



A COMPARATIVE STUDY ON THE POLITICAL THOUGHTS OF MAHATMA GANDHI AND THOREAU

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Abstract

This paper deals with the comparative study on the political thought of Mahatma Gandhi and Henry David Thoreau. A comparison of Gandhi and Thoreau is valuable for two reasons. First, it gives us a deeper understanding of Satyagraha. Second, it introduces us to the field of comparative political thought, while Gandhi was in jail he read the essay written by Thoreau. Gandhi adopted the term "civil disobedience" to describe his strategy of non-violently refusing to cooperate with injustice, but he preferred the Sanskrit word Satyagraha. Addressing "American friends," Gandhi once wrote, "You have given me a teacher in Thoreau, who furnished me through his essay on the 'Duty of Civil Disobedience' scientific confirmation of what I was doing in South Africa." Thoreau published "On the Duty of Civil Disobedience" in 1849. The essay would become a classic not only for its engaging style and its challenging political argument, but for the story Thoreau told there of the night he himself spent in jail in Concord, Massachusetts.

Introduction

The influence of Henry Thoreau upon Mahatma now universally recognized, is generally treated perfunctorily ; almost all popular articles on Thoreau usually devote at least one sentence to Gandhi's indebtedness to "Civil Disobedience." Since Indian Opinion, the South African news- paper published by Gandhi from 1903 to 1914, is now available for study, much new material on Gandhi's knowledge of Thoreau has come to light. Before Indian Opinion could be studied, information about Gandhi's indebtedness to Thoreau was scattered and fragmentary. For example, Gandhi, in his 1942 appeal "To American Friends," wrote, "You have given me a teacher in Thoreau, who furnished me through his essay on the 'Duty of Civil Disobedience' scientific confirmation of what I was doing in South Africa. Thoreau's essay *Resistance to Civil Government*, which emerged from his action of refusing to pay the poll tax, explained the meaning of action, and his essay was turned into action by its readers who found inspiration from it. Henry David Thoreau is conventionally considered as a towering figure who advocated and practiced nonviolent resistance against social evils. But as matter of fact, his essay not only influenced social reform leaders like Tolstoy, Gandhi, and Martin Luther King who insisted on using nonviolent means to achieve their political goals, but also anonymous fighters in the Danish Resistance who used violent means.

Political thought of Mahatma Gandhi and Henry Thoreau

Gandhi's political theory, as noted earlier, has congruence to action. Gandhi, as a theorist, is a propagandist and reformer. We must now turn to the theory of moral reform inherent in Gandhi's political theory. Ultimately only a religious force can restore man to his original nature, and effect the prevalence of soul-force in social and political life. If politics is to lose its viciousness, if fear, ambition, and concern for immediate gain are to be controlled, man must conquer his inner self. There must be the "control of the Mind," brought about by the spirit of chastity, of poverty, by honesty and fearlessness. A person so transformed would at once experience the moral evil of violence and see the necessity of employing only non-violent means to gain political ends. This means, that voluntary suffering is an inevitable condition of nonviolent politics. Gandhi himself has described passive resistance as a "method of securing rights by personal suffering." Speaking of India he said, "we shall become free only through suffering." How does Gandhi legitimize voluntary suffering as a means of politics? First, voluntary suffering thus employed is morally superior to the application of violence for the same purpose: "sacrifice of self is infinitely superior to sacrifice of others." Here Gandhi echoes the Socratic doctrine that it is better to suffer injustice than to inflict it on others. Secondly, it assures an economy of suffering. In trying to rectify an unjust situation through voluntary suffering, one hopes that others can be spared of suffering. Thirdly, voluntary suffering is the only morally consistent way of vindicating political truths. For political truths are relative truths. "No man can claim that he is absolutely in the right or that a particular thing is wrong because he thinks so . . ." Since one cannot be absolutely sure of one's truth, one lacks the moral basis to compel the other in the name of Truth. When relative truths clash, the alternative is to obey one's own conscience, as enlightened by relative truth, and suffer the consequence whatever it may be. "This is the key to the use of soul force."

AS commentators have long understood, Henry David Thoreau's radical individualist political philosophy is fundamentally at odds with his intermittent participation in the anti-slavery movement of mid-nineteenth-century New England. Mid-twentieth-century scholars who attempted to account for that discrepancy were largely hostile, with critics like Hannah Arendt and Vincent Buranelli branding Thoreau's politics a failed brand of egoism or anarchism. Later in that century and early in the present, other analysts have sought to rehabilitate Thoreau's reputation by arguing that he was an exemplar of liberal democratic individualism, and they have



characterized him as bent on cultivating “conscience,” a unifying concept that aligns recent research on his influence as a moral philosopher with his highly selective involvement in political activities. Even among those adhering to this explanation, however, there is little consensus, with one critic calling Thoreau’s approach “militant,” another “democratic,” and a third asserting that Thoreau exhibits “a moral sensitivity and therefore a political irritability that are exceptionally keen.” Economics, however, may be a more useful context than moral philosophy for reconciling Thoreau’s political thought and with his sporadic political action. Philosophers and ordinary citizens alike struggled to accommodate themselves to the early nineteenth century’s rapid economic transformations, and they did so through such institutions as the state, the church, and social movements. Others, however, chose a principled withdrawal, a stance Thoreau endeavored to articulate and to maintain. In *Walden* he instructs, “Let everyone mind his own business.” This notion of minding one’s own business suggests the ways in which politics and economics intersect and intertwine in Thoreau’s philosophy. The “business” one should mind includes not only the lifelong pursuit of making one’s living but that of cultivating a serene inner self in defiance of one’s neighbors’, and the nation’s, business. In this second regard, minding one’s own business can be taken as a declaration of political indifference—that is, of the elective detachment of the self from public matters.

Effect of Thoreau’s "Civil Disobedience" on Gandhi’s Satyagraha

Gandhi had written to Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1942, "I have profited greatly by the writings of Thoreau and Emerson." Roger Baldwin, chairman of the American Civil Liberties Union, rode with Gandhi on a train trip through France in 1931 and noticed that the only visible book was Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience." Baldwin remarked on the extremeness of Thoreau's doctrine, and Gandhi replied that the essay "contained the essence of his political philosophy, not only as India's struggle related to the British, but as to his own views of the relation of citizens to government." At the Second Round Table Conference in London that same year, the American reporter Webb Miller, a long-time admirer of Thoreau, asked Gandhi, "Did you ever read American named Henry D. Thoreau?" Gandhi replied, "Why, of course I read Thoreau. I read *Walden* first in Johannesburg in South Africa in 1906 and his ideas influenced me greatly. I adopted some of them and recommended the study of Thoreau to all my friends who were helping me in the cause of Indian independence. Why, I actually took the name of my movement from Thoreau's essay, 'On the Duty of Civil Disobedience,' written about eighty years ago." Miller noticed that Gandhi, a "Hindu mystic," adopted from Thoreau the philosophy which was to affect millions of Indians and inspire them to defy the powerful British Empire. "It would seem," Miller concluded, "that Gandhi received back from America what was fundamentally the philosophy of India after it had been distilled and crystallized in the mind of Thoreau

Gandhi's philosophy of Satyagraha, as many other sections "Civil Disobedience" were, well demonstrates Gandhi's method of extracting the heart of an idea from essays:

Under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man is also prison. If any think that their influence would be lost there, and their voices no longer afflict the ear of the State, that they would not be as an enemy without its walls, they do not know by how much truth is stronger than error, nor how much more eloquently and effectively he can combat injustice who has experienced a little in his own person. Cast your whole vote, not a strip of paper merely, but your whole influence. A minority is powerless while it conforms to the majority; it is not even a minority then; but it is irresistible when it clogs by its whole weight. If the alternative is to keep all just men in prison, or give up war and slavery, the State will not hesitate which to choose. If a thousand men were not to pay their tax-bills this year, that would not be a violent and bloody measure as it would be to pay them, and enable the State to commit violence and shed innocent blood.

Conclusion

These extracts, condemning commerce, government, and intellectual stagnation, must have delighted Gandhi. The middle class lawyer Gandhi underwent a conversion in South Africa which made him discard almost all aspects of his old life and beliefs and made him turn to writers who probed the meaning of civilization. Once Gandhi adopted and modified Thoreauvian -Tolstoyan-Ruskinian principles, he acted without hesitation and with determination. Gandhi found in Thoreau a practical man willing to practice his beliefs. It is a mistake, however, to overestimate Thoreau's influence upon Gandhi and the Satyagraha movement-to maintain that Gandhi did nothing original and merely applied Thoreauvian teachings

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