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THE INFLUENCE OF THOREAU'S "CIVIL
DISOBEDIENCE" ON GANDHI'S
SATYAGRAHA

GEORGE HENDRICK

THE influence of Henry Thoreau upon Mahatma Gandhi, 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 newspaper 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."¹

Similarly, Gandhi had written to Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1942, "I have profited greatly by the writings of Thoreau and Emerson."² 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."³

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 an Ameri-

¹ D. G. Tendulkar, *Mahatma: Life of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi* (Bombay, 1951-1954), VI, 177.

² Tendulkar, *Mahatma . . .*, VI, 144.

³ *Thoreau Society Bulletin*, XI, 2 (April, 1945).

can 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."⁴ 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."⁵

Because of lack of information, however, inaccuracies have been perpetuated. Henry Seidel Canby wrote in the *Yale Review* that "Civil Disobedience" came to Gandhi's attention while he was studying law in London in 1907.⁶ The *New York Evening Post* used this information in an editorial and then received a letter of correction and amplification from Henry S. L. Polak, Gandhi's co-worker in South Africa, stating,

I cannot recall whether, early in 1907, he or I first came across the volume of Thoreau's *Essays* (published, I believe, in Scott's Library) but we were both of us enormously impressed by the confirmation of the rightness of the principle of passive resistance and civil disobedience that had already been started against the objectionable laws, contained in the essay 'On the Duty of Civil Disobedience.'⁷

Gandhi's letter to Henry S. Salt on Thoreau's influence contradicts some of Polak's statement. Salt, one of Thoreau's earliest biographers, was interested in writing the life of Gandhi

⁴ Webb Miller, *I Found No Peace* (Garden City, 1938), 238-239.

⁵ Miller, *I Found No Peace*, 238-239.

⁶ Henry Seidel Canby, "Thoreau and the Machine Age," *Yale Review*, xx, 517 (March, 1931).

⁷ *New York Evening Post*, May 11, 1931, p. 8.

and undoubtedly would have studied Gandhi's indebtedness to Thoreau but was discouraged from writing by G. B. Shaw, who said that there was nothing more to be said about saints after his play on Joan.⁸ Salt, however, did write to Gandhi, whom he had first met in London in the 1890's, asking about the influence of Thoreau. Gandhi replied, in a letter which has often been reprinted, that "Civil Disobedience" had "left a deep impression" upon him and that he had

... translated a portion for the readers of *Indian Opinion* in South Africa, which I was then editing, and I made copious extracts for the English part of the paper. The essay seemed to be so convincing and truthful that I felt the need of knowing more of Thoreau, and I came across your Life of him, his 'Walden,' and other essays, all of which I read with great pleasure and equal profit.⁹

The extracts were made, not from the volume from Scott's Library, but from Arthur C. Fifield's "Simple Life" edition of the essay and presented under the headline, "For Passive Resisters."

The extracts began with a quotation from Tolstoy, "The principle of State necessity can bind only those men to disobey God's law, who, for the sake of worldly advantages try to reconcile the irreconcilable; but a Christian, who sincerely believes that the fulfilment of Jesus' teaching shall bring him salvation, cannot attach any importance to this principle," and then gave a short biographical sketch of Thoreau who "taught nothing he was not prepared to practice in himself." Thoreau was extolled as one who went to jail "for the sake of his principles and suffering humanity." The five columns of extracts from "Civil Disobedience" present Thoreau's argument forcefully and accurately, emphasizing that the essay's "incisive logic is unanswerable."¹⁰

The extracts present in brief the main ideas of Thoreau's closely argued essay; the following passage fundamental in

⁸ Stephen Winsten, *Salt and His Circle* (London, 1951), 170.

⁹ Henry S. Salt, *Company I Have Kept* (London, 1930), 100-101.

¹⁰ *Indian Opinion*, October 26, 1907, p. 438.

Gandhi's philosophy of *Satyagraha*, as many other sections of "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.¹¹

There can be no doubt about the appeal of Thoreau's essay which Gandhi read at a crucial phase of his life. He was then fighting the Asiatic Registration Act ("Black Act") which required all Asiatics over eight years of age residing in the Transvaal to register and, as if they were criminals, give their fingerprints. Failure to register would result in a fine, a prison term, or deportation. "I have never known legislation of this nature," Gandhi wrote, "being directed against free men in any part of the world."¹²

Indian Opinion helped awaken the Indians to the effects of the "Black Act," and when a protest meeting was called for September 11, 1907, in Johannesburg, delegates representing all segments of the 13,000 Indians in the Transvaal were pres-

¹¹ *Indian Opinion*, October 26, 1907, pp. 439-440.

¹² M. K. Gandhi, *Satyagraha in South Africa* (Madras, 1928), 157-158.

ent. The Fourth Resolution passed that day declared that Indians would not submit to the Ordinance and would suffer all the penalties of their disobedience. Sheth Haji Habib while seconding the resolution declared that it should be passed with God as witness; Gandhi, sensing the effectiveness of a religious vow, made an impassioned speech of support ending, "Every one should fully realize his responsibility, then only pledge himself independently of others and understand that he himself must be true to his pledge even unto death, no matter what others do."¹³

Gandhi entitled the chapter describing the meeting of September 11, 1907, "The Advent of Satyagraha." Although this meeting was held five weeks before the extracts from "Civil Disobedience" were published in *Indian Opinion*, he undoubtedly already knew Thoreau's philosophy. On September 7, 1907, four days before the meeting in the Imperial Theatre, *Indian Opinion*, in an unsigned article, quoted Thoreau:

'... All machines have friction, and possibly this does enough good to counter-balance the evil. At any rate, it is a great evil to make a stir about it. But, when the friction comes to have its machine, and oppression and robbery are paramount, I say, let us not have such a machine any longer.' In the Asiatic Registration Act, British Indians have not only a law which has some evil in it, that is to say, using Thoreau's words, a machine with friction in it, but it is evil legalised, or it represents friction with machinery provided for it. Resistance to such an evil is a divine duty. . . .¹⁴

If Gandhi did not write all of the articles which mention Thoreau, he certainly read them, as his newspaper received his constant attention. "During ten years," he wrote, "that is, until 1914, . . . there was hardly an issue of *Indian Opinion* without an article from me."¹⁵

Gandhi may well have read *Walden* as early as 1906; before

¹³ M. K. Gandhi, *Satyagraha in South Africa*, 169.

¹⁴ *Indian Opinion*, September 7, 1907, p. 363.

¹⁵ M. K. Gandhi, *Autobiography* (Washington, 1948), 348.

the first *Satyagraha* movement he dispensed with servants, acted as his own scavenger, and attempted to be independent of machinery. His views were seemingly influenced by *Walden*, but since he was using the *London Times* as a pattern for *Indian Opinion*, his journalistic endeavors did not reflect his personal interests as his later papers in India did, and his reactions to *Walden* were not discussed in the paper. It was rather the Thoreau who went to jail "for the sake of his principles and suffering humanity" who was emphasized in *Indian Opinion* because he confirmed the non-coöperation campaign.

Readers of *Indian Opinion* were frequently reminded of Thoreau's essay on civil disobedience. Thoreau had opposed the enslavement of man; Indians, being enslaved themselves, needed encouragement in their struggle. The Indian community was openly defying the registration act, and the resistances of Thoreau, Tolstoy, Jesus, and Socrates seemed vital confirmations to Gandhi. On November 9, 1907, *Indian Opinion* announced an essay contest on "The Ethics of Passive Resistance." The terms of the competition stated that the essay should contain an examination "of Thoreau's classic, 'On the Duty of Civil Disobedience,' Tolstoi's works—more especially 'The Kingdom of Heaven is within You,' . . . and also the application of the 'Apology of Socrates' to the question."¹⁶ Those who entered the essay competition had access to "Civil Disobedience," as it had been reprinted in pamphlet form for sale at 3d. and issued in time to be used by contestants not familiar with the essay.¹⁷

Only four essays were eventually to be entered in the contest, and before the essays were judged, Gandhi, who had refused to register, was arrested. He was sentenced on January 10, 1908, to two months of simple imprisonment. Gandhi remembered that there was a "slight feeling of awkwardness due to the fact that I was standing as an accused in the very Court where I had often appeared as counsel." He then added a

¹⁶ *Indian Opinion*, November 9, 1907, p. 465.

¹⁷ *Indian Opinion*, November 23, 1907, p. 494.

Thoreauvian comment: "But I well remember that I considered the former role as far more honourable than the latter, and did not feel the slightest hesitation in entering the prisoner's box."¹⁸

During this first incarceration, Gandhi read Tolstoy, Ruskin, Socrates, Huxley, Bacon, and the *Gita*—the work which greatly influenced him, as it did Thoreau, according to Arthur C. Christy in his *The Orient in American Transcendentalism*. Since his days in London when he had first studied the *Gita*, Gandhi had rejected the fundamentalist interpretation that this Hindu Bible was a historical work justifying violence. Gandhi felt that "under the guise of physical warfare, it described the duel that perpetually went on in the hearts of mankind, and that physical warfare was brought in merely to make the description of the internal duel more alluring."¹⁹ Thoreau, in his criticism of the *Gita* in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, had protested the seeming justification of violence; Gandhi undoubtedly knew of Thoreau's interest in Oriental literature through reading of *Walden* and Salt's *Life of Henry David Thoreau*, although Gandhi seemingly never saw *A Week* with its extended comments on the *Gita*.

A settlement calling for voluntary rather than compulsory registration for Indians was arrived at, and Gandhi's days of reading were cut short. Thoreau's essay on civil disobedience was again brought to the attention of *Indian Opinion* readers when on April 18, 1908, the prize essay, "The Ethics of Passive Resistance," was printed. Reverend J. J. Doke read the first four essays submitted, and awarded the first prize to M. S. Maurice. *Indian Opinion* carefully pointed out that the essay which won did not reach the level which they had anticipated; it was indeed a pedestrian production; the section on Thoreau was largely a reproduction of the extracts which *Indian Opinion* had printed, and the sections on Tolstoy, Ruskin, and Jesus were uninspired.²⁰

¹⁸ Gandhi, *Satyagraha in South Africa*, 231.

¹⁹ Gandhi, *The Gita According to Gandhi* (Ahmedabad, 1951), 127.

²⁰ *Indian Opinion*, April 18, 1908, pp. 175-177.

The continued interest in civil disobedience was justified, as General Smuts refused to keep his bargain to repeal the compulsory registration act after the Indians had voluntarily registered. Gandhi was unwilling to tolerate Smuts's breach of faith; an Indian ultimatum was sent stating that if the Asiatic Registration Act were not repealed the registration certificates of the Indians would be burned. Gandhi's inspiration may well have come from reading Salt's biography of Thoreau. Salt noted that Thoreau's essay on "Slavery in Massachusetts," "... was delivered as an address at the anti-slavery celebration at Framingham in 1854, on which occasion the Constitution of the United States was publicly burned by Lloyd Garrison, an incident which may explain the passionate tone of Thoreau's paper."²¹

The certificates were burned on August 16, 1908, and Gandhi was arrested and sentenced to the Volksrust prison on October 10, 1908. He worked all during the day, but in the mornings and evenings and on Sundays he read "the two famous books of Ruskin, Essays of Thoreau," and parts of the Bible, the Essays of Bacon, and several books in Gujarati. "From Thoreau and Ruskin," he wrote, "I could find out arguments in favor of our fight."²²

Gandhi believed that it was the "height of one's good fortune to be in jail in the interests and good name of one's country and religion." In jail the necessities of life were provided and the soul was left free; the body was restrained, but not the soul. A malevolent warden merely taught self-control to the prisoner. Gandhi trusted "that the readers of this my second experience of life in the Transvaal jail will be convinced that the real road to ultimate happiness lies in going to jail and undergoing sufferings and privations there in the interest of one's country and religion."²³

²¹ Salt, *Life of Henry David Thoreau* (London, 1896), 114. I have been unable to date Gandhi's reading of the Salt biography; there was interest in Garrison among the workers of *Indian Opinion* at this time, however, as the paper ran extracts from Garrison's works on March 19, 1910.

²² Gandhi, *Speeches and Writings* (Madras, 1933), 226.

²³ Gandhi, *Speeches and Writings*, 227.

He ended his account of his second jailing by adding, "Placed in a similar position for refusing his poll-tax, the American citizen, Thoreau, expressed similar thoughts in 1849. Seeing the walls of the cell in which he was confined, made of solid stone two or three feet thick and the door of wood and iron a foot thick, he said to himself thus:

I saw that, if there was a wall of stone between me and my townsmen, there was a still more difficult one to climb or break through before they could get to be as free as I was. . . . I saw that the State was half-witted, that it was as timid as a lone woman with her silver spoons, and that it did not know its friends from its foes, and I lost all my remaining respect for it and pitied it.²⁴

Gandhi's transformation from a respectable lawyer to a radical political leader was completed.

Thoreau was not ignored during the years after *Satyagraha* was first tried; for several years after 1908 passive resistance was offered on a small scale, and Gandhi himself did not court arrest. Two years after *Indian Opinion* had printed extracts from "Civil Disobedience," it printed selections from Mazzini with the comment: "We believe that when the first stage of passive resistance was at its height, the extracts we gave from Thoreau's essay 'On the Duty of Civil Disobedience' were very greatly appreciated by Indian passive resisters."²⁵ Gandhi himself was still reading Thoreau; by 1909 he considered that "railways, machineries, and the corresponding increase of indulgent habits are the true badge of slavery of the Indian people, as they are of Europeans."²⁶ Thoreau and Tolstoy had said the same thing, and their influence is particularly strong in Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj* (Indian Home Rule), a severe castigation of the evils of Western imperialism which enslaved colonial peoples and brought material prosperity to the governing nations. Works by Tolstoy, Ruskin, Edward Carpenter, and Thoreau's "On the Duty of Civil Disobedience" and "Life Without Prin-

²⁴ Gandhi, *Speeches and Writings*, 227-228. Only the first and last sentences of Gandhi's quotation from Thoreau are reproduced here.

²⁵ *Indian Opinion*, February 20, 1909, pp. 89-90.

²⁶ Tendulkar, *Mahatma . . .*, 1, 127.

ciple" were among the sources listed in the bibliography; and in a Preface to *Hind Swaraj* printed in *Indian Opinion*, Gandhi stated, "Whilst the views expressed in 'Hind Swaraj' are held by me, I have but endeavoured humbly to follow Tolstoy, Ruskin, Thoreau, Emerson and other writers, besides the masters of Indian philosophy."²⁷ *Hind Swaraj*, banned in India, was a call for individual, Thoreauvian regeneration and shows that in 1909, six years before he was to leave South Africa, Gandhi was beginning to think of Indian affairs. One year after the publication of *Hind Swaraj*, *Indian Opinion* published excerpts from "Life Without Principle," under the title "Thoughts from Thoreau."²⁸

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. Gandhi himself protested to P. Kodanda Rao in 1935, "The statement that I derived my idea of Civil Disobedience from the writings of Thoreau is wrong. The resistance to authority . . . was well advanced before I got the essay. . . ."²⁹ The Passive Resistance movement, however, had not been tested when Gandhi first read "Civil Disobedience," and the essay offered confirmation of the effectiveness of deliberate resistance to unjust laws. There can be no doubt that Gandhi was deeply indebted to the Thoreau who defied society and government to follow his conscience.

²⁷ *Indian Opinion*, April 2, 1910, p. 110.

²⁸ *Indian Opinion*, June 10, 1911, pp. 230-231; July 22, 1911, p. 287.

²⁹ Louis Fischer, *The Life of Mahatma Gandhi* (New York, 1950), 87.