhi. Tolstoy's ideas, particularly those on non-resistance to evil and the rejection of violence as a solution to societal issues, profoundly influenced Gandhi's own philosophy and approach to political and social change. This article explores the connection between Tolstoy's teachings and Gandhi's development of his doctrine of ahimsa (non-violence) and Satyagraha (the force of truth). By examining Tolstoy's writings and the ideological exchange between the two figures, we can gain a deeper understanding of how philosophical ideas transcend borders, motivating social movements and shaping history.

OBJECTIVES

1. To explore the key elements of Leo Tolstoy's philosophy of non-violence.
2. To analyse the ways in which Tolstoy's ideas influenced Mahatma Gandhi's views on non-violence and civil disobedience.
3. To examine the significance of Tolstoy's writings, particularly *The Kingdom of God Is Within You*, in shaping Gandhi's understanding of moral and political resistance.
4. To discuss the broader impact of Tolstoy's influence on the global non-violent resistance movements, as seen in Gandhi's leadership.

METHODOLOGY

This article will adopt a qualitative approach, focusing on a critical analysis of primary and secondary sources. The following methods will be used:

1. Literature Review: Analysing Tolstoy's works, especially *The Kingdom of God Is Within You*, and Gandhi's autobiographies and letters. These will provide insights into the philosophical and personal exchanges between the two figures.
2. Comparative Analysis: Drawing comparisons between Tolstoy's teachings and Gandhi's subsequent development of non-violence and Satyagraha. This will involve examining the ideological similarities and differences in their approaches to peace and justice.



3. Historical Contextualization: Investigating the political and social conditions during Tolstoy's life and Gandhi's formative years in South Africa and India to understand how Tolstoy's ideas were relevant to Gandhi's struggles.

DISCUSSION

Leo Tolstoy's non-violence philosophy was rooted in his Christian beliefs, emphasizing love, compassion, and the rejection of violence. His critique of institutionalized power and war is evident in works like *War and Peace* and *The Kingdom of God Is Within You*, where he argued that true Christian living meant rejecting revenge and resisting evil through peaceful means. Tolstoy's moral stance on violence was not simply theoretical, but a practical guide to personal transformation and societal change.

Mahatma Gandhi encountered Tolstoy's writings during his time in South Africa and was profoundly influenced by the Russian author's vision of peaceful resistance. Gandhi found in Tolstoy's critique of Western imperialism and his insistence on non-violence a moral framework that resonated with his own desire to lead India to independence without resorting to violence. Gandhi adopted the principle of ahimsa (non-violence) as a core element of his philosophy and political activism. He was also influenced by Tolstoy's belief in the power of love and truth to challenge oppressive systems.

The article will examine how Gandhi transformed Tolstoy's theoretical advocacy for non-violence into a practical method for social and political change, exemplified in the concept of Satyagraha. Gandhi developed Satyagraha as a form of non-violent resistance to British colonial rule, drawing heavily on Tolstoy's rejection of violence and his emphasis on individual moral responsibility.

Finally, the discussion will extend to the broader legacy of Tolstoy's influence, highlighting how the marriage of his philosophical principles with Gandhi's activism set the stage for future non-violent movements worldwide, including the Civil Rights Movement in the United States and the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa. The article will conclude by reflecting on the continuing relevance of Tolstoy and Gandhi's shared commitment to non-violence in contemporary social justice efforts.

Russian writer Tolstoy was born in the Tula province of Russia. He was the fourth child in the family. His parents died when he was a child and he was raised by his relatives. He was famous for writing novels, short stories, and essays. The acclaimed novels of this world-famous writer are 'War and Peace', 'Anna Karenina', 'Ivan Ilyich' etc. He joined the Crimean War in 1855. He became the world's best



writer from a soldier. He wanted to explain the purpose of life to people. He wanted to awaken the sense of life, morality, and humanity in people.

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi is regarded as one of the most influential figures in global political history. Also known as the "Father of the Nation" and "Mahatma," he was a remarkable leader, social worker, reformer, philosopher, and writer who remained steadfast in his fight for justice until his last breath. He dedicated his life to breaking the chains of oppression and liberating the people of India. Throughout his journey, he consistently opposed inequality, injustice, falsehood, cruelty, orthodoxy, discrimination, and racism.

Recognized as a timeless global leader, Gandhi's teachings and ideologies—including Satyagraha, Brahmacharya, non-violence, equality, patriotism, honesty, wisdom, selflessness, sacrifice, morality, and moderation—continue to inspire generations. His ideas were not just relevant during his lifetime but still influence millions today. Eminent personalities such as Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela, Albert Einstein, Rabindranath Tagore, and Mother Teresa drew inspiration from his philosophies and, in turn, dedicated their lives to serving humanity. Gandhi stands among the greatest world figures in history.

Many renowned social and political figures, including Barack Obama, Aung San Suu Kyi, the Dalai Lama, Steve Jobs, Medha Patkar, and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Kailash Satyarthi, have acknowledged the significance of Gandhian principles. They have openly shared how his teachings shaped their lives and enabled them to make meaningful contributions to society.

This raises a fundamental question: *If Gandhi has inspired countless individuals and continues to be widely respected, who influenced him to become the legendary leader and freedom fighter that he was?* In response, Gandhi himself repeatedly credited Jesus Christ, John Ruskin, Henry David Thoreau, and Leo Tolstoy as his greatest mentors. According to him, their ideologies and writings played a crucial role in shaping his outlook and motivating him to combat injustice and oppression.

Among all these influential thinkers, it was Leo Tolstoy's writings, teachings, and way of life that profoundly impacted Gandhi, a fact he acknowledged in his autobiography. Gandhi's admiration for Tolstoy began when he read *A Letter to a Hindu*, a letter that deeply resonated with him. So inspired was he that he sought Tolstoy's permission to publish it in his weekly magazine *Indian Opinion* in South Africa. Their correspondence, though lasting only from October 1909 to November 1910 (when Tolstoy passed away), had a deep and lasting impact on Gandhi's beliefs.



Even before this exchange, Gandhi had read several of Tolstoy's works. The concept of **non-violent** resistance as described by Tolstoy greatly influenced Gandhi, leading him to adopt Ahimsa (non-violence) as the most powerful weapon in his lifelong struggle for freedom.

One of the books that left a lasting impression on Gandhi was Tolstoy's *The Kingdom of God is Within You*, which he read in 1894. He later expressed how this book transformed his understanding of life, love, and humanity, offering him a new perspective. The book profoundly influenced him after experiencing racial humiliation in South Africa, introducing him to the concept of Satyagraha (truth-force) for the first time. It also reinforced his belief in fearlessly confronting any form of violence. Reflecting on its impact, Gandhi once stated, *I began to realize more and more the infinite possibilities of universal love.*

In 1907, Gandhi put Satyagraha into practice for the first time in South Africa to challenge apartheid laws. The movement successfully pressured the British, marking the first triumph of his non-violent resistance strategy. Later, he returned to India and continued implementing the same principles.

Gandhi's visit to London from July to November 1909 was a pivotal moment in his journey. Around this time, he received a copy of *A Letter to a Hindu*, which Tolstoy had written in response to an inquiry from Indian activist Tarak Nath Das. In this letter, Tolstoy explained why non-violent resistance was the most effective strategy for achieving India's independence. This idea deeply resonated with Gandhi and further strengthened his commitment to non-violence.

Tolstoy's influence on Gandhi extended beyond non-violence. His views on sacrifice, simple living, celibacy, manual labour, fasting, and vegetarianism profoundly impacted Gandhi's personal and political life. Tolstoy's belief that *Everyone thinks of changing the world, but no one thinks of changing himself* inspired Gandhi to first transform his own lifestyle. Despite belonging to an aristocratic family, Tolstoy rejected luxury, adopted a simple existence, worked on farms, and wore peasant clothing.

Following in Tolstoy's footsteps, Gandhi chose to lead a life of simplicity and discipline. Seeking purity in his thoughts, words, and actions, he embraced celibacy (Brahmacharya) in 1906. Tolstoy's emphasis on minimalism also led Gandhi to abandon Western attire in favour of a dhoti and shawl, symbolizing his commitment to the Swadeshi movement. He actively promoted the boycott of British goods, aiming to revive Indian industries and uplift the country's economy.



Tolstoy's principles also guided Gandhi's views on property, labour, and education. He advocated for manual labour and self-reliance, inspiring Gandhi to engage in farming and provide sustenance for oppressed Indian refugees in South Africa. Such was Tolstoy's impact that Gandhi named his second ashram *Tolstoy Farm* in South Africa, a community where he worked alongside others to foster unity and self-sufficiency.

Tolstoy's model of education also deeply influenced Gandhi. Just as Tolstoy had established a free school on his estate, Yasnaya Polyana, for peasant children, Gandhi implemented a similar system at *Tolstoy Farm* to educate the children of *Satyagrahis* fighting against racial discrimination.

Thus, Gandhi's ideological framework and leadership were significantly shaped by Leo Tolstoy's doctrines. Tolstoy's unwavering belief in non-violence, love, simplicity, and social justice became the cornerstone of Gandhi's philosophy. Their shared vision of a peaceful, just, and self-sufficient society remains an enduring legacy that continues to influence the world today.

CONCLUSION

Mahatma Gandhi learned a lot from Tolstoy. Gandhi adopted Tolstoy's ideas and principles in the Indian independence movement and achieved significant success. For example, Gandhi borrowed the idea of non-violent non-cooperation from Tolstoy. An Indian journalist, A. Ramasheshan, responded to a request from Tolstoy to express his views on the current British Raj and found his words encouraging against the brutal and corrupt British rule. Despite facing several physical attacks, discrimination and humiliating experiences, Gandhi never stopped. Gandhi always called himself a disciple of Tolstoy. He expressed his opinion about Tolstoy thus, "To him, Tolstoy was a sage, a revolutionary thinker. He was greatly influenced by Tolstoy's spiritual understanding as well as his thoughts on social and economic matters". Following most of Tolstoy's ideals, Gandhi was able to reach out to all sections of the society of his time. His teachings and principles still reach every person in the world even in this generation. Impressed by Gandhi's life and all his sacrifices, his true and loyal service to the nation, the famous Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore bestowed the title of "Mahatma" on Gandhi in 1915. From then on, people started addressing him by this name. Gandhi possessed all the qualities that a person should have to be a Mahatma, and he acquired most of them from Leo Tolstoy. Therefore, we can firmly say that Tolstoy's principles and beliefs contributed a lot in transforming Mohandas Gandhi into Mahatma Gandhi.



REFERENCES

1. Verma R., 'Gandhi: A Biography for Children and Beginners', Ahmedabad, Nabajiban Publishing House, 2001.
2. Shankar R., 'Gandhi's Story', New Delhi, Children's Book Trust, 1969.
3. Terras V., 'Handbook of Russian Literature', New Haven City, Yale University Press, 1985.
4. Pettinger T., 'Biography of Leo Tolstoy', Oxford, UK, 2009.
5. Bart Loff C., 'Tolstoy and Gandhi', 1997.
6. Popova M., 'Why We Hurt Each Other. Tolstoy's Letter to Gandhi on Love, Violence and the Truth of Humanity', <https://www.brainpickings.org/2014/08/21/leo-tolstoy-gandhi-letter-to-a-hindu/>
7. Murthy B. Srinivasa (ed), 'Mahatma Gandhi and Leo Tolstoy Letters', Long Beach Publication, United State of America, 1987.
8. Green Martin Burgess, 'Tolstoy and Gandhi, Men of Peace', Basic Books, 1983.
9. Tolstoy, L., 'The Kingdom of God Is Within You', Translated by Constance Garnett, 1894.
10. Gandhi, M., 'The Story of My Experiments with Truth', 1927.
11. Kumar, R., 'Gandhi and Tolstoy: The Influence of Non-Violence', 2014.
12. Weber, T., 'The Nonviolent Revolution: Gandhi and Tolstoy', 1997.
13. Bose, S., "Tolstoy's Influence on Gandhi's Non-Violent Resistance." *Journal of Peace Research*, 39(4), 2002, p.p. 431-448.
14. Nandy, A., "Gandhi and Tolstoy: Moral Visionaries and the Search for Peace." *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 5(2), 2002, p.p. 153-170.
15. Gandhi Heritage Portal (<https://www.gandhiheritageportal.org>)
16. Leo Tolstoy's Works (<https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/115>)
17. Mahatma Gandhi's Official Website (<https://www.gandhi.gov.in>)
18. Mahatma Gandhi and Leo Tolstoy: A Study in the Moral Vision of Non-Violence by Shridhar D. Venkatesh (2020).