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Sarvodaya as Emancipation: Ruskin – Tolstoy – Gandhi

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ABSTRACT

This paper looks at the emancipatory potential of the Gandhian concept of Sarvodaya, drawing on the insights from Ruskin and Tolstoy. It also discusses some associated concepts like Swadeshi and Bread Labour. Before Sarvodaya was woven into an all-encompassing constructive programme with the support of Kumarappa and Vinoba Bhave, Gandhi created the spinning wheel (charka) movement for homespun cotton yarn (khadi) in the 1920s. Gandhi recollected Bondaref and Tolstoy's concept of Bread Labour in detail and compared it with the ancient Indian notion of sacrifice (yajna).

Key words: Sarvodaya, Bread Labour, John Dube, Khadi , Ohlange High School

Introduction

THE TERM SARVODAYA is a compound that Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869-1948) created from two Sanskrit roots: *sarva*, meaning “all”, and *udaya*, meaning “uplift”. Sarvodaya means “welfare of all” – “advancement of all” – “universal dawn”, that is the political message of equality and well-being for each and every one.

M. K. Gandhi not only created a new term for the socio-economic basis of nonviolent resistance but also assigned a new meaning to the term “orient”, which originally means “where the sun rises” (oriens). This prophetic message of the East, this message of the orient is linked with emancipation for those affected and victimized by

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slavery and war. The term “orient” finds analogies within many languages, e. g. the terms “Levant” (French levant “rising”) or “Vostok” Russian: Восток (Russian: voskhod, Russian: восход “sunrise”). The Levant (/lə'vænt/) refers to a large geographical area in the Eastern Mediterranean region of Western Asia, a term being used in English since the late 15th century with French origin and an Italian root: Levante, meaning “rising”, implying the rising of the sun in the east. This term Levante resonates with the Arabic term al-Mashriq, meaning “the eastern place, where the sun rises”. The opposite term of “orient” is “occident” which derives from the Latin word “occidens”, meaning “where the sun sets”.

For Gandhi, Sarvodaya means the basis for Swadeshi, meaning self-reliance:

Swadeshi carries a great and profound meaning. It does not mean merely the use of what is produced in one’s own country. That meaning is certainly there in swadeshi. But there is another meaning implied in it which is far greater and much more important. Swadeshi means reliance on our own strength. We should also know what we mean by “reliance on our own strength”. “Our strength” means the strength of our body, our mind and our soul. From among these, on which should we depend? The answer is brief. The soul is supreme, and therefore soul-force is the foundation on which man must build. Passive resistance or satyagraha is a mode of fighting which depends on such force. That, then, is the only real key [to success] for the Indians.¹

The Swadeshi movement was an integral part of the political aspiration for Indian home rule and the nucleus of Indian nationalism. The movement started in 1906 against the partition of Bengal. It was one of the most successful movements against British rule, with precursors from the 19th century, primarily organized and led by Aurobindo Ghosh, Lokmanya Tilak, and Lala Lajpat Rai. Swadeshi was a key focus of Mahatma Gandhi, who described it as the soul of Swaraj (self-rule). This movement from Bengal ended in 1911.

The word Swadeshi is a compound of two Sanskrit words, *swa* and *desh*, meaning “self” and “home”. Swadeshi, as a descriptive term, means “of one’s own home”. In the second half of the 19th century, the first Swadeshi movement was developed by Dadabhai Naoroji, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, Mahadev Ranade, and Lokmanya Tilak.

The founding of his first settlement project Phoenix at Inanda near Durban in South Africa with the International Printing Press for *Indian Opinion* was not only inspired by John Ruskin’s *Unto This Last* but also by the Ohlange Institute of John and Nokutela Dube in the tradition of Booker T. Washington’s Tuskegee Institute.

John Langalibalele Dube and Nokutela Dube

It was as early as 1903 that Mahatma Gandhi wrote about Booker T. Washington after he had learned about him from an article by Romain Rolland written in the journal *East and West*, published in Mumbai on 10 September.

Booker, as he was known when yet a slave, was born about the year 1858, the exact date being unknown to him. 'His lot,' says Mr. Rolland, 'was the average one. He did not fall under the tyranny of one of those brutes so forcibly depicted in Mrs. Beecher Stowe's novel. ... Yet even those masters who were kind to their slaves, treated them like inferior beings – a kind of useful cattle which had to be well fed if they were to work well, and which had no need of comforts they would be unable to appreciate.' When freedom for the slaves was proclaimed, Mr. Booker's family left the plantations and went to town. He had a very great desire, illiterate though he was, to learn and educate himself. He, therefore, set about learning the rudiments of the English language, and attended a night school. [...] Harvard University has honoured him with the degree of Master of Arts. In travelling through Europe, he has drawn crowds of appreciative audiences. A life such as this teaches a lesson to all of us. If it is one full of honours, the honours have been well earned, after patient toil and suffering. Mr. Washington might have chosen another career in which he might have shone perhaps better in the estimation of some, but he chose first of all to raise his people, to qualify them for the great task lying before them. With himself he has raised his own countrymen also immeasurably, and set to them, as indeed to all of us who care to study his life, an example worthy to be followed. One word to our own countrymen, and we have done. We have in our midst in India men who have devoted their lives to the service of their country, but we make bold to say that the life of our hero would perhaps rank higher than that of any British Indian, for the simple reason that we have a very great past and an ancient civilization. What, therefore, may be and is undoubtedly natural in us, is a very great merit in Booker Washington. Be that, however, as it may, a contemplation of lives like this cannot fail to do good.²

The Indian lawyer in South Africa - M.K. Gandhi, and John Langalibalele Dube and Nokutela Dube shared an appreciation of Washington's educational ideals, i. e. vocational training, because John Dube had experienced these ideals in practice and first-hand at Oberlin College, Ohio.

Founded by Lewis Adams, a former slave, and George W. Campbell, a former slaveholder, the Tuskegee Institute was established initially as the "Tuskegee Normal School for Coloured Teachers" but its syllabi also included practical farming skills and vocational training

in various trades found in the region of Alabama and the rural South. The Institute thereby closely followed Washington's founding ideal of self-reliance.

The sugar plantation owner Marshall Campbell introduced Gandhi and Dube in the year 1905, one year after the founding of Phoenix Settlement. Gandhi reported this episode in his *Indian Opinion*, the voice of the South African Indians, published in four languages: English, Hindi, Gujarati and Tamil, as follows:

Some members of the British Association in England are at present visiting South Africa. They are all scientists, and possess great knowledge. This is the first event of its kind in South Africa. A few days ago, when they were in Natal, the Hon'ble Mr. Marshall Campbell took them to his residence at Mount Edgecombe. Addressing them Mr. Dubey [...] made a very impressive speech. This Mr. Dubey is a Negro of whom one should know. He has acquired through his own labours over 300 acres of land near Phoenix. There he imparts education to his brethren, teaching them various trades and crafts and preparing them for the battle of life. [...] It was unfair to burden the Negroes with taxes; also it was like cutting down the very branch one was sitting on [...] They worked hard and without them the whites could not carry on for a moment. They made loyal subjects, and Natal was the land of their birth. For them there was no country other than South Africa; and to deprive them of their rights over lands, etc., was like banishing them from their home. Mr. Dubey's speech produced a very good impression on the whites, and he suggested to them that, if they sympathised with the Negroes, they might help him to start a smithy on his farm. The members of the British Association subscribed £60 on the spot and presented the sum to him. The Hon'ble Mr. Marshall Campbell also made a speech on the occasion praising the Kaffirs in Natal and pointed out that they were good and useful and that the ill-will shown to them was due to misunderstanding and was wrong.

Gandhi, at that time, was an assimilated and loyal citizen of the British Empire and a barrister of law, educated in London. As a lawyer for Indian merchants, he sought strategies for the emancipation of all so-called "coloured" immigrants in South Africa from all over Asia who were not born in South Africa unlike the Bantu peoples such as Xhosa and Zulu.

Ohlange High School, a secondary school in Inanda, KwaZulu-Natal, was the first school in South Africa started by a descendant of the Qadi branch of the Zulu people, a South African Bantu ethnic group: John Langalibalele Dube (Ngcobo). The school name "Ohlange" based on the word "uhlanga", which means a mythological marsh, denoting a swamp of reeds as the birthplace of the highest god, creator of humanity.

In the beginning, the school offered courses not only in basic education, but also vocational training such as agriculture, carpentry, journalism, dress- and shoemaking, mechanical engineering. Dube shared the administrative duties and taught journalism and printing he had learned at Oberlin College (Oberlin, Ohio, U.S.A.). Dube was deeply impressed by Booker T. Washington's 1901 autobiography *Up from Slavery*, a book on education and self-reliance.

John Dube was inspired by Gandhi's nonviolent resistance campaigns since 1906 and founded the South African Native National Congress at Bloemfontein on 8 January 1912, the forerunner to the African National Congress (ANC). The future Nobel Peace Laureate of 1960, Albert John Luthuli, was a student at Ohlange in 1914. Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute and John and Nokutela Dube's Ohlange Institute were the model for Gandhi's Phoenix Settlement: in terms of journalism, gardening, and vocational training.

There are two quotes affirming the Ruskinian and Tolstoyan traditions of *Indian Opinion* and Phoenix Settlement:

..Mr. Gandhi is the real proprietor of Indian Opinion from which no profits are made and to which he has devoted the whole of his savings. There are two Englishmen associated with him in that work and they and several Indians have, for the sake of the paper, reduced themselves to voluntary pauperism. The paper is being run on Tolstoy's and Ruskin's lines. Its publicly declared mission is to bring the two communities together and become an educative medium for the Indian community.³

In the "The Phoenix Trust Deed" of 1912, printed in *Indian Opinion*, it is explicitly mentioned that "the majority of the settlers [...] joined the [...] settlement [t]o follow and promote the ideals set forth by Tolstoy and Ruskin in their lives and works [...]"⁴

John Ruskin

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.

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In the year 1908, as basic information of his compatriots, Gandhi published a nine-part Gujarati paraphrase of John Ruskin's *Unto This Last: Four Essays on the Principles of Political Economy*. He gave this paraphrase the new name of his new concept: Sarvodaya. These nine parts were later translated into English. We now quote Gandhi in his own words from his preface and his conclusion:

People in the West generally hold that it is man's duty to promote the happiness-prosperity, that is-of the greatest number. Happiness is taken to mean material happiness exclusively, that is, economic prosperity. If, in the pursuit of this happiness, moral laws are violated, it does not matter much. Again, as the object is the happiness of the greatest number, people in the West do not believe it to be wrong if it is secured at the cost of the minority. The consequences of this attitude are in evidence in all western countries.

The exclusive quest for the physical and material happiness of the majority has no sanction in divine law. In fact, some thoughtful persons in the West have pointed out that it is contrary to divine law to pursue happiness in violation of moral principles. The late John Ruskin was foremost among these. He was an Englishman of great learning. He has written numerous books on art and crafts. He has also written a great deal on ethical questions. One of these books, a small one, Ruskin himself believed to be his best. It is read widely wherever English is spoken. In the book, he has effectively countered these arguments and shown that the well-being of the people at large consists in conforming to the moral law.

We in India are much given nowadays to imitation of the West. We do grant that it is necessary to imitate the West in certain respects. At the same time there is no doubt that many western ideas are wrong. It will be admitted on all hands that what is bad must be eschewed. The condition of Indians in South Africa is pitiable. We go out to distant lands to make money. We are so taken up with this that we become oblivious of morality and of God. We become engrossed in the pursuit of self-interest. In the sequel, we find that going abroad does us more harm than good, or does not profit us as much as it ought to. All religions presuppose the moral law, but even if we disregard religion as such, its observance is necessary on grounds of common sense also. Our happiness consists in observing it. This is what John Ruskin has established. He has opened the eyes of the western people to this, and today, we see a large number of Europeans modelling their conduct on his teaching. In order that Indians may profit by his ideas, we have decided to present extracts from his book, in a manner intelligible to Indians who do not know English. Socrates gave us some idea of man's duty. He practised his precepts. It can be argued that Ruskin's ideas are an elaboration of Socrates's. Ruskin has described vividly how one who wants to live by Socrates's ideas should acquit himself in the different vocations. The summary of his work which we offer here is not

really a translation. If we translated it, the common reader might be unable to follow some of the Biblical allusions, etc. We present therefore only the substance of Ruskin's work. We do not even explain what the title of the book means, for it can be understood only by a person who has read the Bible in English. But since 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-we have entitled these articles 'Sarvodaya'.⁵

What Ruskin wrote for his countrymen, the British, is a thousand times more applicable to Indians. New ideas are spreading in India. The advent of a new spirit among the young who have received western education is of course to be welcomed. But the outcome will be beneficial only if that spirit is canalized properly; if it is not, it is bound to be harmful. From one side we hear the cry for swarajya; from another, for the quick accumulation of wealth by setting up factories like those in Britain.

Our people hardly understand what swarajya means. [...] America, France and England are all great States. But there is no reason to think that they are really happy.

Real swarajya consists in restraint. He alone is capable of this who leads a moral life, does not cheat anyone, does not forsake truth and does his duty to his parents, his wife, his children, his servant and his neighbour. Such a man will enjoy swarajya wherever he may happen to live. [...] We ought to be careful, therefore, not to be hasty and thoughtlessly to imitate the people of the West. Just as we cannot achieve real swarajya by following the path of evil-that is by killing the British-so also will it not be possible for us to achieve it by establishing big factories in India. Accumulation of gold and silver will not bring swarajya. This has been convincingly proved by Ruskin. [...] But swarajya is to be achieved by righteous means. It must be real swarajya. It cannot be achieved by violent methods or by setting up factories. We must have industry, but of the right kind. India was once looked upon as a golden land, because Indians then were people of sterling worth. The land is still the same but the people have changed and that is why it has become arid. To transform it into a golden land again we must transmute ourselves into gold by leading a life of virtue. The philosophers' stone which can bring this about consists of two syllables: satya. If, therefore, every Indian makes it a point to follow truth always, India will achieve swarajya as a matter of course. This is the substance of Ruskin's book.⁶

[...] We can find the doctrine of satyagraha in the writings of Ruskin and Thoreau. [...]"⁷

[...] Whilst the views expressed in Hind Swaraj are held by me, I have but endeavoured humbly to follow Tolstoy, Ruskin, Thoreau, Emerson and other writers, besides the masters of Indian philosophy. Tolstoy has been one of my teachers for a number of years. [...]"⁸

In the 1920s, when Gandhi created the movement of the spinning

wheel (*charka*) for homespun cotton yarn (*khadi*), before the concept Sarvodaya had been woven into an all-embracing constructive programme with the support of the Kumarappas and Vinoba Bhave, Gandhi recollected Bondaref and Tolstoy's concept of Bread Labour in detail and compared Bread Labour with the ancient Indian notion of sacrifice (*yajna*).

Jesus was a carpenter. He never used his intellect to earn his livelihood. We do not know how much manual work Buddha did before he attained wisdom. Yes, we know this much, that he did not propagate religion for securing his livelihood. He lived on charity. That could not militate against the duty of labour. A roving ascetic has to do a lot of manual work. Now, to come to Tolstoy, what his wife has said is true but it is not the whole truth. After the change in his outlook Tolstoy never took for himself the income from his books. Although he had property worth millions, he lived like a guest in his own house. After the attainment of wisdom, he worked eight hours a day and earned his wages. Sometimes he worked in the field and sometimes he made shoes at home. Although he did not earn much by doing such work, still he earned enough to feed himself. Tolstoy strove hard to practise what he preached. This was characteristic of him. The sum and substance of all this discussion is that the duty which the ancients observed themselves and which the majority in the world discharges even today has been presented to the world in an explicit manner by him. In fact this doctrine was not Tolstoy's original idea; it was thought of by a great Russian writer by name Bondaref. Tolstoy endorsed it and proclaimed it to the world.⁹

Bread Labour

The Ashram holds that every man and woman must work in order to live. This principle came home to me upon reading one of Tolstoy's essays. Referring to the Russian writer Bondaref, Tolstoy observes that his discovery of the vital importance of bread labour is one of the most remarkable discoveries of modern times. The idea is that every healthy individual must labour enough for his food, and his intellectual faculties must be exercised not in order to obtain a living or amass a fortune but only in the service of mankind. If this principle is observed everywhere, all men would be equal, none would starve and the world would be saved from many a sin. It is possible that this golden rule will never be observed by the whole world. Millions observe it in spite of themselves without understanding it. But their mind is working in a contrary direction, so that they are unhappy themselves and their labour is not as fruitful as it should be. This state of things serves as an incentive to those who understand and seek to practise the rule. By rendering a willing obedience to it they enjoy good health as well as perfect peace and develop their capacity for service. Tolstoy made a deep impression

on my mind, and even in South Africa I began to observe the rule to the best of my ability. And ever since the Ashram was founded, bread labour has been perhaps its most characteristic feature.

In my opinion the same principle has been set forth in the third chapter of the Gita. I do not go so far as to say that the word yajna (sacrifice) there means body labour. But when the Gita says that 'rain comes from sacrifice', (verse 14), I think it indicates the necessity of bodily labour. The 'residue of sacrifice' (verse 13) is the bread that we have won in the sweat of our brow. Labouring enough for one's food has been classed in the Gita as a yajna. Whoever eats more than is enough for sustaining the body is a thief, for most of us hardly perform labour enough to maintain themselves. I believe that a man has no right to receive anything more than his keep, and that everyone who labours is entitled to a living wage. This does not rule out the division of labour. The manufacture of everything needed to satisfy essential human wants involves bodily labour, so that labour in all essential occupations counts as bread labour. [...]

In an institution where body labour plays a prominent part there are few servants. Drawing water, splitting firewood, cleaning and filling lamps with oil, sanitary service, sweeping the roads and houses, washing one's clothes, cooking,- all these tasks must always be performed. Besides this there are various activities carried on in the Ashram as a result of and in order to help fulfilment of the observances, such as agriculture, dairying, weaving, carpentry, tanning and the like which must be attended to by many members of the Ashram.

All these activities may be deemed sufficient for keeping the observance of bread labour, but another essential feature of yajna (sacrifice) is the idea of serving others, and the Ashram will perhaps be found wanting from this latter standpoint. The Ashram ideal is to live to serve. In such an institution there is no room for idleness or shirking duty, and everything should be done with right goodwill. If this were actually the case, the Ashram ministry would be more fruitful than it is. But we are still very far from such a happy condition. Therefore although in a sense every activity in the Ashram is of the nature of yajna, it is compulsory for all to spin for at least one hour in the name of God incarnated as the Poor (Daridranarayana).¹⁰

In these hard times of a global pandemic because of the lethal virus we remember the social worker Mahatma Gandhi, who served during a plague epidemic. We finally share the lesson he drew from his experience:

[...] During a plague epidemic, the physician must not run away [from his task] but instead attend to the patients even at the risk of infection. The priest must lead people from error to truth even if they should kill him for it. The lawyer must ensure, even at the cost of his life, that justice prevails.¹¹

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