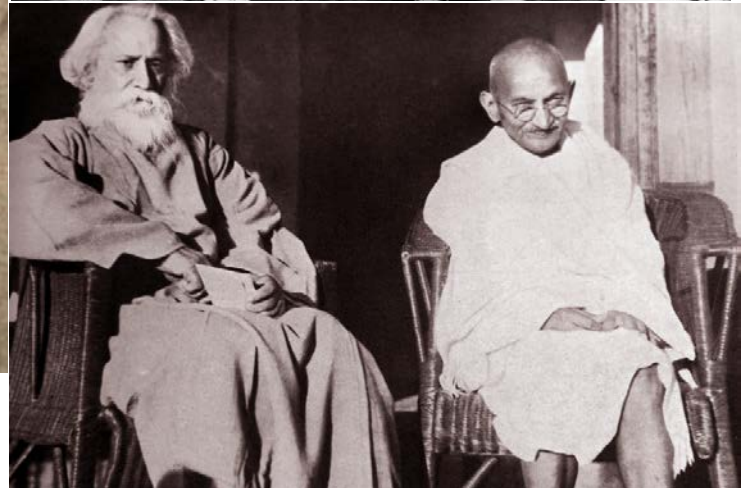
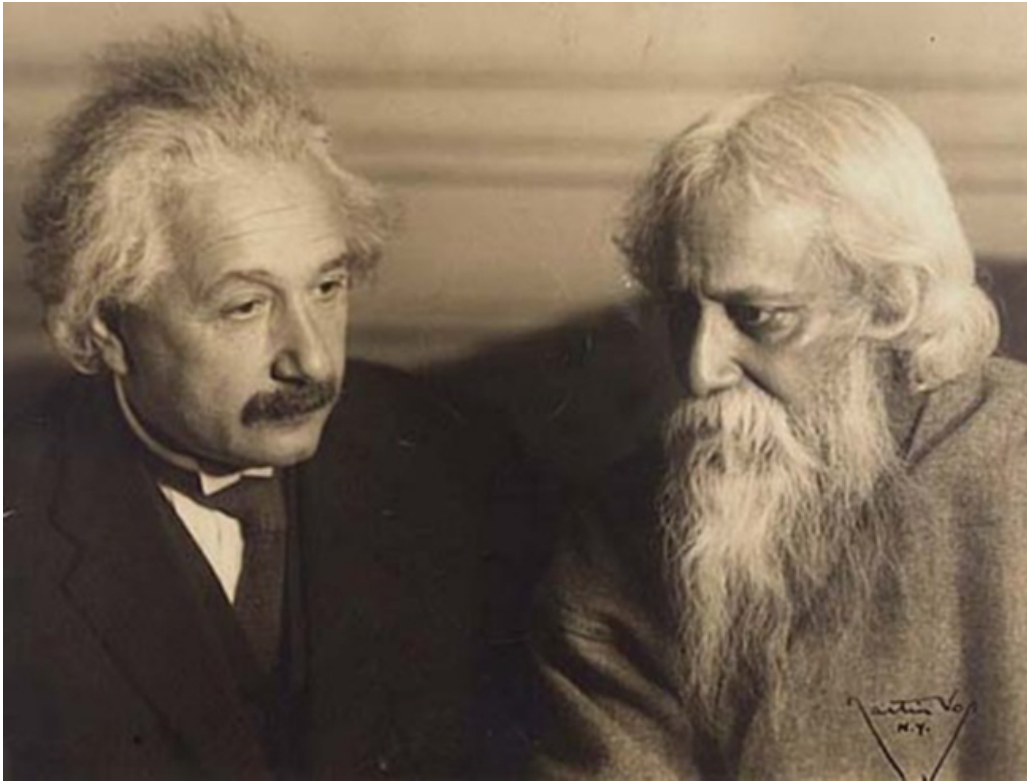


Tagore: East-West dialogues

Introduction to Gandhi



Rudyard Kipling's famous poem

A single line of a famous poem by Rudyard Kipling is often quoted when discussing the East-West dialogue. "East is east and west is west and never the twain shall meet." It is most unfortunate that this line has been repeated so often that it has become a truism. But the verse in its entirety is:



East is East and West is West
And never the twain shall meet,
Till Earth and Sky stand presently
In God's great Judgement Seat;
But there is neither East nor West,
Border, nor Breed, nor Birth,
When two strong men stand face to face,
though they come from the ends of the earth!

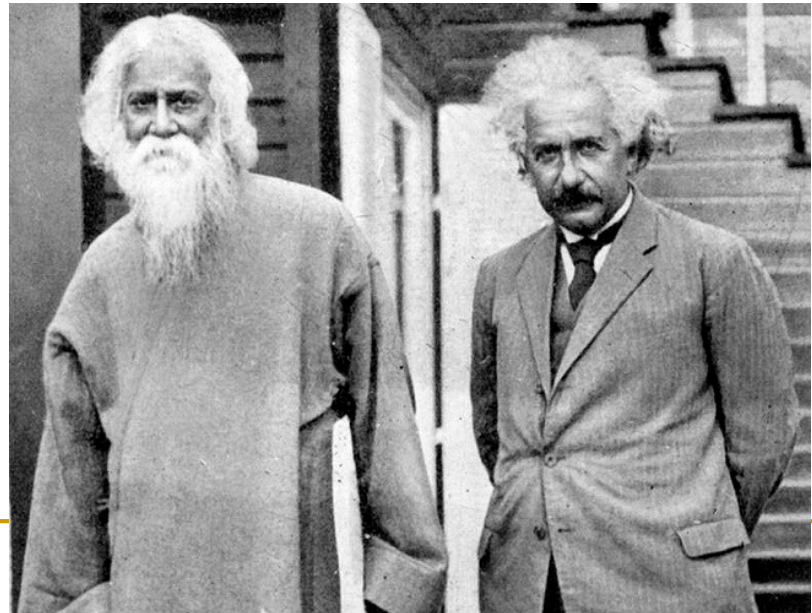
Tagore and other intellectuals

Contrary to popular opinion, Kipling is saying the opposite of what he is usually cited as having said. In the philosophy of aesthetic humanism of Tagore, a unified world view is essential.

Tagore conversed with great intellectuals in both Europe, America and India and these have been recorded. We examine a few of these conversations in some detail to get a glimpse of their world view.

Einstein and Tagore

Rabindranath Tagore visited Einstein's house in Caputh, near Berlin, on July 14, 1930. The discussion between the two great men was recorded, and was subsequently published in the January, 1931 issue of *Modern Review*. From these conversations, we get a glimpse into their world view and their conception of reality. Tagore had just finished giving a series of lectures in Germany. Here are some excerpts from this conversation. Tagore begins by saying "You have been busy, hunting down with mathematics, the two ancient entities, time and space, while I have been lecturing in this country on the eternal world of man, the universe of reality."



EINSTEIN: Do you believe in the divine isolated from the world?

TAGORE: Not isolated. The infinite personality of man comprehends the universe. There cannot be anything that cannot be subsumed by the human personality, and this proves that the truth of the universe is human truth.

EINSTEIN: There are two different conceptions about the nature of the universe—the world as a unity dependent on humanity, and the world as reality independent of the human factor.

TAGORE: When our universe is in harmony with man, the eternal, we know it as truth, we feel it as beauty.

EINSTEIN: This is a purely human conception of the universe.

TAGORE: The world is a human world — the scientific view of it is also that of the scientific man. Therefore, the world apart from us does not exist; it is a relative world, depending for its reality upon our consciousness. There is some standard of reason and enjoyment which gives it truth, the standard of the eternal man whose experiences are made possible through our experiences.

EINSTEIN: This is a realization of the human entity.

TAGORE: Yes, one eternal entity. We have to realize it through our emotions and activities. We realize the supreme man, who has no individual limitations, through our limitations. Science is concerned with that which is not confined to individuals; it is the impersonal human world of truths. Religion realizes these truths and links them up with our deeper needs. Our individual consciousness of truth gains universal significance. Religion applies values to truth, and we know truth as good through own harmony with it.

EINSTEIN: Truth, then, or beauty, is not independent of man?

TAGORE: No, I do not say so.

EINSTEIN: If there were no human beings any more, the Apollo Belvedere no longer would be beautiful?

TAGORE: No!

EINSTEIN: I agree with this conception of beauty, but not with regard to truth.

TAGORE: Why not? Truth is realized through men.

EINSTEIN: I cannot prove my conception is right, but that is my religion.

TAGORE: Beauty is in the ideal of perfect harmony, which is in the universal being; truth is the perfect comprehension of the universal mind. We individuals approach it through our own mistakes and blunders, through our accumulated experience, through our illumined consciousness. How otherwise can we know truth?

EINSTEIN: I cannot prove, but I believe in the Pythagorean argument, that the truth is independent of human beings. It is the problem of the logic of continuity.

TAGORE : Truth, which is one with the universal being, must be essentially human; otherwise, whatever we individuals realize as true, never can be called truth. At least, the truth which is described as scientific and which only can be reached through the process of logic—in other words, by an organ of thought which is human. According to the Indian philosophy there is Brahman, the absolute truth, which cannot be conceived by the isolation of the individual mind or described by words, but can be realized only by merging the individual in its infinity. But such a truth cannot belong to science. The nature of truth which we are discussing is an appearance; that is to say, what appears to be true to the human mind, and therefore is human, and may be called maya, or illusion.

— EINSTEIN: It is no illusion of the individual, but of the species. —

TAGORE: The species also belongs to a unity, to humanity. Therefore the entire human mind realizes truth; the Indian and the European mind meet in a common realization.

EINSTEIN: The word species is used in German for all human beings; as a matter of fact, even the apes and the frogs would belong to it. The problem is whether truth is independent of our consciousness.

TAGORE: What we call truth lies in the rational harmony between the subjective and objective aspects of reality, both of which belong to the superpersonal man.

EINSTEIN: We do things with our mind, even in our everyday life, for which we are not responsible. The mind acknowledges realities outside of it, independent of it. For instance, nobody may be in this house, yet that table remains where it is.

TAGORE: Yes, it remains outside the individual mind, but not the universal mind. The table is that which is perceptible by some kind of consciousness we possess.

EINSTEIN: If nobody were in the house the table would exist all the same, but this is already illegitimate from your point of view, because we cannot explain what it means, that the table is there, independently of us. Our natural point of view in regard to the existence of truth apart from humanity cannot be explained or proved, but it is a belief which nobody can lack—not even primitive beings. We attribute to truth a superhuman objectivity. It is indispensable for us—this reality which is independent of our existence and our experience and our mind—though we cannot say what it means.

TAGORE: In any case, if there be any truth absolutely unrelated to humanity, then for us it is absolutely non-existing.

EINSTEIN: Then I am more religious than you are!

TAGORE: My religion is in the reconciliation of the superpersonal man, the universal spirit, in my own individual being.

August 19, 1930

About a month later, on August 19, 1930 Tagore met Einstein again and they had the following conversation regarding free will and determinism. Curiously, the Austrian physicist, Erwin Schrodinger also came to the same philosophical implications regarding the emerging theory of wave particle duality in physics concerning the nature of light. At the dawn of the 20th century, two theories emerged in physics: one was quantum mechanics which was useful in explaining phenomenon at the microcosmic level and the other was the theory of relativity ideal for explaining macrocosmic events. The former was probabilistic and the latter was deterministic. Einstein was never comfortable with quantum mechanics and its philosophical implications, for it shattered an age-old view that can be traced back to Newton, that if we knew enough of the causes, we can determine everything. He is often quoted as saying "God doesn't play dice with the world." Quantum mechanics says that "She does!" Some of this tension manifests in the following conversation.

TAGORE: I was discussing ... today the new mathematical discoveries which tell us that in the realm of infinitesimal atoms chance has its play; the drama of existence is not absolutely predestined in character.

EINSTEIN: The facts that make science tend towards this view do not say goodbye to causality.

TAGORE: Maybe not; but it appears that the idea of causality is not in the elements, that some other force builds up with them an organised universe.

EINSTEIN: One tries to understand how the order is on the higher plane. The order is there, where the big elements combine and guide existence; but in the minute elements this order is not perceptible.

TAGORE: This duality is in the depths of existence - the contradiction of free impulse and directive will which works upon it and evolves an orderly scheme of things.

EINSTEIN: Modern physics would not say they are contradictory. Clouds look one from a distance, but, if you see them near, they show themselves in disorderly drops of water.

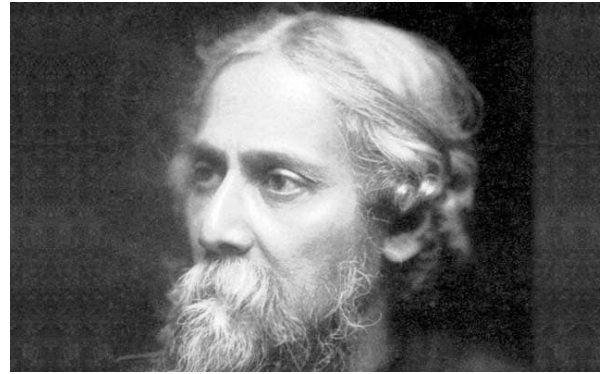
TAGORE: I find a parallel in human psychology. Our passions and desires are unruly, but our character subdues these elements into a harmonious whole. Are the elements rebellious, dynamic with individual impulse? And is there a principle in the physical world which dominates them and puts them into an orderly organisation?

EINSTEIN: Even the elements are not without statistical order; elements of radium will always maintain their specific order, now and ever onwards, just as they have done all along. There is, then, a statistical order in the elements.

TAGORE: Otherwise the drama of existence would be too desultory. It is the constant harmony of chance and determination which makes it eternally new and living.

EINSTEIN: I believe that whatever we do or live for has its causality; it is good, however, that we cannot look through it.

Tagore and Wells



The famous historian, H.G. Wells met with Tagore in 1930. Here is a short transcript of their conversation.

TAGORE: The tendency in modern civilization is to make the world uniform. Calcutta, Bombay, Hong Kong, and other cities are more or less alike, wearing big masks which represent no country in particular.

WELLS: Yet don't you think that this very fact is an indication that we are reaching out for a new world-wide human order which refuses to be localized?

TAGORE: Our individual physiognomy need not be the same. Let the mind be universal. The individual should not be sacrificed.

WELLS: We are gradually thinking now of one human civilization on the foundation of which individualities will have great chance of fulfillment. The individual, as we take him, has suffered from the fact that civilization has been split up into separate units, instead of being merged into a universal whole, which seems to be the natural destiny of mankind.

TAGORE: I believe the unity of human civilization can be better maintained by linking up in fellowship and cooperation of the different civilizations of the world. Do you think there is a tendency to have one common language for humanity?

WELLS: One common language will probably be forced upon mankind whether we like it or not. Previously, a community of fine minds created a new dialect. Now it is necessity that will compel us to adopt a universal language.

TAGORE: I quite agree. The time for five-mile dialects is fast vanishing. Rapid communication makes for a common language. Yet, this common language would probably not exclude national languages. There is again the curious fact that just now, along with the growing unities of the human mind, the development of national self-consciousness is leading to the formation or rather the revival of national languages everywhere. Don't you think that in America, in spite of constant touch between America and England, the English language is tending toward a definite modification and change?

WELLS: I wonder if that is the case now. Forty or fifty years ago this would have been the case, but now in literature and in common speech it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish between English and American. There seems to be much more repercussion in the other direction. Today we are elaborating and perfecting physical methods of transmitting words. Translation is a bother. Take your poems - do they not lose much by that process? If you had a method of making them intelligible to all people at the same time, it would be really wonderful.

TAGORE: Music of different nations has a common psychological foundation, and yet that does not mean that national music should not exist. The same thing is, in my opinion, probably true for literature.

WELLS: Modern music is going from one country to another without loss - from Purcell to Bach, then Brahms, then Russian music, then oriental. Music is of all things in the world most international.

TAGORE: May I add something? I have composed more than three hundred pieces of music. They are all sealed from the West because they cannot properly be given to you in your own notation. Perhaps they would not be intelligible to your people even if I could get them written down in European notation.

WELLS: The West may get used to your music.

TAGORE: Certain forms of tunes and melodies which move us profoundly seem to baffle Western listeners; yet, as you say, perhaps closer acquaintance with them may gradually lead to their appreciation in the West.

WELLS: Artistic expression in the future will probably be quite different from what it is today; the medium will be the same and comprehensible to all. Take radio, which links together the world. And we cannot prevent further invention. Perhaps in the future, when the present clamor for national languages and dialects in broadcasting subsides, and new discoveries in science are made, we shall be conversing with one another through a common medium of speech yet undreamed of.

TAGORE: We have to create the new psychology needed for this age. We have to adjust ourselves to the new necessities and conditions of civilization.

WELLS: Adjustments, terrible adjustments! TAGORE: Do you think there are any fundamental racial difficulties? WELLS: No. New races are appearing and reappearing, perpetual fluctuations. There have been race mixtures from the earliest times; India is the supreme example of this. In Bengal, for instance, there has been an amazing mixture of races in spite of caste and other barriers.

TAGORE: Then there is the question of racial pride. Can the West fully acknowledge the East? If mutual acceptance is not possible, then I shall be very sorry for that country which rejects another's culture. Study can bring no harm, though men like Dr. Haas and Henri Matisse seem to think that the eastern mind should not go outside eastern countries, and then everything will be all right.

WELLS: I hope you disagree. So do I!

TAGORE: It is regrettable that any race or nation should claim divine favoritism and assume inherent superiority to all others in the scheme of creation.

WELLS: The supremacy of the West is only a question of probably the past hundred years. Before the battle of Lepanto the Turks were dominating the West; the voyage of Columbus was undertaken to avoid the Turks. Elizabethan writers and even their successors were struck by the wealth and the

high material standards of the East. The history of western ascendancy is very brief indeed.

TAGORE: Physical science of the nineteenth century probably has created this spirit of race superiority in the West. When the East assimilates this physical science, the tide may turn and take a normal course.

WELLS: Modern science is not exactly European. A series of accidents and peculiar circumstances prevented some of the eastern countries from applying the discoveries made by humanists in other parts of the world. They themselves had once originated and developed a great many of the sciences that were later taken up by the West and given greater perfection. Today, Japanese, Chinese and Indian names in the world of science are gaining due recognition.

TAGORE: India has been in a bad situation.

WELLS: When Macaulay imposed a third-rate literature and a poor system of education on India, Indians naturally resented it. No human being can live on Scott's poetry. I believe that things are now changing. But, remain assured, we English were not better off. We were no less badly educated than the average Indian, probably even worse.

TAGORE: Our difficulty is that our contact with the great civilizations of the West has not been a natural one. Japan has absorbed more of the western culture because she has been free to accept or reject according to her needs.

WELLS: It is a very bad story indeed, because there have been such great opportunities for knowing each other.

TAGORE: And then, the channels of education have become dry river beds, the current of our resources having been systematically been diverted along other directions.

WELLS: I am also a member of a subject race. I am taxed enormously. I have to send my check - so much for military aviation, so much for the diplomatic machinery of the government! You see, we suffer from the same evils. In India, the tradition of officialdom is, of course, more unnatural and has been going on for a long time. The Moguls, before the English came, seem to have been as indiscriminate as our own people.

TAGORE: And yet, there is a difference! The Mogul government was not scientifically efficient and mechanical to a degree. The Moguls wanted money, and so long as they could live in luxury they did not wish to interfere with the progressive village communities in India. The Muslim emperors did not dictate terms and force the hands of Indian educators and villagers. Now, for instance, the ancient educational systems of India are completely disorganized, and all indigenous educational effort has to depend on official recognition.

WELLS: "Recognition" by the state, and good-bye to education!

TAGORE: I have often been asked what my plans are. My reply is that I have no scheme. My country, like every other, will evolve its own constitution; it will pass through its experimental phase and settle down into something quite different from what you or I expect.

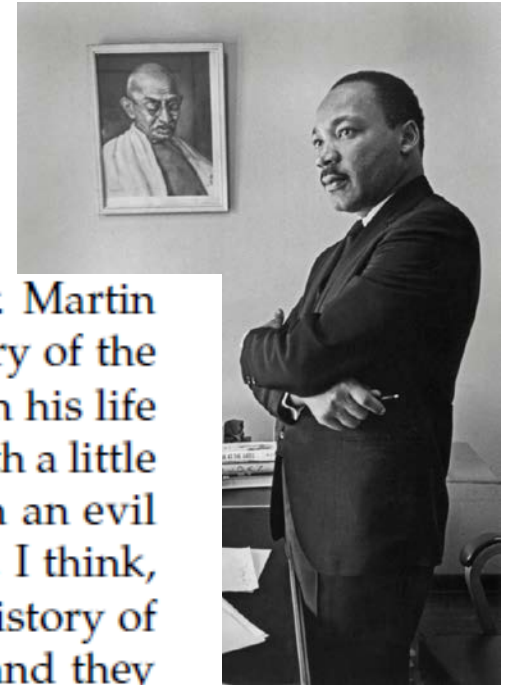
Gandhi and Satyagraha

A British reporter once asked Mahatma Gandhi what he thought about modern civilization. Gandhi replied, "I think it would be a good idea." (Guha, 3) The joke reflects accurately Gandhi's view about the modern materialistic culture that we are currently living in. One need not look very far to see that man is not civilized.



Martin Luther King Jr. and Einstein on Gandhi

Mahatma Gandhi is a towering figure of the twentieth century. Martin Luther King Jr. went further and said that he is a titan in the history of the world. "Gandhi was able to mobilize and galvanize more people in his life time than any other person in the history of this world. And just with a little love and understanding goodwill and a refusal to co-operate with an evil law, he was able to break the backbone of the British Empire. This, I think, was one of the most significant things that ever happened in the history of the world. More than 390 million people achieved their freedom and they achieved it non-violently." (King, 129) Albert Einstein added that "in generations to come the world will scarcely believe that such a one as this walked this earth." Both King and Einstein kept portraits of Mahatma Gandhi in their house. Einstein said of Gandhi that he was "the only statesman who represented that higher conception of human relations in the political sphere to which we must aspire with all our powers." (Clark, 529) In 1952, when a reporter asked Einstein about the atomic bomb, he replied "I condemn the military mentality of our time ... I have been a pacifist all my life and regard Gandhi as the only truly great political figure of our age." (Clark, 573)



Satyagraha

Gandhi's political philosophy has often been called the doctrine of "passive resistance" or "non-violent resistance". Gandhi himself did not like these labels. He called his philosophy *satyagraha* which is a new Sanskrit phrase that he coined himself and it literally means "holding on to Truth" or "Truth-force". Others have also called it "soul force" and this is a better name for it than "passive resistance." Satyagraha is a fundamental discovery essential for the civilization of the human race. Even a superficial glance at the history of the world shows that it is largely a history of slavery and oppression by the minority of the powerful. How can the average citizen respond? Should they submit or should they resist? Gandhi discovered that worthy ends deserve worthy means. So, the method adopted to achieve a worthy goal must also be a worthy method. This essential connection between ends and means forms the core of Gandhi's thought. For him, "*satyagraha* seemed to be not only a practical way of responding to wrong, but also a mode of action which would solve the problem of ends and means." (Brown, xv) Later, he wrote, "The means may be likened to a seed, the end to a tree, and there is just the same inviolable connection between the means and the end as there is between the seed and the tree." (Brown, 58)

Truth as God

For Gandhi, Truth was God. Thus, holding onto to Truth meant holding onto God. That is the power awakened by the word *satyagraha*. He seems to have come to this realisation relatively early in his life, in South Africa, where he was sent as a legal clerk to plead the case of Indian indentured labourers there. After several episodes of racism and bigotry, “he had come to a sense of an overarching and underpinning Truth, a divine power and nature beyond any vision of God as seen within a particular religious tradition. He believed that this Truth had called him (and indeed all men and women), and that he had to follow that call, not through a life of meditation and withdrawal from the world, but through an active life of service to humanity.” (Brown, xv) It is this allegiance to Truth that formed the fibre of his being and guided all his thought and action.

In our modern world where ‘might is right’, we stand on the precipice of self-annihilation. On our present trajectory, we may bring doom upon ourselves long before any wrath wreaked by climate change or some other cosmic cataclysm. Before the advent of Gandhi, the oppressed would either “petition their rulers for justice” or resort to an “armed struggle.” (Guha, 9) Gandhi proposed a new way of mass civil disobedience. This was a revolutionary discovery in political philosophy and may very well be the only hope for humanity. For what stands before us is a choice between non-violence and non-existence.

Arnold Toynbee



The world historian Arnold Toynbee wrote, "Today we are still living in this transitional chapter of the world's history, but it is already becoming clear that a chapter which had a Western beginning will have to have an Indian ending if it is not to end in the self-destruction of the human race. In the present age, the world has been united on the material plane by Western technology. But this Western skill has not only annihilated distance; it has armed the peoples of the world with weapons of devastating power at a time when they have been brought to point-blank range of each other without yet having learnt to know and love each other. At this supremely dangerous moment in human history, the only way of salvation for mankind is an Indian way ... Mahatma Gandhi's principle of non-violence and Sri Ramakrishna's testimony to the harmony of religions; here we have the attitude and the spirit that can make it possible for the human race to grow together into a single family - and, in the Atomic Age, this is the only alternative to destroying ourselves." (Toynbee, 6)

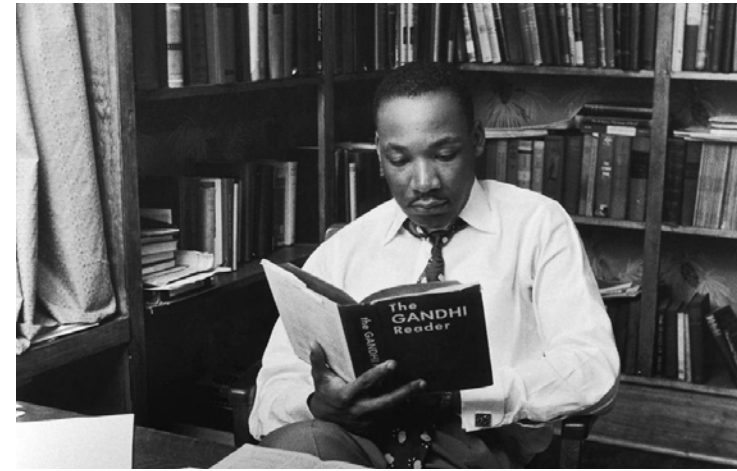
Churchill and Gandhi



It is difficult for the average individual to understand the whole concept of spiritual strength which lies at the core of Gandhi's method. The world today is permeated by the idea of social Darwinism, "the survival of the fittest." The iconic figure of the Second World War, Winston Churchill was often at loggerheads with Mahatma Gandhi. Churchill's biographers all wrote that Churchill believed in racial hierarchies and eugenics, with, of course, Britain at the top. Reluctant to let go of the jewel in the crown of the British Empire, Churchill said "that Gandhi-ism and everything it stands for will have to be grappled with and crushed." (Mukherjee, 14)

Social Darwinism is even now infecting the world today. In fact, one could trace both of the world wars to such ideologies. Imperialism is rooted in such ideas and the epic drama that unfolded on the Indian subcontinent offers the human race a new philosophy, a new phase in the process of evolution. It is not competition but rather co-operation that must guide the future of the world.

King on Gandhi again



King thought deeply about these ideas during his own civil rights movement in America. He wrote, "During this period I had about despaired of the power of love in solving social problems. I thought the only way we could solve our problem of segregation was an armed revolt. I felt that the Christian ethic of love was confined to individual relationships. I could not see how it could work in social conflict." Looking back at his study of Western philosophy, he wrote, "my faith in love was temporarily shaken by the philosophy of Nietzsche. I had been reading parts of *The Genealogy of Morals* and the whole of *The Will to Power*. Nietzsche's glorification of power - in his theory, all life expressed the will to power - was an outgrowth of his contempt for ordinary mortals. He attacked the whole of Hebraic-Christian morality ... as the glorification of weakness ... He looked to the development of a superman who would surpass man as man surpassed the ape." (King, 23)

Musing thus, in the spring of 1950, one Sunday afternoon, King went to hear a lecture on Gandhi given by Mordecai Johnson, who was the President of Howard University. "Like most people, I had heard of Gandhi," he wrote, "but I had never studied him seriously. As I read, I became deeply fascinated by his campaigns of non-violent resistance. I was particularly moved by his Salt March to the Sea and his numerous fasts. The whole concept of *satyagraha* was profoundly significant to me. As I delved deeper into the philosophy of Gandhi, my skepticism concerning the power of love gradually diminished, and I came to see for the first time its potency in the area of social reform." (King, 23)



The Selma march

This was a turning point for the civil rights movement. King was inspired by Gandhi's methods and slowly things began to change. His famous Selma march to protest the denial of voting rights for blacks had an epic dimension. King continues. "Prior to reading Gandhi, I had about concluded that the ethics of Jesus were only effective in individual relationships. The "turn the other cheek" philosophy and the "love your enemies" philosophy were only valid, I felt, when individuals were in conflict with other individuals; when racial groups and nations were in conflict a more realistic approach seemed necessary. But after reading Gandhi, I saw how utterly mistaken I was." (King, 24)



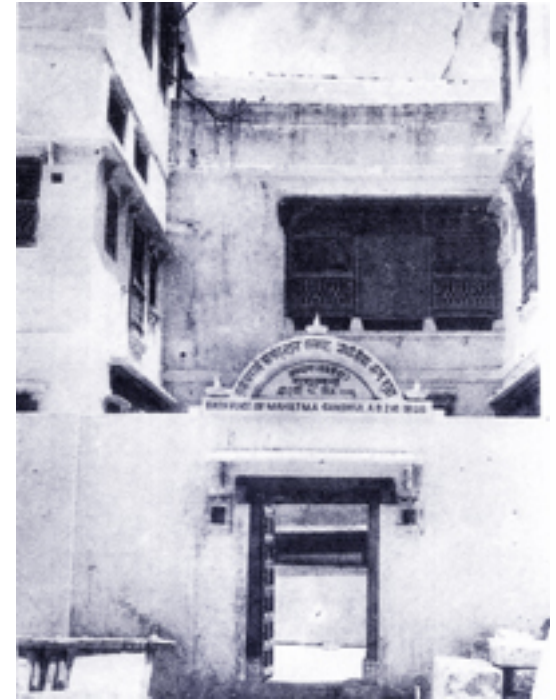
Satyagraha and the power of love

At the heart of the principle of *satyagraha* is the power of love. The activist must hold onto this even at the point of death. Thus, by voluntary suffering and by holding onto Truth and Love, the activist brings about change. This is not easy to do. But it is the only way left for the survival of the human race.

Giving a sweeping critique of Western philosophy and contrasting it with Gandhian thought, King concluded, "Love for Gandhi was a potent instrument for social and collective transformation. It was in this Gandhian emphasis on love and nonviolence that I discovered the method for social reform that I had been seeking. The intellectual and moral satisfaction that I failed to gain from the utilitarianism of Bentham and Mill, the revolutionary methods of Marx and Lenin, the social contracts theory of Hobbes, the 'back to nature' optimism of Rousseau, the superman philosophy of Nietzsche, I found in the nonviolent resistance philosophy of Gandhi." (King, 24)

It is this testimony, not only from King, but other activists and historians that compels us to make a detailed study of Gandhi and his methods.

Porbandar



Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was born in 1869 in Porbandar, in the province of Gujarat in India. He was the youngest of three sons. He lived there until he was seven when the family moved to nearby Rajkot. While still in high school, at the age of 13, he was married to Kasturba, who was also 13. Later in life, while in prison, Gandhi wrote his autobiography in which he recalls this episode of child marriage. "Much as I wish that I had not to write this chapter, I know that I shall have to swallow many such bitter draughts in the course of this narrative. And I cannot do otherwise, if I claim to be a worshipper of Truth." (Gandhi, *Autobiography*, 7)

Gandhi's autobiography

Indeed, Gandhi's autobiography is unlike most autobiographies. He is very uncomplimentary to himself and is his most severest critic. Truly, it is a candid admission of many aspects of his life that most of us would not divulge in public, and this testament reveals his unflinching devotion to Truth. All episodes of moral and ethical lapses in Gandhi's life as a teenager are written there with full details for us to read. These admissions reveal spiritual courage. He was indeed a votary of Truth.

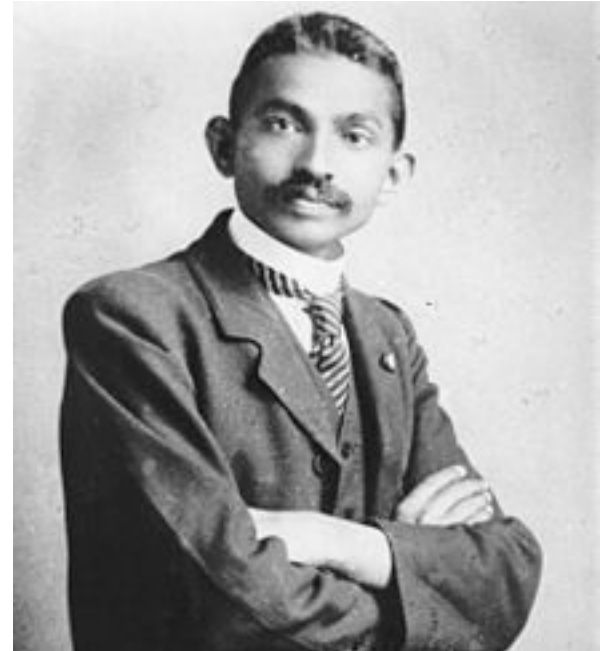
Ramanama and Ramayana

Though Gandhi showed no signs of a great intellect or political leadership as a child, there are several episodes that can be identified as formative. As a teenager, he did not have any interest in religion. However, two episodes from his childhood made an indelible impression on his youthful mind. This was *Rāmanāma*, the chanting of the name of Rāma, and the Ramayana, the story of Ram written by the poet sage Tulsidas. Gandhi recalled “that there was in me a fear of ghosts and spirits.” An old servant of the family household had “suggested, as a remedy for this fear, the repetition of *Rāmanāma*. I had more faith in her than in her remedy, and so at a tender age, I began repeating *Rāmanāma* to cure my fear of ghosts and spirits.” (Gandhi, Autobiography, 27) Regarding the Ramayana, Gandhi remembered that it was the evening readings of the Ramayana that “left a deep impression”. The reader had a melodious voice and after reading each verse, “explain them, losing himself in the discourse and carrying his listeners along with him. I must have been thirteen at that time, but I quite remember being enraptured by his reading. That laid the foundation of my deep devotion to the *Ramayana*. Today, I regard the *Ramayana* of Tulsidas as the greatest book in all devotional literature.” (Gandhi, Autobiography, 28)

His habit of walking

At the end of his teenage years, Gandhi's father died and the family decided to send him to England to study law. So, in 1887, at the age of eighteen, he sailed to London alone, leaving behind his wife and his toddler son. Initially, after reaching England, Gandhi tried to mould himself in the English lifestyle. He took music and dancing lessons as well as courses in public speaking and French. He quickly realised that these extra-curricular activities were not the goals for which he came to England. Also, he was running out of money, so he decided to live a frugal life. This meant to seek out cheaper accommodation. One could say this was a turning point in Gandhi's life because his new accommodation was "selected as to enable me to reach the place of business on foot in half an hour, and so save fares. Before this I had always taken some kind of conveyance whenever I went anywhere, and had to find extra time for walks. The new arrangement combined walks and economy, as it meant saving of fares and gave me walks of eight or ten miles a day. It was mainly this habit of long walks that kept me practically free from illness throughout my stay in England and gave me a fairly strong body." (Gandhi, Autobiography, 45)

Gandhi in England



Gandhi's period of education in England was also an opportunity for introspection. Partly because of monetary constraints, he was forced to adopt a lifestyle of walking and simple living. But there were other aspects of himself that he was soon discovering. There were several friends of his who were interested in Indian religion and philosophy and they approached Gandhi to learn more about the *Bhagavad Gita*, the sacred book of Hinduism. Recalling this encounter, Gandhi wrote, "I felt ashamed, as I had read the divine poem neither in Sanskrit nor in Gujarati. I was constrained to tell them that I had not read the Gita, but that I would gladly read it with — them." (Gandhi, *Autobiography*, 57)

Gandhi and the Gita

As he began to study the Gita with them, several verses were like a rude awakening. He wrote, “the verses in the second chapter,

If one ponders on objects of sense,
There springs attraction;
From attraction grows desire.
Desire flames to fierce passion,
Passion breeds recklessness;
Then the memory - all betrayed -
Lets noble purpose go, and saps the mind,
Till purpose, mind and man are all undone

made a deep impression on my mind, and they still ring in my ears. The book struck me as one of priceless worth. The impression has ever since been growing on me with the result that I regard it today as the book *par excellence* for the knowledge of Truth. It has afforded me invaluable help in my moments of gloom.” (Gandhi, Autobiography, 57)

From that time onwards, the Bhagavad Gita had a dominant role in Gandhi's life. He later wrote a commentary on it and referred to the Gita as his mother, saying "When disappointment stares me in the face and all alone I see not one ray of light, I go back to the Bhagavad Gita. I find a verse here and a verse there and I immediately begin to smile in the midst of overwhelming tragedies - and my life has been full of external tragedies - and if they have left no visible, no indelible scar on me, I owe it all to the teachings of the Bhagavad Gita." (Radhakrishnan, Bhagavadgita, 10)

The Bhagavad Gita



ACCORDING TO GANDHI

M. Gandhi

Return to India

In 1891, Gandhi returned to India with a law degree at the age of 22. On his return, he had an emotional shock. He learned that his mother died while he was in England but the news was kept from him so that he would not have a shock in a foreign land. "My grief was even greater than over my father's death," he recalled. "Most of my cherished hopes were shattered." (Gandhi, *Autobiography*, 73) Her saintliness made a deep impression on the young Gandhi. "She would take the hardest vows and keep them without flinching. Illness was no excuse for relaxing them." (Gandhi, *Autobiography*, 4) Later in his life, his tenacious observances of fasting as a form of non-violent protest against an evil law would form part of his philosophy of *satyagraha*. Undoubtedly, the trait comes from his mother and her example.

Gandhi's early “career” as a lawyer

After four years in England and a law degree in hand, Gandhi tried first to set up a legal practice in Bombay. This was not successful. He was too timid to plead the case on behalf of his defendant. Nor did he learn from others by watching how the more experienced lawyers defended their cases. He wrote, “I used to attend High Court daily whilst in Bombay, but I cannot say that I learnt anything there. I had not sufficient knowledge to learn much. Often I could not follow the cases and dozed off. There were others also who kept me company in this, and thus lightened my load of shame. After a time, I even lost the sense of shame, as I learnt to think that it was fashionable to doze in the High Court.” (Gandhi, Autobiography, 80)



Raychandbhai



In spite of his initial failures, there is one episode that stands out. This was his meeting with the poet Raychandbhai, who in many ways was Gandhi's teacher and guide. He is the closest to someone we can identify as Gandhi's "guru." "He was not above twenty-five then, but my first meeting with him convinced me that he was a man of great character and learning. He was also known as a *Shatavadhani* (one having the faculty of remembering or attending to a hundred things simultaneously)." Once Gandhi wanted to test Raychandbhai's feats of memory. "I exhausted my vocabulary of all the European tongues I knew and asked the poet to repeat the words. He did so in the precise order in which I had given them. I envied his gift without, however, coming under its spell. The thing that did cast its spell over me I came to know afterwards. This was his wide knowledge of the scriptures, his spotless character, and his burning passion for self-realization. I saw later that this was the only thing for which he lived." (Gandhi, Autobiography, 74)

The influence of Jainism



Raychandbhai was a Jain, though he rejected orthodox Jainism. A jeweller by profession, he “combined running a shop with the reading of scriptures and the writing of poetry.” (Guha, 56) He kept a diary at the shop in which he wrote down his insights and reflections. Gandhi wrote, “The man who, immediately on finishing his talk about weighty business transactions, began to write about hidden things of the spirit could evidently not be a businessman at all, but a real seeker after Truth. And I saw him thus absorbed in godly pursuits in the midst of business ... I never saw him lose his state of equipoise.” (Gandhi, Autobiography, 74)

Stitaprajna in the Gita and the role of the guru

Here was the example that made a deep impression on Gandhi's life. Raychand was the ideal karma yogi in the sense of the Bhagavadgita and would be exemplary of the state of *stitaprajna* described in the second chapter that Gandhi would later recite on a daily basis so as to remind himself of this spiritual equanimity.

In spite of his high regard, Gandhi did not view Raychand as his "guru" in the traditional sense of the word. Gandhi reflected later, "I believe in the Hindu theory of Guru and his importance in spiritual realization. I think there is a great deal of truth in the doctrine that true knowledge is impossible without a Guru. An imperfect teacher may be tolerable in mundane matters, but not in spiritual matters. Only a perfect *jnani* deserves to be enthroned as Guru." (Gandhi, Autobiography, 75)

The Gita as the Guru

Gandhi did not see Raychand as a “perfect jnani” and so he wrote, “I could not place Raychandbhai on the throne of my heart as Guru” and that “throne has remained vacant and my search still continues.” (Gandhi, Autobiography, 75) Yet, he consulted him on many occasions. Pondering on this episode, Gandhi wrote, “There must be ceaseless striving after perfection. for one gets the Guru that one deserves. Infinite striving is one’s right. It is its own reward. The rest is in the hands of God.” (Gandhi, Autobiography, 75)

These words are significant for a variety of reasons. Gandhi’s search for a Guru made him more self-reliant. It is said that for the sincere seeker, the “higher mind” becomes the Guru. It would appear that the role of the Guru for Gandhi was taken by the Bhagavad Gita. He gained tremendous insight into its message and spoke of the Gita as “his Mother.”
