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## THOREAU AND GANDHI ON CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE AS A CHARTER OF INTELLECTUAL INDEPENDENCE

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### ABSTRACT

One of the major preceptors of Transcendentalism, Thoreau manifested the Vedantic ideals for the exaltation of axiology over pragmatism, of spiritual over material and of static over dynamic. The movement stood as an emblem of the supremacy of celestially enriched East over the materially prosperous West. Gandhi sought inspiration from Thoreau and propagated the principle of *Satyagraha*, "Passive Resistance". Thoreau's *Civil Disobedience* influenced Gandhi tremendously who was the apostle of freedom struggle of India. Thoreau's concept of non-resistance led Gandhi on the path of beginning of Civil Disobedience Movement in Africa and India. Gandhi and Thoreau emphasized on moral laws—purity, patience and perseverance which restrain the being to adopt false means to prosperity and motivate the individual to upsurge towards a higher living. The genesis of the Transcendental Movement is basically Vedanta. Vedanta has a great message for mankind. The Indian sages through the deep contemplation discovered the affinity between man and God. Vedanta declares that every man is potentially divine. The divine spark is present in each one of us in the form of Soul. It is a portion of the Supreme Consciousness. Identical to Thoreau, Gandhi unfolded the weapons of the war against the colonial rule. The armament of divinity can be used on the path of spirituality but Gandhi successfully implied it on the path of the freedom of India. His weapons were truth and non-violence. He applied it for the liberation of India from the chains of British slavery. Gandhi and Thoreau condemned the busy life of the materialists who worked hard for immense money and power and hardly have time to interact with the knowledgeable inner Self. The common man thinks that he will be happy through material possessions and therefore toil for earning more and more through fair or foul means which leads him towards moral and spiritual degradation. The present research paper will throw light on the influence of Vedanta on Thoreau, Civil Disobedience as a source of inspiration for Gandhi, and pressing demand of the world for intellectual independence of mankind. On the whole, the declaration of Gandhi and Thoreau for just and cerebral independence makes us realize that civil disobedience is a charter of intellectual independence which is the substance of the paper. Undoubtedly, their radiant speculations would endeavour for the welfare of whole humanity.

**Keywords:** Vedanta; Philosophy; Transcendentalism; Divinity; Truth; Endeavour; *Civil Disobedience*; *Walden*.

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## INTRODUCTION

Thoreau played an integral role in fostering the Transcendental Movement of the American literature. He glorified and revered the constitutional doctrines of the movement. The movement was not confined to literature but exalted towards the higher realm as it emerged from the profound brains of America. It disseminated its essence as a spiritual and philosophical endeavour as well, owing its inception from the unfathomable intellects and sound thoughts of the laureates of America. Owing to the origin of the word, the transcendental movement worked as an instrument to transcend human wisdom beyond the incontinent mental level reaching towards the zenith. The major preceptors of Transcendentalism Emerson, Whitman, Thoreau, Alcott and Hawthorne manifested the Vedantic ideals for the exaltation of axiology over pragmatism, of spiritual over material and of static over dynamic. The movement stood as an emblem of the supremacy of celestially enriched East over the materially prosperous West. They accomplished this task triumphantly through their effulgent discourses and magnificent deliberations.

Among all the transcendentalists, Thoreau had a distinguished place. Although, he was regarded as one of the disciples of Emerson, he was the most classic and elegant. He was highly intellectual and his spiritual nature was of a higher degree. He either narrated his experiences or composed and wrote on it. Thoreau imbibed the oriental philosophy comprehensively. For Emerson, the Vedantic doctrines of the soul were homogeneous regarding the affinity of man to the universe. Thoreau treads the path which he found had immense proximity to the ideals of Vedanta.

Transcendentalism is centered on the potential divinity of each individual and Thoreau believed that this divinity can be manifested when the individual is not entangled in worldly desires. Thoreau's impact on Gandhi is entirely perceptible here. Gandhi also insists on the discovery of the Self

after liberation from the shackles of physical and worldly bondages. Thoreau believes that this enslavement is the consequence of indispensable and inevitable yielding to ephemeral joys and material desires. Gandhi's strive was for the freedom of the country so as to attain the fruits of liberty. Whether it is the emancipation of the Self or of the nation, the rewards are divine and exuberant.

Gandhi sought inspiration from Thoreau and propagated the principle of Satyagraha, "Passive Resistance". Thoreau's *Civil Disobedience* influenced Gandhi extremely who was the apostle of freedom struggle of India. Thoreau's concept of non-resistance led Gandhi on the path of beginning of Civil Disobedience Movement in Africa and India. Gandhi and Thoreau emphasized on moral laws—purity, patience and perseverance which restrain the being to adopt false means to prosperity and motivate the individual to upsurge towards a higher living. The present research paper will throw light on the influence of Vedanta on Thoreau, Civil Disobedience as a source of inspiration for Gandhi, and pressing demand of the world for intellectual independence of mankind.

## Voice of Vedanta in Civil Disobedience

The genesis of the Transcendental Movement is basically Vedanta. Vedanta has a great message for mankind. The Indian sages through the deep contemplation discovered the affinity between man and God. Vedanta declares that every man is potentially divine. The divine spark is present in each one of us in the form of Soul. It is a portion of the Supreme Consciousness. Thoreau was deeply influenced by the discovery of the ultimate Truth by Indian *rishis*. He imbibed the idea of universal unity from Vedanta. He learnt from Emerson that the inmost in due course of time becomes the outmost by a practice of spiritual discipline. As an ardent follower of Vedanta, he assimilated the great ideas in his essay, *Civil Disobedience*. The essay is being read by innumerable devoted students of literature as a message for intellectual independence of mankind. *Civil Disobedience* is the result of

Thoreau's protest against the tyrannical regime which enslaves and ceases human beings to live freely. The essay has a universal appeal. It examines the relation of the individual to the state and the central idea is, "that government is best which governs not at all"<sup>1</sup> (115). Thoreau believed that for the emancipation and development of mankind there is a need for transformation of the lower movements, the physical, vital and mental levels. This would lead man towards the Divine aura. Thoreau's isolation from the worldly life and living in natural surroundings inspire the individual to proceed beyond material concern. The progress of the outward world by leaps and bounds is splendid but the inner glory is diminishing gradually. This advancement was troubling Thoreau and motivating him to work for the betterment of humanity. He contends for harmony in every walk of life. He proclaims for the manifestation of the inner potential and its elevation so as to attain purity and bliss. Thoreau's speculation of universal freedom reminds us of the independence of the Self declared by Vedanta. The sage believed that slavery is grievous and realization of the potential divinity of the Soul liberates humanity. In *Civil Disobedience*, Thoreau explicates:

I have paid no poll tax for six years. I was put into a jail once on this account for one night; and, as I stood considering the walls of solid stone, two or three feet thick, the door of wood and iron, a foot thick, and the iron grating which strained the light, I could not help being struck with the foolishness of that institution which treated me as if I were mere flesh and blood and bones to be locked up.<sup>2</sup> (127)

Thoreau pronounces the spiritual powers of nature. His philosophy revolves round the Gita, the Vishnu Purana, the Vedas, the Manusmriti, the Hitopdesha and teachings of Buddha. For him nature stands as an endless circle of spirituality and divinity. The natural ambience resembles man's own spirit and endeavours for concord and unison. Gandhi was devoted to the preaching of Indian scriptures. His idea of non-violence is the essence of the Gita. He believed that in the divine surrounding of nature human soul attains liberation from the bondages of

corporeal frame. The prophets believed that nature inspires man to procure divinity, to value it and to preserve it. Man learns the principle of justice, co-operation, compassion and realization of the Self in the intimate hours of communion with nature. Gandhi is also identical to Thoreau when we observe him spending his days in the Sabarmati Ashram which was the abode of celestial bliss of nature. The calm waves of the holy river, the peaceful bank, the scream doves, the rejuvenating environment and the refreshing cooings of winged creatures filled a divine fragrance in the entire atmosphere.

Thoreau has always been preoccupied with the welfare of the human race through the upsurge towards the higher realm and its realization. His efforts were directed towards the well-being of humanity. Thoreau was a great admirer of Vedanta. He believed in the glory of human Soul and declared that God resides in every being in His entirety; the difference lies in our perception as we fail to distinguish between the meager worldly prodigality and His grace. Like other Transcendentalists Thoreau believed in the inherent divine potential and the identification of the self to the cosmic existence. In the consecrated stage, we observe that spirit is the Ultimate Reality which endeavours to lift humanity from the sorrows of the world and plunge in the ocean of beatific joy and blissfulness. Yet, this attainment is not easy as man generally indulges in material pleasures and wastes the precious life in very much eating, drinking and merry-making. This is not the aim of humanity. This life is bestowed on man to adore the creation of Divine, to praise the design of destiny and to devote oneself in service. One ought to realize that he is the part of the Higher Self. Need of the hour is to identify the celestial affinity of man with God. Thoreau affirmed that a seeker should never lose courage and faith in the Divine and follow the spiritual path in spite of hurdles, the victory is certain for one who moves ahead with an unflinching belief in His powers and presence. His writings and discourses inspire man to follow the path and teach human beings to attain freedom from the worldly predicament and continue the journey towards the eternity and infinity. He endeavoured for the upsurge of the West through his lustrous spiritual ideal of

illuminating and advancing it towards the higher realm.

#### **A Silent Dialogue between Thoreau and Gandhi**

Identical to Thoreau, Gandhi unfolded the weapons of the war against the colonial rule. The armament of divinity can be used on the path of spirituality but Gandhi successfully implied it on the path of the freedom of India. His weapons were truth and non-violence. He applied it for the liberation of India from the chains of British slavery. Drawing inspiration from Thoreau's *Civil Disobedience*, he launched the Civil Disobedience Movement in India. As Thoreau endeavoured to help people quit the mundane resources, Gandhi urged people to stop the use of foreign products, the British schools and offices and the support to the colonial government. Gandhi inspired millions of Indian to stand united against British dominance and attain freedom for the nation from the bondage of slavery, as Thoreau inspired European masses to seek freedom from material bondage.

Gandhi has proclaimed self-abnegation, self-surrender, self-sacrifice to inherit the doctrine of love instead of being violent and destructive. *Satyagraha*, the "soul-force" subsides the brutal and diabolical forces and elevates the individual towards the grand and blissful existence. *Hind Swaraj* advocates enlivening and reinvigorating the ancient ideals of democracy. The governance of the Self is required to heal the material wounds of the world. The world is in the process of evolution and the descend of a new era would be embellished by the gospel of Gandhi which preaches to do good and always be good as goodness is divine in nature. Gandhi reiterates:

Goodness is God. Goodness, conceived as apart from Him, is a lifeless thing and exists only whilst it is paying policy. So are all mortals. If they are to live in us, they must be considered and cultivated in their relation to God. We try to become good, because we want to reach and realize God.3 (I: 65-66)

Thoreau advocated that man's real wealth is his character and conscience. His character should be attributed with goodness and conscience must be distinctively divine. Wealth is of no use if one fails

to recognize the divinity within because in that case, he will use his wealth for dominating the marginalized and deprived classes. But if he succeeds in identifying his oneness with all, he would use his wealth for the betterment of underprivileged and well-being of the bereft and marginalized. The divinity is the essence of man but there is need of self-realization. This realization comes from the intuition which enables us to perceive the glory of the Self. These qualities are apparent in Gandhi and manifest his strong spiritual beliefs. He shows us the path of enlightenment by living a simple and natural life and listening to the voice of conscience. He believed that every individual is endowed with the metaphysical power of nature, but due to ignorance is unaware of the inherent potency and latent spark. The company of nature and acceptance of the voice of conscience unrolls the carpet of inward potential and the individual realizes his affinity to God. Like Thoreau, Gandhi asserts:

Man has two windows to his mind; through one he can see his own self as it is; through the other, he can see what it ought to be. It is our task to analyse and explore the body, the brain and the mind of man separately; but if we stop here, we derive no benefit despite our scientific knowledge. It is necessary to know about the evil effects of injustice, wickedness, vanity and the like, and the disaster they spell where the three are found together. And mere knowledge is not enough, it should be followed by appropriate action.<sup>4</sup> (III:5)

Gandhi and Thoreau condemned the busy life of the materialists who worked hard for immense money and power and hardly have time to interact with the knowledgeable inner Self. The common man thinks that he will be happy through material possessions and therefore toil for earning more and more through fair or foul means which leads him towards moral and spiritual degradation. Gandhi and Thoreau advocate to work hard for the attainment of liberation and redemption from the transitory domain. They proclaimed God is the All, the One, the Ruler of the whole empire, His glory and aura is incredible, and this experience will lead towards the

province of truth, light, bliss and peace. Thoreau asserts:

Man flows at once to God when the channel of purity is open. By turns our purity inspires and our impurity casts us down. He is blessed who is assured that the animal is dying out in him day by day, and the divine being established.<sup>5</sup>(196)

The gospel of Thoreau again seeks coalescence with the thought stream of Gandhi. Gandhi experienced the subjugation of the diabolical forces in the form of colonizers. The discriminative prospective of the imperials symbolizes the dominant attitude of the worldly and material aspects. When Gandhi was in South Africa, he was thrown out of a moving train because of his colour. When he came back to India, he found disharmony among the people of India in form of caste and elite domination. The untouchability or imbalance was standing like a fierce and horrible creature to swallow the glory of the nation. Gandhi was determined to give the right of a respectful living to the untouchables. He enumerates:

None can be born untouchable, as all are sparks of one and the same Fire. It is wrong to tread certain human being as untouchable from birth. It is also wrong to entertain false scruples about touching a dead body, which should be an object of pity and respect...When one visualizes the removal of untouchability from this spiritual standpoint, its material and political results sink into insignificance, and we befriend the so-called untouchables, regardless of such results.<sup>6</sup> (III: 195-96).

Gandhi identified the divine light in all beings and proclaimed that every being should realize it. He was so preoccupied with the thought of human welfare that when he was thrown outside the moving train in South Africa, one of his shoes fell on the platform. He immediately took out his another shoe and threw it on the platform to be of use for one who would get it. This should be our approach towards the betterment of mankind.

Gandhi and Thoreau endeavoured to attain the goal of life, although the goals were different but means were the same. The goal of Thoreau was

to declare the supremacy and the presence of the Almighty and to employ simple methods for all to attain this enlightened state. Whereas Gandhi's goal was to awaken India from the slumber of ages through the attainment of freedom from British imperialism, Thoreau's efforts were to illuminate and elevate Europe spiritually. Their endeavour was inspired by Vedanta and they insisted to assimilate the treasure of spiritual wisdom because it leads the being towards the realm of the Supreme.

#### **Gandhi's Sense of Gratitude for Thoreau**

Thoreau believed in the moral superiority of an individual's conscience over governmental law. For him, the individual was more important than the state. A state, a government should be allowed to rule if the concerning individuals consent for it. Like Thoreau, Gandhi also believed the same. It was the reason why he was determined to root up the British government as it tried to govern the conscience of the Indians, forcefully. He had faith that an individual has power to change the whole course of history because he is superior to any worldly authority. This was the reason he preferred the superiority of individual to the state and the government. The impact of Indian philosophy through Vedanta moved Thoreau, and Thoreau's expression of the realization of the power of the Self has greatly influenced Gandhi. Thus Gandhi himself has declared his deep sense of gratitude for Thoreau:

A friend sent me Thoreau's essay on civil disobedience. It left a deep impression upon me. I translated a portion of that essay for the readers of *Indian Opinion* in South Africa which I was then editing and I made copious extracts from the essay for that paper. That 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 short essays all of which I read with great pleasure and equal profit.<sup>7</sup> (214)

The finest creation of Thoreau is best found in the days he spent at Walden pond. Similarly, the best of the efforts of Gandhi came out when he was in Sabarmati Ashram in Gujarat. The Sabarmati Ashram is the replica of Walden, the land of self-service, self-

experience, self-realization and physical, mental and economic development. The nature is at its best at both the places and a sense of wonder is experienced through the components of nature. Nature reveals the divine glory and it's an impetus to man for elevation towards the zenith. The congenial atmosphere of Sabarmati and Walden strengthens and boosts the morale of the substantial existence to transform into unsubstantial ether of knowledge, to become a holy being. To exist in the material world, the inner power and strength is very essential. Being spiritually strengthened means detachment but in the way that is concerned with the welfare and betterment of humanity. Vivekananda and Aurobindo announced to endeavour for supreme living in the mundane and earthly world but being ineffective to the consequences of anything. Thoreau at Walden and Gandhi at Sabarmati earned this knowledge which is never dissipated and shines perpetually. They inherited the divine virtues of morality, diligence, service, honesty, egolessness, love, hope, truth, worship and understanding from nature which became the guide and guardian of their spirit just like Wordsworth's friend, philosopher and guide.

Thoreau was a keen and delicate observer of nature. He was fond of nature and revered it from the depth of his heart. In return, nature seemed to be his mother which adopted him as her very special child. He was well acquainted with the secrets of nature through his intense and subtle vision. He was familiar with the flora and fauna and pronounced the proximity to the elements of nature. Thoreau explicates:

I wish to speak a word for Nature, for absolute freedom and wildness, as contrasted with a freedom and culture merely civil,— to regard man as an inhabitant, or a part and parcel of Nature, rather than a member of society.<sup>8(149)</sup>

Similarly Gandhi also developed a close affinity to nature during his communion with it. He enjoyed the most celestial aspects of life while his stay at Sabarmati Ashram. Various animals were found roaming near his Ashram. There they forgot their very nature and moved around calmly. Gandhi was

very well acquainted with the medicinal value of many plants and kept on using them time to time.

Thoreau believed in the higher law and Gandhi also believed in that law which is also the law of conscience. The powerful inner voice should always be listened and obeyed. It will give strength and courage to an individual to face any difficult situation. Gandhi was sent to jail many times even was forced to face house arrest for many days yet never surrendered against the unlawful will of the British government. He kept on speculating on the mysteries and intricacies of life and ultimately succeeded in his experiments with truth when he found the entire nation standing by him in his mission to drive away the alien forces. He infused the belief in common man that a state can only confront an individual outwardly but can never capture his soul and conscience.

Through the ideal of elevation and exaltation Gandhi and Thoreau paved the path of simplicity, truth and non-violence to seek higher living. Thoreau's gospel transformed the thought current of India and revolutionized the entire idea of Indian war of independence. Where Thoreau was triumphant in channelizing Europe towards the spiritual path, Gandhi was victorious in turning the entire nation towards the freedom struggle for independence with the novel weapons of truth and non-violence.

Thoreau was a champion of liberty and his teachings have a universal appeal. He proclaimed for the need of spiritual awakening to bring harmony and peace. Thoreau rendered the pearl of transcendentalism which contended the joy and ecstasy of human soul diving deep in the ocean of love of the Supreme. He announced that man is not a sinner but is unaware of the inner power and puissance. Thoreau asserts:

The question is not whether you or your grandfather, seventy years ago, did not enter into an agreement to serve the devil,... but whether you will not now, for once and at last, serve God,... by obeying that eternal and only just CONSTITUTION, which He and not any Jefferson or Adams, has written in your being.<sup>9 (XXXIV)</sup>



The similarity of Gandhi to Thoreau exhibits in the belief in the victory of truth over darkness and in the triumph of wisdom over ignorance. Gandhi asserts:

Passive resistance has been described in the course of our discussion as truth-force.

Truth, therefore, has necessarily to be followed and that at any cost.<sup>10</sup> (74).

For Gandhi, the term 'Truth' gained new connotations. This time, it was the victory of the truth of Indian religion and culture over the superficiality of English norms; it was the conquest of the light of independence over enslavement and the conquest of realization of subtle values and tradition of India over temporal and worldly desires of the British Empire. We have mentioned that the charter of intellectual independence was declared by Thoreau before Gandhi, and hence, Gandhi is indebted to Thoreau for the same. Tendulkar quotes Gandhi's letter:

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.<sup>11</sup> (213)

### Conclusion

The impact of Vedanta on Gandhi and Thoreau is tremendous. They share the ideal of faith in existence of a supreme power in the universe and divinity of every man. This has been the core and crux of their writings and discourses. Whether it was simplicity of lodging, clothing and eating or elegance of thoughts and practise, Gandhi had close affinity to Thoreau. This is the need of the present age as well. We should practise the code of conduct which the prophets followed in their lives and preached to inculcate and inherit the principle. The accumulation of great wealth, a palatial house or grand clothes with great food will certainly raise our outward standard but the inner power is lost. A huge wealth can provide luxury but not contentment, no health and the unawareness of the inward puissance and glory. A simple and blissful life will elevate man towards virtuosity, contentment and spiritual prosperity. The material progress of the contemporary world tormented Gandhi and Thoreau. They contemplated for the creation of a

refined world devoid of selfishness, anxiety, disharmony and cut-throat competition. Gandhi and Thoreau endeavoured for the resurgence and upliftment of humanity. The awareness of the soul-force, the inner power would establish the peaceful and blissful atmosphere. This stupendous thought current of the thinkers will be a path-breaking effort in the convergence of the East and the West. On the whole, the declaration of Gandhi and Thoreau for just and cerebral independence makes us realize that civil disobedience is a charter of intellectual independence which is the substance of the paper. Undoubtedly, their radiant speculations would endeavour for the welfare of whole humanity.

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