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RESEARCH NOTES

Leo Tolstoy from 1901–2010 in Two Leading English-Language Newspapers in India

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On May 30, 1901 *The Hindu* published its first lengthy editorial on Count Leo Tolstoy. It was followed by a personal letter to Tolstoy on June 13, 1901 from A. Ramaseshan, publicist and editor of the journal *The Arya* out of Madras. This seminal letter set the stage for a steady correspondence between Tolstoy and many Indians from different walks of life, the most prominent among them being M. K. Gandhi (1869-1948), who, as a political and ideological leader of India during the Indian Independence Movement, wrote to the Russian writer between 1909-1910.

Some of the essence of this continuous correspondence with Indian freedom fighters, religious thinkers, philosophers and the general public in Colonial India, was shared through newspaper columns. The surprisingly extensive coverage of Tolstoy's life and beliefs during those years shows that his voice and image were revered by the Indian reading public. His death was sincerely mourned; he has not been since forgotten. The following is a selection of archival materials from two Indian English-language newspapers and a weekly journal (published from one of the newspaper offices) that gives us a glimpse into the ex-

traordinary interest the reading public took in Tolstoy and his work.

L. N. Tolstoy During His Lifetime (1901-1910)

The first significant mention of Tolstoy in *The Hindu* was made on April 1, 1901 under the heading "Leo Tolstoy." It reported the writer's formal excommunication by the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church. It also relayed the news of March 9 in St. Petersburg as issued by *Церковные ведомости*, a publication of the Holy synod, Printed in a word-for-word translation, the report opened with the explanation that the circular on the heresies of Count Leo Tolstoy was issued in order to guard the children of the church from being led into moral corruption. It read briefly as follows:

Count Leo Tolstoy, to the grief and horror of the whole Orthodox world, has by speech and writing increasingly striven to separate himself from all Communion with the Orthodox Church, and this not only clandestinely, but openly, to the knowledge of all persons.

All attempts to dissuade him from this conduct have proved of no avail, and consequently the Orthodox Church no longer considers him as one of its members, and cannot regard him as such so long as he does not repent and become reconciled to the Church.

Following this reasoning, the newspaper reported that the Russian Orthodox Church hoped that Tolstoy would in due course acknowledge the truth and return to the Church. The news of his excommunication evoked a response in the Indian press and within two months there appeared a long article on the topic.

The issue of May 30, 1901 brought further attention to Tolstoy's excommunication and his firm stance against the Orthodox Church's interpretation of the Christian faith, emphasizing the power and strength that Tolstoy wielded in the world. It was among the first of a series of articles that followed in the print journalism of those times, where Tolstoy frequently emerged as more than a mere mortal, assuming a larger-than-life image.

On May 30, 1901 the editors of *The Hindu* published an article under the heading, "Count Leo Tolstoy on 'The Root of Evil.'" It began by recalling two well-known statesmen, Bismark and Gladstone, whose significance, despite the prophetic roles they had played, was restricted to their respective countries. By contrast, the editors presented Tolstoy as having influenced the whole of "modern Europe" and indeed the World, stating that

there is one whose Powerful personality, saintly life and ethical influence will leave a lasting mark on modern Europe. The philosophical and religious teachings of Leo Tolstoy are a refreshing feature of the otherwise dull, monotonous and lifeless history of modern European thought.

In the article Tolstoy was called the "progenitor of a purer form of thought, a nobler kind of religion and a superior order of morality," and it was suggested that his

philosophy of life was for a long time misunderstood and misinterpreted. Based on a purer form of Christianity, it delivered a deadly blow to the conventional doctrines of the modern church. It is no wonder that those whose material concerns are so closely intertwined with the spiritual pretensions of the age have denounced the new interpretation as a false philosophy and the Russian count as a false prophet.

The authors referred to his philosophy as professed in the treatise "On Life" because in it "he gives us the very care of his faith." Tolstoy, said the editors, "dispenses with the modern class of teacher's who expounded the meaning of life without understanding it themselves" and concluded that "Tolstoy begins his search with that which we alone know with certainty, and that is the 'I' within us." Starting from this point of departure, Tolstoy finds that man lives for the happiness of others, the pursuit of which constitutes his happiness. On this journey, Tolstoy said that men often mistake the "animal life" for "real life." Thus, according to Tolstoy, once self-renunciation begins, man must eschew his animal existence, enter the regions of real life and feel his immortality.

The editors explained Tolstoy's thoughts as follows:

The clear perception that the individual finds happiness in the happiness of others puts an end to the ceaseless strife of animal existence. Once the truth is recognized, it takes deep root in man and completely controls his animal activities. Once this self-renunciation forms that motive power, he is lifted from an animal existence into the regions of real life. He feels the immortality of the self.

Having touched on his philosophy of life, the editors turned to Tolstoy's article "The Root of Evil," which had appeared in the *North American Review* in English and in which he had questioned the so-

cial inequalities between the working poor and the land-owning rich. Tolstoy did not trust those who wielded power, firmly believing that the powerful and mighty used religion to justify poverty, depravity, hatred, execution, and murder. For Tolstoy, that was false Christianity, a perversion that had caused Christianity to stray away from Jesus's original teachings and that continued to hold sway among powerful monarchs, of whom he found worthy of mention Constantine, Charlemagne and Vladimir.

Commenting on Tolstoy's article, the editors of *The Hindu* noted that their newspaper had objected to the interpretations of Christianity presented by western missionaries to colonial Indians as false, welcoming Tolstoy's heroic effort to instill true Christian faith and principles in the Churches. They were quick to draw a parallel between Tolstoy's stance and their own struggle on the Indian subcontinent with the Christian missionaries. They declared that "true Christianity can have no quarrel with the sublime religion of the Hindus." They asserted that Tolstoy, who was more powerful than worldly-wise mortals, would show true love for mankind and lead Europe to a better future.

Following this editorial, selected Correspondence between Tolstoy and Ramaseshan (editor of the journal) was published in *The Arya*, a monthly journal devoted to Aryan religion, science, philosophy and literature. *The Arya* of August 1901 (no. 5, volume 1) opened with a letter from Tolstoy as its front piece. (This same letter with Ramaseshan's commentary was reprinted in *The Hindu* of Sept. 6 and Sept. 12, 1901) *The Hindu* introduced the correspondence thus: "*The Arya*, the August number of which appears in a very attractive form, has the unique privilege of having elicited from Count Leo Tolstoy an expression of his views on the duty of all civilized Indians," and then reprinted Tolstoy's letter verbatim. In his letter, Tolstoy agreed with Ramaseshan's position that India "cannot accept the solution to the social problem which is proposed by Europe and which is no solution at all."

A society held together by force is "not only in a provisory state, but in a very dangerous state" and such a society could not consent to being held together by force.

Hence Tolstoy went on to propose that the solution was in the abolition of violence, by bringing people together through mutual love and by practicing true religion. Tolstoy clarifies true religion firstly as the "consciousness of the divine essence of the human soul," and secondly as "respect for its manifestation—human life."

Tolstoy recalled that while Hinduism was profound in its metaphysical relation of man to the Spiritual All, to the *Atman*, the "true self" within, it had been "maimed in its moral, i.e., practical application to life, by the existence of the caste system." Jainism, Buddhism, and sects like Kabir Panchis, according to Tolstoy, held to the fundamental principle of the sacredness of life and consequently prohibited taking the life of any living being, especially of man. Tolstoy reminded readers that

all the evils that inform your experience—the famine and, what is still more important, the depravement of your people by factory life—will last as long as your people consent to kill their fellowmen and to be soldiers (*sepoys*). Parasites feed only on unclean bodies.

His earnest advice for all civilized Indians was to remember the real essence of Hinduism, which needed to be developed and expressed by doing the following: "1. To try to destroy all old superstitions which hide from the masses the principles of true religion and, 2. To spread these principles as far and wide as possible."

After reprinting Tolstoy's complete letter, the newspaper also printed the commentary of Ramaseshan, editor of *The Arya*, to Tolstoy's straightforward appeal. In his reply in *The Hindu* of September 6 and 12, 1901, Ramaseshan agreed with Tolstoy's basic position but found it hard to agree

to practice Tolstoy's "almost idealistic enunciation of Love and complete absence of Force." Notwithstanding this hesitation, Ramaseshan reminded his readers of the spirit of the letter and of Tolstoy's challenge to Indians in his "address to Europe to give up false Christianity, false ideas of work and conquest and revert to the true teachings."

These longer articles were followed in *The Hindu* by occasional notes on Tolstoy's views on love and marriage, as well as on English literature. On the subject of marriage, *The Hindu* published Tolstoy's conviction that "to marry in order that one's life may be more full of pleasures will never prove a success" (November 5, 1901). And regarding Tolstoy's view of English literature, *The Hindu* reprinted Mr. Long's sketch of Tolstoy denouncing Shakespeare's poetry for its lack of "proportion and moderation" (July 11, 1901). Tolstoy criticized most English writers for paying too much attention to plot and entertainment while not taking up the "great questions which are the common property of all nations and all ages" (November 5, 1901). Many brief notes continued to appear on various aspects of Tolstoy's life and philosophical ideas, including an editorial published when news of Tolstoy's death arrived.

Indian Press Reaction to Tolstoy's Death

The Hindu editorial of November 21, 1910 was sub-titled "Count Leo Tolstoy" and opened with the remark that "the death of Count Leo Tolstoy, announced by Reuters, deprives us of one of those personalities whose importance is not only national but international," and lamented that while appreciation for Tolstoy was small in his own country, he was hailed in the world at large "as one of the greatest thinkers and novelists of modern times." It was added that "Russian literature would be a barren wasteland without Tolstoy's writings." This was followed by a biographical sketch of Tolstoy and the latter's view of Christianity, emphasizing

that Tolstoy "has re-enunciated the commandment 'that ye love one another,'" and noted that

it is a scathing commentary on the Christianity of the complacent West that the man who, after nineteen centuries of its profession, re-enunciated this cardinal principle of the Christian faith should have been denounced as an impossible visionary and dreamer.

The editors concluded these thoughts with Tolstoy's views in the following sentence, as remembered by English journalist and liberal politician, Sir Henry Norman (1858-1939): "Three things I hate: autocracy, orthodoxy, and militarism."

While such a conclusion laid out Tolstoy's negation of certain prevalent ideas, the editorial also illuminated Tolstoy's firm belief in "the dignity of labor and the equitable distribution of labor," and went on to elaborate Tolstoy's creed of life as comprising "no more multitudinous cities and manufacturers and money, but simply the tiller of the soil, eating the fruit of his toil."

Although the editorial conceded the impracticability of some of his views, especially his uncompromising call for the "simple life," it brought attention to Tolstoy's "eminence as a thinker" and noted that "the lesson of his message is one which the Western world may, with advantage, take seriously to heart."

This informative editorial was followed by a smaller, feature article a day later. On November 22, 1910, the paper carried a small news item titled "The Death of Tolstoy." It stated that the Russian Duma had adjourned as a mark of respect to Tolstoy's memory, and that while the whole nation mourned, the wayside station of Astapovo had become a pilgrimage destination, primarily for peasants. The article reminded readers that Tolstoy died still unreconciled with the Orthodox Church. When he died, it said that his wife and daughter were at his side. His last words were reported: "There are millions of suffering people in the world-why are there so many of you around

me?" Two days later *The Hindu* carried a small announcement, "Count Tolstoy's Funeral." It was brief and read as follows: "Count Tolstoy was buried last Tuesday on the top of a hill at his estate. Crowds of peasants singing chants were present. There were no speeches."

At the same time, another newspaper from Bombay called *The Times of India* reprinted a fairly long article on Tolstoy's death on November 21, 1910, titled "The Great Mujik: The Death of Count Tolstoy. A Russian of the Russians." This article gave Tolstoy's biography and summarized his place in the world thus:

Many are the debts the present generation owes to this man, who, in spite of many failings and shortcomings, towered head and shoulders above all contemporary writers. For nothing does he deserve more gratitude than for the mental and moral stimulus he gave to tens of thousands of his own readers and those of other nations by the frank simplicity with which he treated the most important questions. As no other man has ever done he stirred the conscience of the Russian people.

It concluded with the words: "The Czar might rule in the prisons, but Tolstoy held sway over the people's hearts. Throughout the world today there will go forth the cry that a Prince indeed has fallen in Israel."

Tolstoy and Gandhi in the Indian Press

Following this eulogy in the newspapers, there were a few short articles in the years 1914, 1916, 1918, and 1921 in *The Hindu* which quoted Tolstoy's diary entries and letters. One such letter printed on January 8, 1914, was about why men should never marry and stated that a wife is only a "domestic doll" in spite of her husband's trials to improve her intellect. At the same time, Tolstoy reminded

himself that he preferred (like Turgenev) women with a heart but no brain, because he claimed that women with intellectual interests in external affairs lose their feminine charm.

There were furthermore diary entries from the years 1895-1910 that Tolstoy had requested to print only after his death. *The Hindu* reprinted various of these from the volumes that Chertkov, his trusted friend, had originally published.

On March 6, 1916, Tolstoy's notes on women, life, art and marriage were reprinted in *The Hindu* from the *Daily Chronicle*, a British newspaper published from 1872-1930. It stated in its introduction that Tolstoy revealed himself more frankly and freely here than he ever did in publications that appeared during his life. It said of Tolstoy that he

was perhaps the simplest, most outspoken and most courageous moralist who ever wrote, yet he had many thoughts about life that his instinctive human-kindliness and fear of wounding others prevented him from publishing.

The brief notes expressed Tolstoy's contempt toward women and especially those women who sought to be equal to men. His hostility toward marriage as a social institution was expressed openly in another piece, where he said that marriage resulted in the "loss of freedom, servility, satiety, spiritual aversion and all the other moral vices of the spouse which have to be tolerated" because all that is positive in marriage was taken for granted when compared against the vices which challenged the relationship.

The editors conclude that, while his thoughts on women and marriage were extremely short-sighted and chauvinistic, his thoughts on ordinary life were penetrating and aphoristic.

These brief thoughts were followed by a translation of Tolstoy's letter to Gandhi, reprinted from the *Indian Opinion* of November 10, 1910. The *Indian Opinion* was a newspaper that was established by M. K. Gandhi and published from 1903-1914 to

fight racial discrimination and win civil rights for the Indian immigrant community in South Africa.

On March 6, 1919 *The Hindu* published Tolstoy's letter to Gandhi from September 7, 1910, which opened with the following words: "I received your journal, *Indian Opinion*, and was glad to see what it said of those who renounced all resistance by force, and I immediately felt the desire to let you know what thoughts its perusal aroused in me." Tolstoy went on to elaborate the importance of "passive resistance" which, according to him, is "nothing less than the teaching of love uncorrupted by false interpretations." He emphatically eschewed violence and saw no reason to maintain armies, because when such things are allowed to exist, love is lost.

Another small piece on January 21, 1921, in *The Hindu* reminded readers of an excerpt from Tolstoy's "A Letter to a Hindu" of December 14, 1908, written as a reply to Tarak Nath Das, who had advocated violence in the interests of seeking India's independence. Tolstoy explained nonviolent resistance as the injunction not to

fight against evil, but on the other hand, take no part in it. Refuse all cooperation in the Government administration, in the Law Courts, in the collection of taxes, and above all in the army, and no one in the world will be able to subjugate you.

Tolstoy's "A Letter to a Hindoo" was published in *The Hindu* for the first time in 1921 so that an Indian readership could become aware of the close relationship between Tolstoy and his pupil Gandhi: Gandhi came across this letter in London and was moved enough to write his first letter to Tolstoy on October 1, 1909.

Gandhi first made reference to Tolstoy in 1889 when he went to Paris and saw the Eiffel Tower and agreed with Tolstoy's reaction to the monument as "man's folly." From then on (1893-Gandhi studied some of Tolstoy's works and often mentioned Tolstoy as his mentor. Gandhi's pro-

found regard for Tolstoy induced him to develop the "Tolstoy Farm" in South Africa where he and his supporters practiced spiritual purification and penance and prepared themselves for *satyagraha* (non-violent resistance). Thus the kinship between teacher and pupil only strengthened just before Tolstoy's death when six letters were exchanged between the two great men and the baton of "non-violence" was handed over by Tolstoy to Gandhi and through Gandhi to the world, tested and proved as a successful method for combating aggression.

The Times of India on September 11, 1928, reported on the celebration of the centenary of Tolstoy's birth in which Gandhi had participated. In his speech to the youth league, Gandhi said that Tolstoy had been one of the three most influential people in his life and named Tolstoy's book *The Kingdom of God is Within You* as the one that had most impressed him. He went on to say that "the life of Tolstoy taught lessons of truth and nonviolence. There was none other in the West at present, so far as he knew, who taught and practiced these lessons as Tolstoy had done."

Tolstoy Remembered, 1930 to 2010

Alongside such adulation, scathing criticism of his teachings appeared in the Indian press. On February 6, 1929, in *The Hindu*, an article entitled "The Character of Tolstoy: Some Criticism Examined" presented the view of Tolstoy as a sadist by the English author, journalist, literary critic and travel writer, Rebecca West (1892-1983). Ms. West based her views on the diaries of Tolstoy's wife and concluded that "the master instinct that governed him was an instinct of cruelty and lust for destruction, and its most powerful manifestation was in the region of sex, for he hated the human race." In Tolstoy's defense, the author said that West's arguments "cannot be controverted, but may be qualified." While conceding a number of shortcomings, the writer suggested that one not overlook

the “moral struggles that went on in his own breast and the tortures which he suffered.”

On August 9, 1931 *The Hindu* published a personal interview with Paul Birukov (1860-1931). The well-known Indian parliamentarian, Lanka Sundaram (1905-1967), had a chance meeting with Birukov in Onex, a village not far from Geneva, whom he introduced as “one of the most noted pacifists of the world, the lifelong friend and sole surviving testator of Count Leo Tolstoy.” As he approached the country cottage the author said that it reminded him of Sabarmati, Gandhi’s spiritual hermitage in his native Gujarat. After making the acquaintance of the Birukovs, the author described their living room as “a replica of Mahatma Gandhi’s ashram in every detail.” There were four photographs on the walls, two of Canadian Dukhobor camps, the third of Gandhi and the fourth of Tolstoy. The author said of Birukov that “in his old age M. Birukov has the consolation of spiritual companionship with the foremost exponents of soul-force and the practical manifestation of the same through the organization of the Dukhobors,” one of the most pacifistic communities in the world. In Birukov’s mind, Gandhi was not a politician, but a religious teacher and a philosopher. When the author asked for a message for Indians, Birukov said with profound emotion:

India is a great land and Gandhi is a great man. All the people of the universe must prostrate themselves before India and her people because their civilization and spiritual development are more ancient and real than those of others. If Europe is to stay in its present condition, it is necessary for Indian civilization to come to Europe and for the latter to feel her soul.

As Birukov was not well enough to talk for a long period of time, the interview ended with the hope of continuing at a later date.

On November 15, 1935 *The Times of India* announced the production of a film in Hindi based

on Tolstoy’s *Resurrection*, starring the famous actress, Lalitha Pawar (1916-1998), who was to play Katya Morozova. The film’s title was to be *Duniya Kya Hai* (What is Life?). The newspaper noted that “this is the first time that Tolstoy’s *Resurrection* will appear on the Indian screen” and added that the director G. P. Pawar had done the adaptation of the novel.

A detailed article was published in *The Times of India* on July 3, 1949, titled “Count Leo Tolstoy and Mahatma Gandhi” by the Jewish-American journalist, Louis Fischer (1896-1970), whose *The Life of Mahatma Gandhi* later became the basis for David Attenborough’s film, *Gandhi*. The introduction of Fischer’s article highlighted how both Tolstoy and Gandhi had referred to the Eiffel Tower as “man’s folly.” Fischer noted the fascinating correspondence between Tolstoy and his Indian readers, spanning a decade, beginning in October 1901. Gandhi’s own correspondence with Tolstoy began in 1909 and ended September 7, 1910, when Tolstoy penned his last letter to Gandhi.

On June 4, 1951 the *Times of India* reported that the Indian ambassador to the Soviet Union, S. Radhakrishnan, presented to the Tolstoy Museum in Moscow *Tolstoy and Gandhi*, a book by cultural anthropologist Kalidas Nag, and two oil paintings, one of which was of Gandhi. Radhakrishnan, a well-respected academic, philosopher, and statesman, said that these two leaders “shared fundamental values, faith in spiritual ideals, human brotherhood, race equality, resistance to tyranny and hatred of war.”

On April 9, 1957, *The Times of India* reported the discovery of a letter to Tolstoy, dated November 10, 1909, inside a book in the Yasnaya Polyana museum. In that letter, the second Gandhi wrote to Tolstoy and which was subsequently published by A. I. Shifman in *Soviet Eastern Studies*, Gandhi urged Tolstoy to use your influence in any manner you think fit to popularize the passive resistance movement” throughout the world for the good of the oppressed and down-trodden.

A year later on May 29, 1958, a competition on the "Significance of the Life and Work of Tolstoy" for graduate and post-graduate students from universities all over India was announced by the committee appointed to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of Tolstoy's death on November 8, 1960. There were three cash prizes announced for the competition. *The Times of India* of August 2, 1958, reported that the committee would be headed by Mr. Jayaprakash Narayanan (1902-1979), an Indian independence activist and a political leader. On November 20, 1960, India Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru (1889-1964) published his "Tribute to Tolstoy" in *The Times of India*. In it he wrote that

of all western writers, probably the name and works of Leo Tolstoy are among the best known in India. This has been so not only because of the merit of his work, but also because there was a spiritual kinship between him and our leader Mahatma Gandhi, who admired him greatly and was influenced by him during the formative period of his life.

On the same date *The Illustrated Weekly of India* published "The Genius of Tolstoy," an article by the scholar Prema Nandakumar. After quoting Gorky's lament of Tolstoy's death, the author gave a brief overview of Tolstoy's life and works. She concluded that "there have been few novelists more severely, more challengingly objective than Tolstoy." In another article published in *The Times of India* on the same day, T. Novikov drew a comparison between the Indian Nobel Prize winner Rabindranath Tagore and Tolstoy in praise of their passion for finding new ways of educating children.

On June 25, 1961 a "Letter to the Editor" appeared in *The Times of India*. The author, P. Cheerath, in comparing the views on history held by Toynbee and Tolstoy, states that Tolstoy had a more realistic approach to history, basing his opin-

ion on the novel *War and Peace*. He added that Tolstoy's humanism was "so broad and all-embracing and his ability to see the whole picture with detachment so great that he could see that even the humblest individual lives exerted an influence on the general course of events."

Articles on Tolstoy continued to appear in these newspapers in the 1970s and 80s to commemorate anniversaries or visits by Indian dignitaries to Yasnaya Polyana. The release of the film *War and Peace* elicited a few articles on its production. Well-known Indians continued to write on Tolstoy's work, recalling the Tolstoy-Gandhi connection and its legacy. The centenary of Tolstoy's death (2010) was remembered with short, nostalgic articles on the greatness of Tolstoy's writings. There was also a steady stream of review articles on translations of Tolstoy's works into various Indian languages in the second half of the twentieth century.

Thus, in reviewing two English-language newspapers from the period 1901-2010, it becomes clear that Tolstoy held a special place in the hearts of the Indian reading public for many reasons. He had a profound effect on Mahatma Gandhi's life and mission, which has sustained for many an interest in Tolstoy as Gandhi's "guru." Tolstoy's firm stance against the British colonialists, and his dislike of the way Christianity was preached and practiced, attracted the Indian intelligentsia who looked up to him for further direction and support in their struggle for freedom. Indian philosophers and religious thinkers were eager to supply Tolstoy with the best literature on Hinduism.

While such was the level of interest during Tolstoy's lifetime, his life and legacy were celebrated after his death with continuous reference in articles, from discussions of realistic fiction to issues that dealt with the place of women and the need to follow a vegetarian diet. Many of these articles exhibit love and admiration for Tolstoy to the point of celebrating his "Indianness" by often calling him a *Rishi*, or Russian Sage. While I have provided only a sample of what was expressed in two

major English-language newspapers, it gives us an idea as to the unique place Tolstoy held and has continued to hold in the minds of the Indian reading public for more than one hundred years.

Note: The editor-in-chief of *The Hindu*, Ram Narasimhan, and the archivist, Rajendrababu, took special interest in securing the materials.