
GANDHI'S LABORATORY: THE SOUTH AFRICAN YEARS

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When Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi entered the field of Indian politics in 1916, he had placed his concept of swaraj upon four pillars. They were: the end of untouchability, Hindu – Muslim unity, the principle for non-violence for freedom, and transformation of villages by spinning and other self-sustaining methods. These four pillars almost covered all the aspects, which were needed by the subcontinent to unite and fight for its independence. And these then set the paradigm of the political discourse in India for at least two decades since his return to India. This paradigm, it may be stressed, was not cultivated in a day, month or year; its prologue was his struggle in South Africa where he tried to erase the hardships of Asiatic people. Twenty one years and the legacy of the foreign land led to the evolution of Gandhi's ideas in the social, political and religious fields. South Africa witnessed the provenience of a social and political reformer.

In this sense, what Gandhi did to South Africa was less important than what South Africa did to him.¹ With a law degree from London, Gandhi failed to set himself up as a lawyer in Bombay; he moved to South Africa in order to establish himself as a successful lawyer. Alien environment welcomed him as coolie (a derogatory term used for Indians in South Africa then) and not as a lawyer. He started his fight, in order to assert the premise that all Indians are British subjects under the famous proclamation of 1858 by Queen Victoria. The struggle that was started after the incident of Pietermaritzburg (where he was thrown out of a first class compartment because of his brown skin) was ended with the 1913-14 Satyagraha campaign. This trajectory made him the most famous leader in South Africa who represented not only the Indians but Asiatic people as well. There is evidence that Gandhi's ambit had extended beyond the Asians in South Africa and had begun to encompass the rights of the African people too and this indeed would mature into the anti-apartheid struggle even after Gandhi left the South African shores to India, prodded by his Rajguru, Gopal Krishna Gokhale.²

It may be argued that the lawyer self-invented himself in South Africa and in fact liberated himself from the traditional outlook with which he landed there. Had he not lived in

¹ Nanda, B.R. *Mahatma Gandhi: A Biography Complete and Unabridged*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1989, p.121.

² This story is beyond the scope of this study. Nevertheless, it may be stressed here that Gandhi had laid the foundation of that glorious struggle, inspiring such leaders as Nelson Mandela, Archbishop Desmond Tutu and several others.

South Africa, he might never have outgrown the conventional, confined, views of Indian men of his class and his generation.³ Gandhi's ideas kept evolving during his stay in South Africa and it was reflected in his personality also. The journey from an untested lawyer to a leader who fought for the legal rights, equality and justice witnessed the passage of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi into 'Mahatma' Gandhi. In tracing this evolution, we may see new epiphany he underwent every two years or so - Phoenix (1904), Brahmacharya (1906), Satyagraha (1908), and Tolstoy Farm (1910) - each representing a milestone in the path he was blazing for himself.⁴

Among the four pillars, "eradication of untouchability" was one of Gandhi's foremost concerns in order to attain swaraj. To unite the Indian people under one umbrella was, in his own times and is in our own times, one of the most difficult tasks for any Indian leader. Not only religious differences were there but caste division with its odious practice of 'untouchability' was rampant among Indians. Gandhi understood that until and unless these divisions were obliterated, all efforts to unite the people will go in vain. Social and religious equality should be the forerunner in order to attain swaraj, in his view. Gandhi who already went against the conventions of 'Modh Banias' (Gandhi's caste), by crossing 'kala paani' (a taboo related to the sea in Indian Hindu culture) was ready to tread a different path. His encounter with the west and its traditions is one of the significant events of his life. His inclination to understand different religions and cultures laid the base for his future prospects of a leader. He understood different religions through different religious texts (the Gita, the Bible, and the Quran) and through his dialogues, as well as debates, with religious persons and friends. Religious and moral attitudes found its roots in India and London, but initially he went on a quest to see the links between religious beliefs and dietary practices. He does not appear to have given any thought at all to political questions before his direct involvement with the problems of the Indian community in Natal.⁵

The idea of social equality and eradication of untouchability, which the lawyer understood as 'sin' must have been crept into his mind during the South African years where, he came face to face with injustice and inequality. He naturally obeyed his mother and caste people who excommunicated him and after three years also purified him. In his renditions to all these, he could not find a logic; but then, he obeyed it. A stark difference can be observed when he was opening an ashram (the Kochrab Ashram in Ahmedabad) in India based on the same roadmap of the Phoenix ashram and the Tolstoy farm. In his autobiography he wrote:

The question of Untouchability was naturally among the subjects discussed with Ahmadabad friends. I made it clear to them that I should take the first opportunity of admitting an untouchable candidate to the ashram if he was otherwise worthy.⁶

³ Guha, Ramchandra. *Gandhi before India*, Penguin Books, Gurgaon, 2013, p.535.

⁴ Lelyveld, Joseph. *Great Soul: Mahatma Gandhi and His Struggle with India*, Harper Collins India, New Delhi, 2011, p. 18.

⁵ Dalton, Dennis. *Non Violence in Action: Gandhi's power*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2014, p.16.

⁶ Gandhi, M.K.. *The Story of My experiments with truth*, Navjivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad, 2012p. 363.

A foray into the two decades of his activities in South Africa throws light on the fact that his experiences were varied and intense. His life in Durban and Johannesburg, as well as his struggle, provided him a deeper knowledge, of what divided or united human beings in general and the Indians in particular. Thus, the South African discourse became an important factor which shaped Gandhi's ideas on caste and untouchability. South Africa witnessed an initial phase of Gandhi's evolving views on caste and untouchability. This progressive evolution can be traced from his letter written to Chhaganlal (Gandhi's nephew), when he became a father (dated 7th February 1907). Gandhi wrote:

The father should do the cleaning himself, even though his particular form of labour was not consistent with his caste. In rearing the child, said Gandhi, please do not allow our old customs about untouchability, which are useless and wicked, to come in the way.⁷

Several forces worked together that carved out a middle caste Bania to tread on the path of a social reformer. Contemporary scholars moot upon his idea of self-purification in the context of caste and untouchability. But the roots of his idea lie in his 'experiences' and 'experiments' in South Africa. A range of incidents and thought processes went into this. Caste and untouchability, according to its preachers, got its base from the religious texts and traditions. Gandhi also underwent the phase of religious fermentation. But he came out of it rationally. Gandhi's religious pluralism also played an important part by which Gandhi started to look into the different traditions scientifically.

The ideas of Gandhi were of a hybrid cult that was being cultivated with the help of eastern and western thoughts. He syncretised all the ideas and infused them with his own thoughts and experiences. Eastern thinkers like Raychandbhai and Gopal Krishna Gokhale played an important part in his social evolution project as much as did such western thinkers as Leo Tolstoy and John Ruskin. The heterodox society of South Africa provided him the space for his experiments. South Africa thus became his laboratory for the evolution of his social and political thoughts. Service to the humanity became his foremost agenda as a political leader. He assiduously fought for equality and justice; these ideas were cultivated in South Africa. While campaigning against untouchability in the year 1927 (in India) Gandhi naturally referred to his experiences of South Africa and opined:

I believe implicitly that all men are born equal.....I have fought this doctrine of superiority in South Africa inch by inch, and it is because of that inherent belief that I delight calling myself a scavenger, a spinner, a weaver, a farmer and a labourer.⁸

It will be appropriate, in this context, to discuss briefly the fermentation of the ideas in Gandhi's life.

⁷ Guha, Ramchandra. Op cit., p. 251.

⁸ Lelyveld, Joseph. Op cit, p. 25

PHASE OF RELIGIOUS FERMENTATION:

Social reform and revivalist movements had already started in India, to combat the idea of occidentals and missionaries, even before Gandhi had arrived on the scene. From Raja Rammohan Roy to Mahadev Govind Ranade, reformers were trying to unite the Indian society. And this tradition had persisted in Gandhi's own time too. When Gandhi was tirelessly uniting people, irrespective of their caste and religion in South Africa; another Kathiawari, Swami Dayanand Swaraswati, was concerned about the converts from Hinduism and was engaged to reverse this and thus enlarge the Hindu community through the 'Suddhi' movement.⁹ But whether the purified were allowed to use the same wells and other public resources was a matter of concern.¹⁰ It was not only the case with the Suddhi movement; it was so with the several other such movements. None were leading to social equality and were limited in their scope.

It is necessary to locate the phase of religious fermentation in Gandhi's life in this very context. To entertain the idea of social equality among Indians, one has to have the knowledge of religion through which inequality was sanctioned. Gandhi's religious pluralism was precocious in this context.¹¹ Gandhi cared about his faith but did not believe in the dogmatic vehicle to run it. He was a product of his time, but he had a conviction to look into religion rationally and with a secular approach. This indeed set him apart from the other reformers and revivalists of his own times.

This inclination to plurality was, perhaps, ingrained in Gandhi since his childhood. Putlibai (mother of Gandhi), being a Vaishnavite, was attracted to the 'Pranami Sect' whose founder, Prannath, also incorporated teachings of Islam into his precepts. The Pranami temple in Porbandar that Putlibai patronized was not like other temples of the land. It had no icons, no images; only writings on the wall, deriving from Hindu scriptures and from the Quran. Her ecumenism extended even further; for among the regular visitors to her home were Jain monks.

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But the limitations that were imposed by the society can be seen in a contradictory action of Putlibai, when she chided her son for brushing shoulders with a young Bhangi named 'Uka' and insisted that he undergoes purification.¹³ In this incident, Gandhi found no reason. Being a young lad he came in acquaintance with the thoughts of poet and novelist Narmadshankar Lalshankar (1833-66) and Govardhan Tripathi (1855- 1907), both of whom had talked against the caste and religious dogmatism. He became an outcaste and went to London, where he breached the caste

⁹ Suddhi (purification) is a socio political movement, its main aim was to reconvert the Hindus who were converted or had changed their faiths. It was started under the domain of Arya Samaj and the whole process is known as suddhikaran (to purify).

¹⁰ Lelyveld, Joseph. Op cit, p. 25.

¹¹ Guha, Ramchandra. Op cit., p. 83.

¹² *Ibid.* p. 24

¹³ Lelyveld, Joseph. Op cit, p. 30.

rules and shared house with a Christian, Josiah Oldfield. London was place where he started to get acquainted himself with other religions. He came in contact with the Theosophist brothers; he also studied Sir Edwin Arnold's translation of *The Gita* (The Song Celestial). But the book that struck a deep impression on him was *The New Testament (Bible)* and years later he wrote that *The New Testament* produced a different impression, especially the Sermon on the Mount which went straight to my heart".¹⁴

After the completion of his law degree, he again went for the purification process. May be, he did not want to purify himself, but he understood that many of his clients will be from the same community and it is possible to argue that it was sheer pragmatism that led him to follow the 'tradition'. Although a conclusion can be made that whatever may be the reason, his stand was that of a "conformist". But a letter he wrote to his friend, Ranchhodlal Patwari, suggests that a process of religious fermentation was going on inside him, although he was keeping in his mind career prospects. Complaining about the lack of work and caste opposition because he crossed "kala Paani" to educate himself in London, Mohandas wrote on 5th September 1892:

Everything depends upon one man who will try his best never to allow me to enter his caste. I am not very sorry for myself as I am for the caste fellows who follow the authority of one man like sheep. They have been passing some meaningless resolutions and betraying their malice clearly in overdoing their part. Religion of course finds no place in their arguments. It is not almost better not to have anything to do with such fellows than to fawn upon them and wheedle their fame so that I might be considered one of them?¹⁵

It was clear from the letter that a silent rebellion had already started inside the young lawyer. This state of religious ferment, he carried to South Africa. But South Africa gave him the space to explore new horizons. Eastern and Western thoughts and personal learning were fused by Gandhi which evolved him politically and socially. The religious ferment settled down in South Africa and a social reformer was born.

South Africa – Growth of syncretic thought:

South Africa was where Gandhi's thought and his actions followed the trajectory of a syncretic cult. His ideas were often influenced by the thinkers of east and west. Contemporary social, intellectual and political thoughts or concerns affect the opinion and theories of any person. Gandhi was a product of an old cultural tradition and of his own times. Being intelligent and imaginative, he borrowed from his cultural history, was influenced by personal experiences and drew much of philosophies from others.¹⁶ But it was the barrister's perception to look into traditions and western thoughts rationally which helped him; to amalgamate and synthesise all these varied thoughts and then to express it in his own ways.

Often people use the Gandhian way of protest against the many instances of social and

¹⁴ Gandhi, M.K..Op cit, p. 363.

¹⁵ *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, volume 1, Gandhi Serve Foundation, pp. 56 - 57.

¹⁶ M.duToit, Brian. *The Mahatma Gandhi and South Africa*, The Journal of Modern African Studies, 1996, p. 647.

political injustices in the contemporary scenario. How then, a lawyer who went to South Africa to establish a career for himself cultivated a new idea, which is still popular today. The answer to this lies in his experiences of South Africa.

South Africa was the place where people from different countries were migrating in order to establish themselves and also to make a living or a livelihood. Among them were a large numbers of Indian traders as well as indentured labourers. Obviously a large chunk of the Indians in South Africa, at that time, were labourers and they came from the low and intermediate castes and Muslims; they had been agricultural labourers and peasants. One of the reasons that can be traced regarding why the upper caste migration was less from India was related to the customary practises of theirs; that they will not cross "kaala paani" out of the fear that they will become outcastes. Apart from the Indians, there were the Chinese, the Jews and the native Africans. Britons and the Boers were the colonial masters. All this rendered South Africa into a melting pot of cultures and civilizations. A perfect place where Gandhi's experiments to build up an inclusive society could be tested.

The lives of Indians in India were circumscribed by caste, kin and religion. But injustice and inequality in South Africa made Indians to come together under the leadership of Gandhi for an inclusive social movement.¹⁷ This happened in a long span of twenty two years; Natal, Transvaal and finally in the 1913 - 1914 movement (Satyagraha movement against the colonial masters). During all these movements and Satyagraha, a unique phenomenon occurred. Hindus, Muslims, Parsis, Christians; high, middle and low castes and class; merchants, priests, labourers struggled and worked together. Their leader was their "bhai" (brother).¹⁸ Gandhi had struggled for legal equality of Indians and whites. This had led him, inevitably, to the issue of equality between Indian and Indian.¹⁹ South Africa, due to its amalgamation of civilizations and culture, presented a heterodox environment rather than orthodox which was present in India.

The late 19th century Indian scenario saw the rise, on the one side, of aesthetic sentiments among intellectuals, and on other, of an aggressive proselytizing drive by the missionaries.²⁰ A temptation towards Christianity was provided by A.W. Baker and Askews, but Gandhi was more inspired by the pluralistic thinking represented in the works of Anna Kingsford and Leo Tolstoy. He had friends from different religious communities. Jews, Christians and Parsis all became his close associates in South Africa (Henry Polak, Hermann Kallenbach, Joseph Doke, Parsee Rustomjee, Sonja Schlesin and others). As a practising Hindu, he got a religious mentor Rajchandra or Raychandbhai, who through his debates and discourses influenced him to reason any faith rationally. In transcending the traditional beliefs of class, religious and ethnic background, Gandhi was way ahead of his contemporaries in India. All these gave him an opportunity to scrutinise all the religions carefully. With his acquaintance with all these religions, he came to the conclusion that what divided people is not religion; but evil thoughts that were

¹⁷ Guha, Ramchandra. Op cit., p. 538.

¹⁸ Bhai is the name that was provided to Gandhi by his associates and followers in South Africa.

¹⁹ Lelyveld, Joseph. Op cit, pp.24 - 25.

²⁰ Guha, Ramchandra. Op cit, p.83.

entertained by any society for many years. Being invited to speak on religion by L.W. Ritch (of the Theosophical Society), Gandhi gave three lectures. Of significance was his second lecture which was on Islam and in that he elaborated on how it spread in India and opined that “its doctrine of equality could not but appeal to the masses, who were caste –ridden”.²¹

In addition to religious plurality, Gopal Krishna Gokhale and Ruskin provided him with a prophecy; which set his trajectories to analyse the society and human beings from the paradigm of equality. The ideas and thoughts of the duo helped him to entertain the view that until and unless the downtrodden and caste ridden were brought into the fold; no Swaraj can provide an inclusive society. One was his Political guru and the other was the writer of the book, whomade Gandhi to realize that true basis of the society was not wealth but human relationship.²² One can trace the influence of these two thinkers when Gandhi seeks to place himself as an untouchable by birth. In this we find the core of his approach that birth alone did not determine the social status of a person; in other words, the approach that caste identity by birth may be retained but not the evil practice of caste based discrimination and exclusion.

The ideas and thoughts of the eastern and western thinkers moulded the barrister to become a social reformer. He incorporated their ideas with his own ideas and personal experiences and established a new “cult of politics” before facing the Indian challenge. Perhaps, no place other than South Africa, would have given him such an opportunity to test his experiments. He became the leader of common masses; which was divided by colour, language, religion, caste, et al, but united by their leader.

Gandhi’s broadmindedness and how he connected with a society at odds, was most stressfully written in an unpublished memoir by Henry Polak. He wrote of his friend and leader in the following words:

He was a vaishnava by birth, he is by nature Brahmin, the.....teacher of fellow men, not by the preaching of virtue, but by its practise; by impulse a Kshatriya, in his chivalrous defence of those who has place their trust in him for protection: by choice a Shudra, servant of the humblest and most despised of his fellow men.²³

Gandhi’s idea to build an inclusive society rested on the influence of oriental and occidental thinkers. Among the eastern thinkers, the impact of Raychandbhai and Gopal Krishna Gokhale was the most and among western thinkers, Tolstoy and Ruskin influenced the moulding of a social and political reformer.

²¹ Guha, Ramchandra. Op cit, p.181.

²² M.duToit, Brian. Op cit, p.649.

²³ Guha, Ramchandra. Op cit, p.533.

Impact of Raychandbhai and Gopal Krishna Gokhale:

Impression of Raychandbhai on Gandhi was great. Gandhi wrote about him that; “in moments of spiritual crisis, he was my refuge”.²⁴ He was the son in law of Pranjivan Mehta’s brother (Gandhi’s friend and benefactor). A poet and a Jain by faith, he led a simple life, even austere life, although his renunciation was different from and possibly deeper than the norm. Raychandbhai dismissed orthodox Jainism as the religion of the mouth covering (muh patti) rather than soul.²⁵ He was against the obsession of formal vows and opined that even a householder could practise renunciation by cultivating an inner detachment from worldly pleasures. Raychandbhai was a learned person; he knew Jaina and Hindu scriptures intimately and had also read many texts in Gujarati on Islam and Christianity.²⁶

Gandhi first met Raychandbhai after coming back from London in July 1891, but the impact of Raychandbhai was immense on Gandhi’s life. He was one of the modernists who had a huge influence on Gandhi’s life and had even captivated him. The young lawyer who was frustrated with the lack of work and still spurned by his caste, found asylum in his discourses. It was Raychandbhai who told a young Gandhi to look beyond the conventions of caste. Although the Bania’s sphere was business, said Raychand, he must also ‘possess the qualities of other castes’, such as hard work from the Sudra, fearlessness from the Kshatriya, ‘a love of learning’ from the Brahmin.²⁷

For Gandhi, who was torn between the religions in South Africa; it was Raychandbhai’s teachings that helped him to comprehend each religion through the rational lens. It was this preceptor’s view that made Gandhi realise, examine things from an independent thought and see that every religion is both perfect and imperfect. It is how one looks into it. A vacuum in relation to moral and intellectual thoughts was present in Gandhi’s life and this was filled by Raychandbhai. It was the preceptor’s view that made Gandhi to nullify the objectives of dogmatists. An equitable order of society was Gandhi’s idea as a social reformer. For this, he had to rise above caste and religious boundaries to understand human society. Raychandbhai, through his evocations provided him a platform to question each and every division prevalent in society and to tread on a rational path.

For Gandhi, Gopal Krishna Gokhale became his political mentor and Rajguru. Before facing the turbulent Indian political discourse, on the advice and promise taken by Gopal Krishna Gokhale; Gandhi set out to travel across India in order to understand his karmabhoomi. Gokhale wanted Gandhi to understand India first in order to carry out his struggle. An ardent follower of Mahadev Govind Ranade, Gokhale was aware of the evils that persisted in the Indian society. Ranade was related to the reform movement known as Prathana Samaj which stood for monotheism and social reform. This movement laid stress on abandonment of caste, widow

²⁴ Gandhi, M.K.. Op cit, p. 81.

²⁵ Guha, Ramchandra. Op cit, p. 56.

²⁶ CWMG, volume 53, (Great Seer), Gandhi Serve Foundation, p. 98.

²⁷ CWMG, Volume 21, , Gandhi serve Foundation pp. 432 – 434.

remarriage, and encouragement of women's education. Ranade was an inspiration for Gokhale, whose reverence for Ranade could be seen every moment.²⁸ Gokhale was a senior leader of the Indian National Congress as well as a social reformer; he not only promoted the idea of India's independence but also tried to reform the society and cleanse it of its evil practices.

Gandhi's respect or rather reverence for Gokhale was very high. In spite of his high regard for Raychandbhai; he wrote in his autobiography, "I could not enthrone him in my heart as a guru."²⁹ This place was filled by Gopal Krishna Gokhale. The respect for Gokhale was immense and this could be seen throughout the journey of Gandhi. Gokhale was conspicuously free from sectarian biases. Gokhale was one of the first leaders of the Indian National Congress to call for an end to untouchability and caste discrimination. The relationship between the mentor and the follower was a special one. Gandhi was inspired by the personality cult that Gokhale had enjoyed, as political leader and social reformer.

Gandhi too inspired Gokhale. He went to South Africa and participated in his struggle. Gokhale after witnessing the campaigns that Gandhi organized came to the firm view he must return to India within a year and serve his country. Gokhale succeeded in persuading Gandhi at that. Gandhi's distinct combination of personal saintliness and social meliorism impressed Gokhale. He had successfully reached out to compatriots of other religions and linguistic communities, and to the disadvantaged sections of the society as a whole.³⁰ All these qualities made Gandhi into a leader quite different from others. The methods, through which he united the Indians in an alien land in spite of distinct division, made him an outstanding leader in front of Gokhale.

Gokhale understood it properly that a political leader in India should also be a social reformer also. Being a moderate leader under the umbrella of Indian National Congress; Gokhale also started the 'Servants of India Society', whose members were required to 'work for the advancement of all (Indians), regardless of caste and creed'.³¹ The major objectives of the society included the promotion of education and communal harmony, and the advancement of women and low castes. When Gandhi returned to India, Gokhale wanted Gandhi to join the society. Gokhale also supported the idea of Gandhi, to open an ashram based on his experiences of South Africa. Gandhi, as a social reformer in South Africa had already surpassed Gokhale. But on the advice of his political mentor, Gandhi first understood Indian people and its society properly (by travelling across the Indian subcontinent) and then ventured into Indian politics. It will be appropriate to stress here that his four pillars of swaraj carry the imprints of Gokhale's teaching.

The political mentor showed the path to his disciple, that in order to unite the Indians; divisions based on caste and religion should be wiped out. Although Gandhi was successful in South Africa, the Indian scene was different. Gokhale's experience in the Indian National

²⁸ Gandhi, M.K.. Op cit, p.213

²⁹ Gandhi, M.K.. Op cit, p.81.

³⁰ Guha, Ramchandra. Op cit, p.534.

³¹ *Ibid* .p.385.

Congress exposed him to the limitations on the contemporary leaders. Gokhale wanted Gandhi to comprehend Indian society and its people first, so that he should not follow the conservative or narrow path. Gokhale knew the strength of Gandhi as a leader but he was also aware of his limitations. A precise remark by Gokhale to Gandhi, in the context of "Hind Swaraj" is relevant in this context. Gokhale suggested Gandhi, "after you have stayed a year in India, your views will correct themselves".³²

Influence of Western thinkers- Leo Tolstoy and John Ruskin:

Referring to the three modern thinkers who influenced his thought, Gandhi writes, "Three moderns have left a deep impression on my life and captivated me: Raychandbhai by his living contact; Tolstoy by his book, *The Kingdom of God Is within You*; and Ruskin by his *Unto This Last*".³³ Gandhi's encounter with the west and its thoughts moulded the leader in the making. Love, non-violence, equality, and humility were the ideas that left a deep impression in the young lawyer's mind after coming across these two writers and their respective work.

Rather than imitating the works of western thinkers it is necessary to stress that, Gandhi syncretised his ideas with western views and philosophies. These ideas governed his political and social discourse. It was the uniqueness of Gandhi's genius that the western heritage operated upon him in such a manner that they did not come into conflict with what he had inherited from the traditions of the east.³⁴

He came across orthodox Christianity but the writing of heterodox Christians created deep impression on him. One among them was Tolstoy. Gandhi came across Tolstoy's *The Kingdom of God Is Within You* in 1894. About his experiences after he first read the book, recalled Gandhi years later, "He was overwhelmed by the independent thinking, profound morality and the truthfulness of this book".³⁵ In relation to Tolstoy, one can also say that the ideas of both coincided with each other, many of these ideas Gandhi himself had cultivated from the Hindu and Buddhist texts. The central theme of the book, that a good Christian follows his conscience rather than the laws imposed by tsars, bishops and generals – can be seen in Gandhi's campaigns during the struggle for freedom and for social reforms.

Tolstoy was both a novelist and moralist; Gandhi was attracted towards the latter aspect. Tolstoy contrasted the teachings of Christ with the practices of the established church. The idea of truth, brotherhood and non-violence that are central in the writings of Tolstoy was also visible in Gandhi's works. Tolstoy, in fact, reinforced Gandhi's own heterodoxy, his idea to forge a spiritual path for himself regardless of religion or creed. The political philosophy that inspired all the movements of Gandhi can be traced back to the view of society and state that he upheld as a

³² Gandhi, M.K.. Op cit, p.352.

³³ *Ibid.* p.83.

³⁴ Ramana Murthi, V.V.. *Influence of western traditions on Gandhian thoughts*, Philosophy of East and West, vol. 18, University of Hawai'i Press, 1968, p.65.

³⁵ Gandhi, M.K.. Op cit, p. 83.

devout follower of Tolstoy.³⁶ It was the impact of the western thinker, the law of love and non-violence, which became the kernel of Gandhi's moral philosophy.

Reading Tolstoy was an educating and epiphanic experience for the young lawyer. Gandhi had come to see his legal practice more as a duty than as a career. He would attend to the cases of discrimination, but his heart lay (as did Tolstoy's) in the personal improvement of the human being's life and social reform.³⁷ It was under the influence of Tolstoy and Ruskin that Gandhi established two settlements- the Phoenix settlement and the Tolstoy farm. These two settlements made social and religious distinctions inconsequential and irrelevant. Tolstoy believed "hate the sin not the sinner", which also became the basis for Gandhi's idea of 'self-purification'. This idea Gandhi used time and again in his political and social life's discourse

Ten years later after his introduction to Tolstoy's works, Gandhi came across the work of Ruskin. It was after reading Ruskin's *Unto This Last*, that the young leader came to the conclusion that the basis of the society was not 'wealth' but 'human relationships'. Gandhi's friend, Henry Polak provided him a copy of Ruskin's work. Tolstoy's impact was basically related to religion and politics, but Ruskin's impact moulded Gandhi's economic philosophy and social thinking. Ruskin's view obviously fell on the soil that had been earlier fertilised by a reading and internalisation of Tolstoy.³⁸

The economic and social ideas of Gandhi were shaped by the idea of Ruskin. Gandhi wrote later, "I could not sleep that night I determined to change my life in accordance with the ideals of the book".³⁹ The impact of Ruskin's work was immense. He summarised his reading of Ruskin in three basic propositions: the good of the individual is contained in the good of the group; the labourer's work has equal value to that of lawyer since both have the right to so earn a living; a life of labour, i.e., the life of the tiller of the soil and craftsman, is the life worth living.⁴⁰

Gandhi found an echo of his convictions in Ruskin's work. He began to mould his life. The Phoenix settlement was the place where he began implementing Ruskin's ideas first. The economic and social philosophies were put into operation. Social and economic distinctions were not present in the settlement. One can trace the ideas of Ruskin in the readiness of Gandhi to do the job of a scavenger at the Indian National Congress session at Calcutta in 1906. Ideas of Ruskin helped him come out from the conservative views that divided humans economically and socially. All these views of Ruskin provided Gandhi with the strength to fight for equality and justice. Work for humanity without any distinction became Gandhi's ideal, in which he firmly believed for his whole life.

³⁶Ramana Murthi, V.V.. Op cit, Vol. 18.

³⁷Guha, Ramchandra. Op cit, p.287.

³⁸M. du Toit, Brian. Op cit, p. 649.

³⁹Gandhi, M.K.. Op cit, p. 274.

⁴⁰M. du Toit, Brian. Op cit, p.649.

Provenience of a social reformer:

Gandhi's years in South Africa are repletewith experiences which turned his life and his thoughts. Changes not only occurred in his private life, but also his public and political life evolved. This all experiences moulded him and provided him the traits to become very good leader. South Africa provided the mission to his life. The political and personal evolution was carried out through his experiments in which he tested himself also.

The heterodox society of South Africa,which was the melting pot of cultures and civilization made the alien land laboratory for his work. Career prospects forced Gandhi to go and settle in South Africa. InitiallyGandhi was both an empire loyalist and believerin the superiority of the British justice system and its institutions.⁴¹ But inequalities and injustice that he himself came across with changed his view. Raychandbhai, Gokhale, Leo Tolstoy and John Ruskin provided him the answers to the questions that were fermenting in the young lawyer's mind. Religious pluralism and secular beliefs allowed him to expand the universe of his friendship, which in turn expanded his horizon to look at society in a different way.

It was in South Africa that Gandhi learned that until and unless all divisions are purged out, political freedom could not be achieved. Not only a politician but a social reformer was also born in South Africa. It was from the experiencesin South Africa that Gandhiformulated his four pillars of swaraj;eradication of untouchability, Hindu – Muslim unity, use of non-violence for any struggle and self-maderural India. His urge to form an inclusive society could be seen in his programme. He was also the victim of the different tools that divided people.A conformist was changed into an ardent social reformer after his South African years. He expanded the horizon of his politics and walked on his own path. One can trace the impact or influence of eastern and western thoughts, but, the process of his self-invention was an unending process for him. For some this evolution is slow and process takes years, but once it's under way, he is never again static or predictable.⁴²

Gandhi succeeded in uniting people in South Africa for different movements. But divisions in India were more rigid. Gandhi initially went for the "sin" what he thought was untouchability. The issue related to caste and its eradication came in the later phase of his life. But from the time he ventured into the Indian political discourse, he also became a social reformer. Right from the foundation of an Ashram on Indian soil, on the banks of the Sabarmati, he fought against untouchability. He was both a political leader and social reformer.

Two decades of South Africa moulded a lawyer and he was ready for Indian arena. He became the visionary leader of Indian political discourse. He could not have come out of conventional and confined visions of Indian men of his class and generation, if he had not lived in South Africa. Conformist Gandhi was buried in South Africa. After his South African experiences, Gandhi attended a reception hosted by Dheds (caste of untouchables). The reformer saw them as 'our own brethren', and said:

⁴¹Guha, Ramchandra. Op cit, p. 548

⁴²Lelyveld, Joseph. Op cit, p.6.

To regard them with the slightest disrespect not only argues our own unworthiness but is morally wrong, for it is contrary to the teaching of the Bhagavad Gita.⁴³

Thus, South Africa saw the birth of political leader and a social reformer that changed the whole political discourse of India's struggle for independence.

⁴³ *CWMG*, volume 12, Gandhi Serve Foundation, p.454.