



# Tolstoy's Influence on Gandhi in Making of Mahatma

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**Abstract:** This article summarizes the influence of two great minds, who lived during the period between 19th and 20th centuries. Despite the fact, that the two great social reformers and thinkers Mahatma Gandhi and Leo Tolstoy, hailing from different geographical areas and having diverse cultures, traditions, mentalities, religions, yet, both of them shared common values, principles, and doctrines of love, truth, non-violence, peace, faith in humanity, tolerance, and brotherhood.

The two, were also regarded as great humanitarian for their true services to humanity, who always raised their voices against all nature of evils and came forward without any personal ambitions to lead those who were exploited, hopeless and weaker sections of the society. Their prime aim was not only to strengthen them, but also to generate a feeling in them that only they themselves could change their fate and destiny.

As far as Gandhi's and Tolstoy's relationship is concerned, it was filled with warmth and respect. Each of them was very close to each other. Although Gandhi considered himself a disciple of Tolstoy, yet, they had equally influenced each other. In this article, we have tried from Gandhi's angle how Tolstoy's principles, ethics and morals, had transformed his life and helped him not only to become a great leader and freedom fighter, but also the father of nation and Mahatma.

We hope that this article would not only enable the students and young researchers to know the greatness and the depth of the relationship between Mahatma Gandhi and Leo Tolstoy in a much better way, but also encourage them to do some comparative studies on Gandhi and Tolstoy, to uncover those aspects of their lives, which are still a mystery to many of us.

**Keywords:** *Freedom fighter, Non-violence, Celibacy, Manual labor, British Raj, Non- Cooperation Movement.*

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869-1948): The most influential figure in the history of the World Politics. He was also known as the Father of the Nation (Bapu) or Mahatma, an Outstanding Leader, Social-Activist, Reformer, Philosopher & A Writer, who fought fearlessly till his last breath, to break the chains and bring the Indians out of the shackles of slavery of many centuries of the British Raj.

Mahatma Gandhi always stood firmly by truth against *inequality, injustice, falsehood, cruelty, conservatism, discrimination and racism of all forms* for the well-being of the people of India, irrespective of the matter of caste, creed, race or region they belonged to.

He is regarded as a world leader of all times for his Teachings & Doctrines of *Satyagraha, (Non-Possession), Brahmacharya, Pacifism, Equality of all, Patriotism, Love, Integrity, Wisdom, Selflessness, Self-Sacrifice, Morality, Moderation and Truthfulness*. Gandhi's teachings and views were not only relevant in his own time, but they are still influencing lives of millions around the world.

For example, the greatest world Personalities (leaders, authors and thinkers) such as **Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela, Albert Einstein, Rabindranath Tagore, Mother Teresa** and others who themselves changed the life of millions through their true services to human beings were also inspired by Mahatma Gandhi.

Similarly, the renowned contemporary social & political figures, activists and brilliant minds such as **Barack Obama, Aung San Suu Kyi, Dalai Lama, Steve Jobs, Medha Patkar and Nobel Peace Laureate Kailash Satyarthi** and more have acknowledged their admiration for Gandhian Principles, Ideas, Values and revealed how they have been influenced by Gandhi in their life transformations and thanks to Gandhi's teachings they have succeeded to play a vital role in impacting the Society.

Here is an interesting question that arises, "If Gandhi had inspired so many people, and people had admired and regarded him with much respect, who then, would have inspired him to become that great world leader, a freedom fighter, and a social & political reformer and ultimately the Mahatma? "

In an answer to this question, the father of Nation Mahatma Gandhi, repeatedly admitted that the great social and literary figures such as *Jesus Christ, John Ruskin, Henry David Thoreau and Leo Tolstoy* had been major influences of his life. According to him, these were the people whose ideologies & creations, inspired him the most and guided him to fight all the evils and overcome every hurdle in the quest of India's Freedom Struggle and for the rights of the less-fortunate people of the society.

Although, all of the above mentioned personalities & writers had influenced Gandhi on their own, yet, **Leo Tolstoy's** writings, teachings and life style inspired the young freedom fighter the most, about which Gandhi acknowledged in his auto-biography.

As far as the correspondence between Tolstoy and Gandhi is concerned, it started only after when Gandhi read a copy of the letter "**A Letter to a Hindu**". Gandhi was so astonished by the writing that he could not stop himself to write Tolstoy and seek his permission to publicize his letter in his weekly newspaper "**Indian Opinion**" in South Africa.

The correspondence between Gandhi and Tolstoy lasted only for one year from October 1909 until the death of Tolstoy, in November 1910 but it left a long lasting & an impacting effect on Gandhi.

Although the correspondence between Gandhi and Tolstoy started only in 1909, much prior to that Gandhi, had already read a number of Tolstoy's books and eagerly used to read the copies of letters sent by Tolstoy to other political and prominent Indian social figures.

One of the prime principles of **non-violence**, which had been the most effective weapon of Gandhi throughout his life and his campaign on Indian Independence, was also based on Tolstoy's concept of non-violent resistance.

After reading Tolstoy's fiction "**The Kingdom of God Is Within You**" in 1894, Gandhi shared his experience that how this book revealed insight into his heart and how it not only guided him in his life, but also gave a new vision to understand true meaning of love and humanity from a new perspective.

It is an interesting fact that Gandhi read this book after experiencing, humiliating racial incidents in South Africa. The book for the first time introduced the young lawyer with the concept of non-violence i.e. **Satyagraha**. The book taught Gandhi how to deal with any kind of violence fearlessly and also informed the significance & the need of application of the concept of non-violent resistance in a person's life.

For the first time "**Satyagraha**" was practiced in South Africa in 1907 by Gandhi to oppose racist law i.e. the **Asiatic Registration Law** which served as an experiment with a significant success by laying pressure on the British. Gandhi continued to practice on the same principle when he returned to India.

Later Gandhi came across Tolstoy's "**A Letter to a Hindu**" which Tolstoy wrote to the journalist and sociologist **Taraknath Das** in 1908, in which he firmly advocated to follow the path of non-violence as an effective weapon, to snatch the freedom from the British-Rule. Thanks to this letter, that Gandhi could understand more precisely, the need and relevance of supporting the idea of non-violence.

Not only Tolstoy's doctrine of non-violence impacted Gandhi, but his other beliefs and ideals such as *sacrificing private wealth, living in celibacy, adopting the practices of manual labor, fasting, vegetarianism* and *teetotalism* also caught the attention of Gandhi.

Since Tolstoy, always preached on the topic that, “*Everyone thinks of changing the world, but no one thinks of changing himself*” hence, despite hailing from an aristocratic family, The Count Tolstoy at first himself adopted all these principles in his life. He began living in *celibacy, rejected luxurious life, worked on farms and wore peasant’s attire*.

Following the footsteps of Tolstoy, later Gandhi also started living in celibacy. Having influenced by Tolstoy and to have purity in his thought, word and deed, Gandhi decided to follow the concept of celibacy. He adopted Brahmacharya i.e. ideals of chastity and sexual abstinence in 1906.

Tolstoy’s idea of simplicity of life also had left an abiding impact on Gandhi that he stopped wearing dresses like Englishman, and wore a simple attire Dhoti and Shawl in his support to Swadeshi movement, by boycotting all the British cloth and products, as a move to revive Indian industries and improve economic conditions.

Apart from being the biggest follower of Tolstoy, Gandhi adopted the principles of vegetarianism and sacrificed private property for the strengthening of the exploited and weaker sections of the society.

Doctrines of Tolstoy on **manual labor** also attracted the attention of Gandhi, which prompted him to engage himself in cultivating farms to provide food to the exploited Indians refugees in South Africa. The greatness of influence of Tolstoy can be judged by the fact that Gandhi named his second ashram after Tolstoy “**Tolstoy Colony or Tolstoy Farm**” in South Africa.

Gandhi along with People residing at Tolstoy Farm spent much of his time in Manual Agricultural Activities such as Picking, Growing, Pruning, Grinding of Corn and other Activities such as Scavenging, Cleaning, Cooking, Weaving, Knitting, Sandal-Making Shoe-Making, and Carpentry etc. One of the main purposes of establishing the Farm was also to generate a spirit of brotherhood among Satyagrahis and make them independent.

Tolstoy’s Education model also deeply impressed Gandhi. Working on Tolstoy’s education model who laid a foundation of a school in his private estate “**Yasnaya Polyana**” to provide **Free Education** to the Children of Peasants and Surfs. Gandhi also established a similar kind of school at his Ashram “**Tolstoy Farm**” for the children of Satyagrahis, who were fighting against racial and unjust discrimination against Indians.

Mahatma Gandhi learned lot of things from Tolstoy. The concepts and principles which Gandhi adapted from Tolstoy when he applied in India’s Independence Movement, he got a significant success.

For example: For his **Asahyog Andolan (Non-Cooperation Movement)** Gandhi took the idea from Tolstoy’s reply to an Indian Journalist A. Ramaseshan, who urged Tolstoy to express his views on the current British Raj and find his encouraging words against the cruel and corrupted British Regime.

Despite facing a number of physical assaults, discrimination and humiliating experiences Gandhi never stopped working on his principles and morals. After each of such incidents he always appeared stronger & stronger. For this, he always gave credit to Leo Tolstoy. How Tolstoy’s ethics, principles and values influenced Gandhi that he

continued to work on the same, throughout his life. Gandhi called himself a disciple of Tolstoy. He expressed his views on Tolstoy in such a manner:

*“To him Tolstoy was a sage, a revolutionary thinker. He had been greatly influenced by Tolstoy's spiritual perceptions as well as his thoughts on social and economic matters”<sup>1</sup>.*

Following most of the ideals of Tolstoy, Gandhi could reach across all the sections of the society of his time and his teachings and principles are still reaching to every individual across the globe, even in this generation.

After being impressed by the life of Gandhi and for all his sacrifices, his true and loyal services to the Nation, the famous Indian Poet Rabindranath Tagore conferred on Gandhi, the title “**Mahatma**” in 1915. Ever since then, People started addressing him as a **Mahatma**.

To become a Mahatma, the required qualities which a person should have, Gandhi had all of them and most of them he had acquired from Leo Tolstoy. Therefore, we can firmly say that Tolstoy’s principles and beliefs contributed a lot in transformation of *Mohandas Gandhi* into *Mahatma Gandhi*.

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<sup>1</sup>Varma R. Gandhi: A Biography For Children & Beginners. Ahmedabad:Navajivan Publishing House. 2001. Pg. 50.