

MAHATMA GANDHI'S MESSAGE FOR US IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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Abstract

Commemorating Mahatma Gandhi, 150 years after his birthday on 2nd October, 1869, we (Gandhi Information Center, Berlin, Germany) will publish four basic essays on his nonviolent resistance in South Africa, the "Origin of Satyagraha: Emancipation from Slavery and War" – a German-Indian collaboration. Here we share with you the abstracts of these four essays: 1) Thoreau – Tolstoy – Gandhi: The Origin of Satyagraha, 2) Socrates – Ruskin – Gandhi: Paradise of Conscience, 3) Garrison – Thoreau – Gandhi: Transcending Borders, 4) Gandhi – Kallenbach – Naidoo: Emancipation from the colonialist and racist system.

Key words: Commemorating Mahatma Gandhi, essays on nonviolent resistance, Origin of *Satyagraha*

Introduction

Satyagraha (firmness in truth) and *sarvodaya* (welfare of all) are the core political concepts of Mahatma Gandhi's political philosophy. *Sarvodaya* ("welfare for all"), a Sanskrit term meaning "universal uplift", was used by Mahatma Gandhi as the title of his 1908 translation of John Ruskin's tract on political economy "Unto This Last" ("the object which the book works towards is the welfare of all - that is, the advancement of all and not merely of the greatest number", May 16, 1908). Vinoba Bhave followed this path in his exemplary reform movements.

Satyagraha became the alternative nonviolent resistance soul force of the oppressed against injustice, an alternative to war and guerilla war and civil war, and yes: genocide. The term *Satyagraha* – as Gujarati equivalent of "passive resistance" – was coined after a competition in the journal "*Indian Opinion*" in South Africa in 1908, the time period when genocidal massacres in colonial Africa were ongoing – in German South-West Africa

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(Herero and Namaqua genocide) in 1904-1908, in South Africa (Bambatha Rebellion) in 1906 and in East-Africa (Maji Maji Rebellion) in 1905-1907.

But *Satyagraha* today, one-hundred years after Colonel Reginald Edward Harry Dyer's Jallianwala Bagh massacre (Amritsar), means: world federation, global citizenship, nuclear disarmament, ecological sustainability, poverty eradication, investigative journalism, and restorative justice.

The first three of these notions in Gandhi's own words:

World Federation

"There will be an international league only when all the nations, big or small, composing it are fully independent. The nature of that independence will correspond to the extent of non-violence assimilated by the nations concerned. One thing is certain. In a society based on non-violence, the smallest nation will feel as tall as the tallest. The idea of superiority and inferiority will be wholly obliterated."¹

Global Citizenship

"I learnt from my illiterate but wise mother that all rights to be deserved and preserved came from duty well done. Thus the very right to live accrues to us only when we do the duty of citizenship of the world. From this one fundamental statement, perhaps it is easy enough to define the duties of Man and Woman and correlate every right to some corresponding duty to be first performed. Every other right can be shown to be a usurpation hardly worth fighting for."²

Nuclear Disarmament

"The West is today pining for wisdom. It is despairing of the multiplication of the atom bomb, because atom bombs mean utter destruction not merely of the West but of the whole world, as if the prophecy of the Bible was going to be fulfilled and there was to be a perfect deluge. It is up to you to tell the world of its wickedness and sin - that is the teaching your teachers and my teachers have taught Asia."³

Commemorating Mahatma Gandhi, 150 years after his birthday on 2nd October, 1869, we will publish four basic essays on his nonviolent resistance in South Africa, the "Origin of *Satyagraha*: Emancipation from Slavery and War" – a German-Indian collaboration. Here we share with you the abstracts of these four essays:

1) Thoreau – Tolstoy – Gandhi: The Origin of Satyagraha-

This essay summarizes the confluence of three thinkers: Thoreau – Tolstoy – Gandhi, building a new principle of nonviolent resistance which Gandhi named as *Satyagraha* (firmness in Truth).

Henry David Thoreau, author of the 1849 essay “*Resistance to Civil Government*”, later: “*Civil Disobedience*”, was influenced by Indian philosophy.

M.K. Gandhi referred to this non-violent resistance essay of Henry David Thoreau first in September 1907 when he wrote about the “*Duty of Disobeying Laws*”.

Gandhi searched for a new term for “passive resistance” in the Gujarati language in December 1907 after he had organized a prize-winning essay competition on “*The Ethics of Passive Resistance*” in his magazine “*Indian Opinion*” in November 1907.

In the competition announcement text Gandhi explicitly referred to the Apology of Socrates, Jesus’ nonresistance principle, Thoreau and Tolstoy, particularly to Thoreau’s “*Civil Disobedience*” (1849) and Tolstoy’s work “*The Kingdom of God is Within You*” (1893).

In January 1908, Gandhi publicly created the new term *Satyagraha* instead of “passive resistance” which he found in the Irish Home Rule movement and in the Austrian-Hungarian tax resistance.

In the forthcoming years, Gandhi corresponded with Tolstoy who had published an open “*Letter to an Indian*” (Taraknath Das) and Gandhi named, together with his friend and supporter Hermann Kallenbach, his second settlement project “*Tolstoy Farm*”. Thus, the *Satyagraha* campaigns of M.K. Gandhi in South Africa became a political success a long way before the Indian independence movement.

2) Socrates – Ruskin – Gandhi: Paradise of Conscience-

This essay summarizes the confluence of three thinkers: Socrates – Ruskin – Gandhi, building a new concept of nonviolent resistance which Gandhi named as *Satyagraha* (firmness in Truth) and associated it with *Sarvodaya* (welfare of all), *Swadeshi* (self-reliance), *Swaraj* (self-rule).

When Gandhi introduced *Satyagraha* in the year 1908, he emphasized not only “firmness in Truth” (*satyaagraha*), but also the attitude of the mind,

courage, education, endurance, fearlessness and soul-force through self-sacrifice and suffering.

Socrates (469 – 399 BCE) was a philosopher whose most important contribution to Western thought is his dialectic method of inquiry, known as the Socratic dialogue, which he largely applied to the examination of key moral concepts, as e.g. the good and just or the wisdom of common sense. The Socratic method, also known as elenctic method, is a form of argumentative dialogue between cooperating individuals, based on asking and answering questions to stimulate critical thinking and to draw out the meaning of ideas and underlying assumptions. Gandhi applied this method in his first political program “Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule” (1909).

Fearlessness of the living and dying individual and a joint collective search for Truth were the key elements of Socratic thinking and also for the new concept of Gandhi’s “*Satyagraha*”. In Plato’s *Apology of Socrates*, Socrates claimed to have a *daimonion* (literally, a “divine something”) that frequently warned him—in the form of an inner voice - against mistakes but never told him what to do. We can call this inner voice: Conscience.

John Ruskin (1819 – 1900) was not only the leading English art critic of the Victorian era, and an artist, but also a prominent social thinker and philanthropist. He wrote on subjects like botany and ornithology, as well as architecture, education, literature, and political economy. His four essays on the principles of political economy, “*Unto This Last*” (1860-1862), influenced Gandhi to create his first South African “Phoenix Settlement” at Inanda Farm near Durban. Ruskin referred to the New Testament “Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard” which criticized capitalist economy and propagated equality. In addition, Ruskin’s books “*The Crown of Wild Olive*” and “*Fors Clavigera*” influenced Gandhi’s philosophy.

“*Phoenix Settlement*”, the garden and home of the Gandhi family and the printing press of “*Indian Opinion*”, was inspired not only by the Ruskin Cooperatives and Tolstoy Colonies throughout the world, but also by Booker Taliaferro Washington’s Tuskegee Institute in Alabama (U.S.A.) (since 1881) and the Ohlange High School (since 1900), organized by John Langalibalele and Nokutela Dube.

3) Garrison – Thoreau– Gandhi: Transcending Borders -

This essay highlights the significance of two borders in the history of nonviolent resistance:

- a) the border between Mexico and the U.S.A., which shifted by annexations and wars, resulting in the expansion of the exploitation system of slavery to the newly conquered territories. Henry David Thoreau opposed slavery and war: by public speeches and by civil disobedience through tax resistance.
- b) the border between Natal and Transvaal in South Africa, which Indian nonviolent resisters crossed as an act of civil disobedience during the Epic March in November 1913, organized by Gandhi and Kallenbach, the owner of “*Tolstoy Farm*” (1910-1913).

Both, Thoreau and Gandhi, contributed to the emancipation struggle against slavery and war by example: Thoreau’s resistance was individual civil disobedience, and Gandhi’s border-crossing was a collective act of defiance against degrading and oppressive legislation – after he had introduced *Satyagraha* in the year 1908, emphasizing not only “firmness in Truth” (*satyaagraha*), but also attitude of mind, courage, education, endurance, fearlessness, righteousness, and soul-force.

Abolitionism – the movement to end slavery, and Non-Resistance – the rejection of the use of force in resisting violence in war, in jurisdiction (death penalty) and in self-defense, started with the U.S. citizen William Lloyd Garrison (1805–1879) and the two societies he founded:

- a) the New England Anti-Slavery Society (1832–1835) with Garrison as editor of “*The Liberator*”, reorganized in 1835 as the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society (Boston), an auxiliary of the American Anti-Slavery Society (since 1833).
- b) the New England Non-Resistance Society founded in September 1838. Its members refused to pledge allegiance to human government and favored secession from the slaveholding American South. The Society adopted the “*Declaration of Sentiments*” (“*The Liberator*”, September 28, 1838) against nationalism, racism and sexism.

Among the members of the New England Anti-Slavery Society were Adin Ballou and the Transcendentalist Amos Bronson Alcott, friend of Henry David Thoreau.

The Russian Count Leo Tolstoy, in his “*The Kingdom of God Is Within You*” (1893) and “*For Every Day*” (in German: 1906; in English: 1909), praised Garrison’s “*Declaration of Sentiments*”, corresponded with the Ballou family and recommended the reading of Thoreau’s “*Civil Disobedience*”

as early as 1896 (in his letter to Eugen Heinrich Schmitt in Budapest).

Henry David Thoreau became famous for his essay “*Resistance to Civil Government*” (1849, later: “*Civil Disobedience*”), because he had refused to pay the poll taxes for six years until he was arrested for one night – this was during his time in his Walden Pond cabin (1845 to 1847), which he built to deepen his understanding of “the over-soul” of ecology and humanity. This essay became the blueprint for Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in their nonviolent emancipation struggle.

4) Gandhi – Kallenbach – Naidoo: Emancipation from the colonialist and racist system -

Satyagraha as an exemplary code of righteous conduct, particularly in political conflicts, requires a basic understanding of cooperation and “*mutual aid*” (Kropotkin). The historic examples connected with Tolstoy and Gandhi shall be remembered today as follows: the fruitful communication between Leo Tolstoy and the Doukhorbor leader Peter Verigin, which resulted in the legendary 1895 burning of arms and the 1898 collective exodus to Canada receiving worldwide attention. Moreover, the political success of Gandhi’s *Satyagraha* campaigns rooted in his cooperation with Christian and Jewish Europeans, who closely collaborated with Gandhi’s emancipation program, for instance, the Baptist missionary pastor Joseph John Doke (1861-1913), who wrote the first biography of Gandhi (“*An Indian Patriot in South Africa*”, first edition 1909, published by The London Indian Chronicle). Furthermore, recalling the names of the closest collaborators of Gandhi in South Africa, we should highlight the four Jewish assistants and secretaries: Henry Solomon Leon Polak (1882-1959), Lewis Walter Ritch (1868-1952), Hermann Kallenbach (1871-1945), and Sonia Schlesin (1888-1956).

Kallenbach, a German-born Jewish architect became invaluable for the effectiveness of Gandhi’s *Satyagraha* campaigns in South Africa. Kallenbach met Gandhi in 1904 and was deeply influenced by his concept of *Satyagraha* – not only as a resistance method, but also as a moral philosophy. In 1910, Kallenbach donated a sizeable farm for Gandhi’s cause, and named it as “*Tolstoy Farm*”. Kallenbach’s resilience and engagement with the British police during the Epic March of 1913 is a testament to his deep understanding and conviction towards a non-violent civil disobedience against the colonial system.

Gandhi founded a unit of Indian stretcher bearers, called ‘The Natal Indian Ambulance Corps’, supporting the British forces during the Second Boer

War (1899-1902). This experience led him to organize another unit of stretcher bearers during the Bambatha Rebellion of 1906, where he was tasked with catering to the wounded Africans as white-skinned doctors refused to treat them. These two instances played a significant role in shaping Gandhi's subsequent political program – a non-violent resistance against colonial oppression, as he witnessed the brutality of genocidal war and the racist treatment by the colonial powers. The Asiatic Law Amendment Ordinance came into effect in the region of Transvaal in 1906, which mandated all Asians to register their fingerprints and carry a certificate of identity. Gandhi who had realized that peace cannot be envisioned through violence, proposed a pragmatic approach against the racist discriminatory laws, denouncing all forms of violence and engaging in passive resistance.

An early member of this non-violent resistance movement was the Mauritius-born Tamil Indian Govindasamy Krishnasamy Thambi Naidoo (1875-1933), who had been voicing opinions as early as in 1885 against the discriminatory practices by the British government towards the Indians in Natal. He mobilized Indians to rally together in the *Satyagraha* campaigns, and persuaded the workers of coal mines, plantations and railways to go on a strike as a gesture of support. When Gandhi was imprisoned, Naidoo is credited to have organized the most significant general strike in the region of Natal, which resulted in the release of Gandhi and the subsequent agreement with the Natal government which relented to the demands of the *Satyagraha* campaign. This essay emphasizes the relationship between Gandhi and the Indian Tamil community in their collective fight for equality, in the context of racism and the indentured labour system in sugar plantations and coal mines.

Throughout his political life Gandhi worked for the uplift of poor and distressed people according to Vivekananda's Daridra Narayan. Gandhi became renowned, worldwide for his *Satyagraha* campaigns in support of the farmers, merchants and workers.

Gandhi's Challenge for us Today

“I will give you a talisman. Whenever you are in doubt, or when the self becomes too much with you, apply the following test. Recall the face of the poorest and the weakest man whom you may have seen, and ask yourself if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him. Will he gain anything by it? Will it restore him to a control over his own life and destiny? In other words, will it lead to Swaraj for the hungry and spiritually

starving millions?

Then you will find your doubts and yourself melting away.”⁴

Endnotes

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3. Mahatma Gandhi: Speech at the Inter-Asian Relations Conference Delhi, 2 April 1947 (Harijan, 20-4-1947, and The Hindu, 3-4-1947; The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, vol. 87, pp. 190-193.
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