

Gandhiji's Views and Impact on English in India

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Abstract

Gandhian philosophy and ideals have great impact on many issues and people throughout the ages. He himself was influenced by many world-famous thinkers/writers and religious books. Apart from his socio-political contribution, his views and ideas regarding the place and scope of English in India are worthy to study. The endeavour of this paper is to point out Gandhi's engagement as well as views and impact with/on the English language and on writings in English in India. It will, indeed, be interesting to explore his position and notion towards English as he was stoutly in favour of native culture and heritage. The paper also attempts to show the reasons behind Gandhi's change of attitude towards the English language. From initial hostility he ultimately changed his position and advocated the learning and use of English so that it can be used as a weapon against the British. Though he was not a creative writer in English, yet he experimented with this language to venture his voice. The impact of Gandhian consciousness and thought can also be felt in many writers of English in India such as R. K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao et al.

Key-words: philosophy, culture, heritage, English, weapon, Gandhian consciousness.

The debate regarding the place and scope of English in India is as old as the date of inception of the British rule in the country. The role of English in India, the need of learning English for the Indians, the influence of the English culture on native people are some of the issues that created the debate. In an interview, Henry Kissinger, the Nobel Peace Prize winner of 1973, said, "India, precisely because it speaks English, is a democracy and all of us know Indians". The statement that India is a democracy because it speaks English is, undoubtedly an exaggeration, but, certainly, the world outside knows India because Indians use English. During the freedom struggle, the great leaders effectively presented the rich Indian culture and heritage, as well as the dreams and aspirations of the people to the outside world in English. Swami Vivekananda presented the India and its spiritualism to the world in English. Sri Aurobindo, Radhakrishnan, Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Subhas Chandra Bose, Ambedkar, Sarojini Naidu, Tagore, Jinnah and a host of others projected India's aspirations and quest for freedom in English. Writers like R. K. Narayan, Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand, Ahmed Ali and many others also expressed their literary creativity in English.

To speak of Mahatma Gandhi is to speak of a multifaceted genius whose influence can be felt almost on every aspect of human consciousness. There is hardly any discipline that he has left un-commented. He is an immense source of writing himself and has influenced various disciplines and many writers and thinkers from different fields like history, politics sociology, philosophy, education, literature and so on. Gandhi once wished that his writings should be cremated with his body. He had no desire to be counted among writers – “What I have done will endure, not what I have said or written.” But a few days before his assassination in January 1948, he wrote “English and Indian scholars of English believe there is something special in my English.” Of course, there is something special in his English, as the man was also a special genius. Apart from his socio-political contributions, Gandhi, undoubtedly, helped to define the place of English in India. By devising English to serve the Indian’s purpose, Gandhi gave Indians a formidable weapon with which to challenge the British.

Before going further into the discussion of Gandhi’s impact on thinkers, writers and their writing – especially his influence and views on English in India, it will indeed be pertinent here to consider some writers and books who/which helped to shape his own philosophy and ideals of life and living. His respect for the sacredness of all life, a deep appreciation of nature, belief in the simplicity in every aspect in life, his commitment to uphold the principle of equality for all, a feeling that power should be dispersed throughout society to empower the individual, and above all his belief in the non-violence – all these were instilled in Gandhi and sustained by such writers like John Ruskin, Leo Tolstoy, Edward Carpenter and Henry David Thoreau. His lifetime pursuit of truth also led him to a wealth of writers – Rabindranath Tagore, Max Mueller, Thomas Carlyle, Thomas Henry Huxley, Francis Bacon, Socrates, Plato – who he increasingly came to admire. He also thoroughly read and appreciated such religious works as the *Bible*, the *Quran*, and the Hindu classics the *Upanishads* and the *Bhagavadgita*. All of these served to shape and nourish Gandhi’s philosophical and spiritual outlook.

John Ruskin’s seminal work *Unto This Last*, a copy of which was given to Gandhi as a gift while he was practising law as a young man in South Africa, had left a deep and immediate impression on him and led to a great reassessment of his life. Ruskin’s questioning of economic inequality in society and his solution of a fairer distribution of wealth, the assertion that ‘there is no wealth but life’, his critique of industrialization and favour of aesthetic need and spiritual virtues played a vital role in the formation of Gandhi’s ideals. Gandhi was also profoundly influenced by Tolstoy’s precepts for living with simplicity, manual work and becoming a vegetarian. Tolstoy’s writings, especially the essay *The Kingdom of God is Within You* taught Gandhi that “he practised what he preached”. Gandhi was so inspired by the teachings of Tolstoy that he started a community settlement, ‘Tolstoy Farm’ where he lived with his family and other community residents. Thoreau’s essay on *Civil Disobedience* also deeply influenced Gandhi’s philosophy.

In today’s postmodern world, which is dominated by technological innovation, commercial market and globalization, their philosophy of life, living and belief system appear to be

irrelevant. But don't we feel that those precepts and beliefs are more relevant and necessary in the present complexity and diversity of the world?

The writings of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869 – 1948) are a treasure house of stimulating thought on political, social, economic, cultural and spiritual issues. Apart from his life long struggle for social reform, Gandhi's views on the British system of education in India is no less important. He found it to be defective as it was "based on a foreign culture to the almost entire exclusion of indigenous culture"; it neglected "the culture of the heart and the hand", and confined itself "simply to the head". Instead of the use of a foreign medium, Gandhi advocated free, compulsory and self-supporting education through the mother tongue. He declared: "I therefore regard it as a sin against the mother-land to inflict upon her children a tongue other than their mother's for their development." However, he was not against English; he favoured it for international communication. That was why he said, "I do not want my house to be walled in all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the cultures of all lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any." (Narayan, 1962: 18)

It would be, indeed, very interesting to note how a man who was in favour of the indigenous culture and language, ironically took the alien language to ultimately use it as a tool of freedom against his foes. Gandhi, along with some other people of the time played a vital role in making English fluent and intimate. It may be said that Gandhi used the English language, to a certain extent, to unmake the empire made by the British.

Gandhi, along with a few others, helped to define the place of English in India. At the beginning Gandhi was more critical and suspicious of the social and cultural functions of English in India. Initially he thought English as an alien language and felt it necessary to cast off the language along with the British. But later Gandhi realized the potentiality and true functions of English. Gandhi himself acknowledged the importance of English in one of his last articles in *Harijan* (25 January, 1948): "I cannot discontinue the English *Harijan*... My contact with the West is also widening. I was never opposed to the British or to any Westerner nor am I today... So, English will never be excluded from my small store of knowledge. I do not want to forget that language nor give it up. [However], it cannot become our national language or medium of instruction... The rule of the English will go because it was corrupt, but the prevalence of English will never go". This is Gandhi, the genius who was firm in his belief and political ideology but ready to accept the role of English as a powerful language.

We know that Gandhi was not a professional writer. He penned no fiction or works of imagination. And the proses written by him are generally read to be familiar with his life and acts. Though Gandhi was often critical and doubtful about the role and function of English in India, he kept a political commitment to English as a language of public communication. English was the language of the enemy. But Gandhi realized the potentiality of English as a vital link not just to the vast world but also among Indians themselves. And English served, to some extent, to make the Indians aware of their own identity by uniting them.

However, Gandhi's introduction with English in his early childhood was not at all steady and comfortable. Gujrati was the first language of Gandhi. He only began to learn English in the last three years of high school, in Rajkot. "English became the medium of instruction in most subjects from the fourth standard. I found myself completely at sea," Gandhi wrote in his autobiography. But there was a demanding prescribed reading which included parts of Addison's *Spectator*, Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. And while learning the English language, Gandhi was somewhat removed from his own family, though new and different realms of experience opened before him.

After his undistinguished school career, Gandhi sailed for London in 1888. His farewell speech proved disastrous: "I had written out a few words of thanks. But I could scarcely stammer them out. I remember my head reeled and my whole frame shook as I stood up to read them." And this feeling haunted him constantly during his years in London. The ship-journey to London was equally traumatic: "I was quite unaccustomed to talking in English, and except for Sjt Majumdar, all the other passengers in the second saloon were English. I could not speak to them. For I could rarely follow their remarks when they came up to speak to me, and even when I understood, I could not reply. I had to frame every sentence in my mind before I could bring it out."

In London, initially Gandhi made an attempt to become an 'English gentleman'. In order to overcome his deficiencies in English, Gandhi began to read the daily newspapers. The functional and informational style of the press impressed him greatly. During his two decades in Africa, close friendships with English speaking Europeans gave him a new ease with the language. In South Africa Gandhi painfully observed that language could also inflict humiliations: the whites invariably referred to Indians as "collie", "Mr. Samy", "Ramysamy" and "collie clerk". M.K.Naik has rightly said, "His encounter with the severe social discrimination practised by the whites against the Indians there – a traumatic experience of which he himself had the bitter taste more than once – turned the shy diffident briefless barrister into a brave fighter against injustice and a confident leader of men."

Gandhi's most rhetorically powerful work *Hind Swaraj* appeared in his first journal *The Indian Opinion* (published in Gujrati and English; 1903-14) in 1909. Originally published in Gujrati, he translated it into English himself and published it as *Indian Home Rule* in 1910. The book was written in the form of a dialogue between the Reader and the Writer on the problem of Indian Independence. In 1921, Gandhi published the new English edition under a modified new title: *Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule*. The mixture of Gujrati and English suggests a desire to impress Gandhi's own terminology on the English language, as we find Gandhi strategically using neologism in later years. Such words as 'satyagraha', 'khadi', 'swadeshi' and 'ahimsa' were his own inventions and he purposefully incorporated them into his English writing to suggest the irreducibility of his vocabulary into English. *Hind Swaraj* is replete with free examples, similes, metaphors and parables, which show Gandhi's easy commanding of English. Gandhi's own comment on the book that "in my opinion it is a book which can be put into the hands of a child" is significant.

Gandhi also ran some well-known journals like *The Indian Opinion*, *Young India* and *Navajiban*. Most of his writings in these journals were originally written in Gujrati and translated by others into English. His autobiography, *The Story of My Experiments with Truth* was translated by Mahadev Desai. *Satyagraha in South Africa*, *Discourses on the Gita* and *From Yeravada Mandir* were translated by V. G. Desai. *Key to Health* was translated by Sushila Nayar. Gandhi's historic speeches in English, like the Benaras Hindu University speech of 1916, the speech at the trial of 1922, various articles in the journals and his many letters in English are enough proofs of his devising of the language and his unmaking as well as remaking of English to serve his own purpose.

There is no denying the fact that Gandhi gave his countrymen a strong voice to combat the British. He gave the people of the land the possibility of an equal conversation with their conquerors. And the English language helped the people of the time to assemble together forgetting their diverse regions, religions, linguistic and ethnic groups. Indians learnt the language and 'the profit on't' was that they cursed the British in their own tongue, as Caliban did in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. It can also be said that the Indians also projected their identity in English. And Gandhi enormously helped the people of India to be conscious of their own identity. The English language in India at that time helped this process in a big way.

Many Indian writers and thinkers were heavily influenced by the Gandhian thought and consciousness. Through his ideals Indian writers got new ideas and thought process with which to begin a journey of individual as well as national identity formation. Authors like R. K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and many others were deeply influenced by the Gandhian thought, philosophy and consciousness. R. K. Narayan's novel *Waiting for Mahatma* (1955) deals with Gandhian freedom struggle and there are episodes like Gandhiji's visit to Malgudi and the chaos after Gandhi's arrest. Jagan, the sweet-vendor in *The Vendors of Sweets* (1967), is a Gandhian. Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* (1935), *Coolie* (1936) etc. are based on Gandhian thought. Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* (1938) is perhaps the finest evocation of the Gandhian age in Indian English fiction. Indian writing in English got nourishment from indigenous roots, culture and heritage. All this proves that Gandhian impact on English in India is far reaching, deep-rooted and subtle.

Gandhi was not necessarily a creative writer, he was a 'thinker's thinker'. Reading Gandhi involves more than reading his words; it means reading the life, itself work of literary artifice. The dramatization of his own life, its transformation into a permanent performance, was Gandhi's greatest literary achievement. Gandhi's thought and writings were instrumental to the struggle for freedom and subsequent independence of India. Writing an autobiography was to Gandhi an unnatural practice, one "peculiar to the West". "But", he continued, "it is not my purpose to attempt real autobiography. I want simply to tell the story of my numerous experiments".

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