

Mahatma Gandhi and Leo Tolstoy

Correspondence

Date: 1909, October 01

Day: Friday

Today's Itinerary: **London.**

Today's Details:

LETTER TO LEO TOLSTOY

I take the liberty of inviting your attention to what has been going on in the Transvaal (South Africa) for nearly three years.

There is in that Colony a British Indian population of nearly 13,000. These Indians have, for several years, laboured under various legal disabilities. The prejudice against colour and in some respects against Asiatics is intense in that Colony. It is largely due, so far as Asiatics are concerned, to trade jealousy. The climax was reached three years ago, with a law which I and many others considered to be degrading and calculated to unman those to whom it was applicable. I felt that submission to a law of this nature was inconsistent with the spirit of true religion. I and some of my friends were and still are firm believers in the doctrine of non-resistance to evil. I had the privilege of studying your writings also, which left a deep impression on my mind. British Indians, before whom the position was fully explained, accepted the advice that we should not submit to the legislation, but that we should suffer imprisonment, or whatever other penalties the law may impose for its breach. The result has been that nearly one-half of the Indian population, that was unable to stand the heat of the struggle, to suffer the hardships of imprisonment, have withdrawn from the Transvaal rather than submit to [the] law which they have considered degrading. Of the other half, nearly 2,500 have for conscience's sake allowed themselves to be imprisoned, some as many as five times. The imprisonments have varied from four days to six months, in the majority of cases with hard labour. Many have been financially ruined. At present there are over a hundred passive resisters in the Transvaal gaols. Some of these have been very poor men, earning their livelihood from day to day. The result has been that their wives and children have had to be

supported out of public contributions, also largely raised from passive resisters. This has put a severe strain upon British Indians, but, in my opinion, they have risen to the occasion. The struggle still continues and one does not know when the end will come. This, however, some of us at least have seen most clearly, that passive resistance will and can succeed where brute force must fail. We also notice that, in so far as the struggle has been prolonged, it has been due largely to our weakness and, hence, to a belief having been engendered in the mind of the Government that we would not be able to stand continued suffering.

Together with a friend, I have come here to see the Imperial authorities and to place before them the position, with a view to seeking redress. Passive resisters have recognised that they should have nothing to do with pleading with the Government, but the deputation has come at the instance of the weaker members of the community, and it therefore represents their weakness rather than their strength.

But, in the course of my observation here, I have felt that if a general competition for an essay on the Ethics and Efficacy of Passive Resistance were invited, it would popularise the movement and make people think. A friend has raised the question of morality in connexion with the proposed competition. He thinks that such an invitation would be inconsistent with the true spirit of passive resistance and that it would amount to buying opinion. May I ask you to favour me with your opinion on the subject of morality? And if you consider that there is nothing wrong in inviting contributions, I would ask you also to give me the names of those whom I should specially approach to write upon the subject.

There is one thing more with reference to which I would trespass upon your time. A copy of your letter addressed to a Hindu on the present unrest in India has been placed in my hands by a friend. On the face of it, it appears to represent your views. It is the intention of my friend, at his own expense, to have 20,000 copies printed and distributed and to have it translated also. We have, however, not been able to secure the original, and we do not feel justified in printing it, unless we are sure of the accuracy of the copy and of the fact that it is your letter. I venture to enclose herewith a copy of the copy, and should esteem it a favour if you kindly let me know whether it is your letter, whether it is an accurate copy and whether you approve of its publication in

the above manner. If you will add anything further to the letter, please do so. I would also venture to make a suggestion. In the concluding paragraph you seem to dissuade the reader from a belief in reincarnation. I do not know whether (if it is not impertinent on my part to mention this) you have specially studied the question. Re-incarnation or transmigration is a cherished belief with millions in India, indeed, in China also. With many, one might almost say, it is a matter of experience, no longer a matter of academic acceptance. It explains reasonably the many mysteries of life. With some of the passive resisters who have gone through the gaols of the Transvaal, it has been their solace. My object in writing this is not to convince you of the truth of the doctrine, but to ask you if you will please remove the word "re-incarnation" from the other things you have dissuaded your reader from. In the letter in question, you have quoted largely from Krishna and given reference to passages. I should thank you to give me the title of the book from which the quotations have been made.

I have wearied you with this letter. I am aware that those who honour you and endeavour to follow you have no right to trespass upon your time, but it is rather their duty to refrain from giving you trouble, so far as possible. I have, however, who am an utter stranger to you, taken the liberty of addressing this communication in the interests of truth, and in order to have your advice on problems the solution of which you have made your life-work.

With respects,

I remain, etc.,

M. K. GANDHI

Source: *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, The (Delhi, Publication Division, Government of India, 1965) Vol. 9, Item. 289, pp. 444-46*

Date: 1909, October 07

Day: Thursday

Today's Details:

YASNAYA POLYANA,

TOLSTOY'S LETTER TO GANDHIJI

M. K. GANDHI

TRANSVAAL

I have just received your most interesting letter, which has given me great pleasure. God help our dear brothers and co-workers in the Transvaal.

That same struggle of the tender against the harsh, of meekness and love against pride and violence, is every year making itself more and more felt here among us also, especially in one of the very sharpest of the conflicts of the religious law with the worldly laws—in refusals of military service. Such refusals are becoming ever more and more frequent.

The letter to a Hindoo was written by me, and the translation is a very good one. The title of the book about Krishna shall be sent you from Moscow. As to the word 'reincarnation', I should not myself like to omit it, for, in my opinion, belief in reincarnation can never be as firm as belief in the soul's immortality and in God's justice and love. You may, however, do as you like about omitting it. If I can assist your publication, I shall be very glad. The translation into and circulation of my letter in the Hindoo language can only be a pleasure to me.

A competition, i.e., an offer of a monetary inducement in connection with a religious matter would, I think, be out of place.

I greet you fraternally, and am glad to have intercourse with you.

LEO TOLSTOY

Source: Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, The (Delhi, Publication Division, Government of India, 1965) Vol. 9, Item. APPENDIX XXVII, p. 593

Date: 1909, November 10

Day: Wednesday

Today's Itinerary: **London.**

Today's Details:

LETTER TO LEO TOLSTOY

I beg to tender my thanks for your registered letter in connection with the letter addressed to a Hindu, and with the matters that I dealt with in my letter to you.

Having heard about your failing health I refrained, in order to save you the trouble, from sending an acknowledgment, knowing that a written expression of my thanks was a superfluous formality; but Mr. Aylmer Maude, whom I have now been able to meet reassured me that you were keeping very good health indeed and that unfailingly and regularly you attended to your correspondence every morning. It was a very gladsome news to me, and it encourages me to write to you further about matters which are, I know, of the greatest importance according to your teaching.

I beg to send you herewith a copy of a book⁵ written by a friend— an Englishman, who is at present in South Africa, in connection with my life, in so far as it has a bearing on the struggle with which I am so connected, and to which my life is dedicated. As I am very anxious to engage your active interest and sympathy, I thought that it would not be considered by you as out of the way for me to send you the book.

In my opinion, this struggle of the Indians in the Transvaal is the greatest of modern times, inasmuch as it has been idealised both as to the goal as also the methods adopted to reach the goal. I am not aware of a struggle in which the participators are not to derive any personal advantage at the end of it, and in which 50 per cent. of the persons affected have undergone great suffering and trial for the sake of a principle. It has not been possible for me to advertise the struggle as much as I should like. You command, possibly, the widest public today. If you are satisfied as to the facts you will find set forth in Mr. Doke's book, and if you consider that the conclusions I have arrived at are justified by the facts, may I ask you to use your influence in any manner you think fit to popularise the movement? If it succeeds, it will be not only a triumph of

religion, love and truth over irreligion, hatred and falsehood, but it is highly likely to serve as an example to the millions in India and to people in other parts of the world, who may be down-trodden and will certainly go a great way towards breaking up the party of violence, at least in India. If we hold out to the end, as I think we would, I entertain not the slightest doubt as to its ultimate success; and your encouragement in the way suggested by me can only strengthen us in our resolve.

The negotiations that are going on for a settlement of the question have practically fallen through, and together with my colleague I return to South Africa this week, and invite imprisonment. I may add that my son has happily joined me in the struggle and is now undergoing imprisonment with hard labour for six months. This is his fourth imprisonment in the course of the struggle.

If you would be so good as to reply to this letter, may I ask you to address your reply to me at Johannesburg, S.A., Box 6522.

Hoping that this will find you in good health.

I remain, etc.,
M. K. GANDHI

Source: *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, The (Delhi, Publication Division, Government of India, 1965) Vol. 9, Item. 345, pp. 528-29*

Date: 1910, April 04

Day: Monday

Today's Itinerary: **Johannesburg**

Today's Details:

LETTER TO LEO TOLSTOY

DEAR SIR,

You will recollect my having carried on correspondence with you whilst I was temporarily in London. As a humble follower of yours, I send you herewith a booklet which I have written. It is my own translation of a Gujarati writing. Curiously enough, the original writing has been confiscated by the Government of India. I, therefore, hastened the above publication of the translation. I am most anxious not to worry you, but, if your health permits it and if you can find the time to go through the booklet, needless to say I shall value very highly your criticism of the writing. I am sending also a few copies of your *Letter to a Hindoo*, which you authorised me to publish. It has been translated in one of the Indian languages also.

I am,
Your obedient servant,
M. K. GANDHI

COUNT LEO TOLSTOY
YASNAYA POLYANA
RUSSIA

Source: *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, The (Delhi, Publication Division, Government of India, 1965) Vol. 10, Item. 139, p. 210*

Date: 1910, May 08

Day: Sunday

Today's Details:

YASNAYA POLYANA

TOLSTOY'S LETTER TO GANDHIJI

DEAR FRIEND,

I just received your letter and your book Indian Home Rule.

I read your book with great interest because I think that the question you treat in it-the passive resistance-is a question of the greatest importance not only for India but for the whole humanity.

I could not find your former letters, but came across your biography by J. Doss (In fact, by Rev. J. J. Doke) which too interested me much deeply and gave me the possibility to know and understand you better.

I am at present not quite well and therefore abstain from writing to you all what I have to say about your book and all your work which I appreciate very much, but I will do it as soon as I will feel better.

Your friend and brother.

Source: *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, The (Delhi, Publication Division, Government of India, 1965) Vol. 10, Item. APPENDIX III, pp. 505*

Date: 1910, August 15

Day: Monday

Today's Itinerary: **Johannesburg.**

Today's Details:

LETTER TO LEO TOLSTOY

I am much obliged to you for your encouraging and cordial letter of the 8th May last. I very much value your general approval of my booklet, *Indian Home Rule*. And, if you have the time, I shall look forward to your detailed criticism of the work which you have been so good as to promise in your letter.

Mr. Kallenbach has written to you about Tolstoy Farm. Mr. Kallenbach and I have been friends for many years. I may state that he has gone through most of the experiences that you have so graphically described in your work, *My Confessions*. No writings have so deeply touched Mr. Kallenbach as yours; and, as a spur to further effort in living up to the ideals held before the world by you, he has taken the liberty, after consultation with me, of naming his farm after you.

Of his generous action in giving the use of the farm for passive resisters, the number of *Indian Opinion* I am sending herewith will give you full information.

I should not have burdened you with these details but for the fact of your taking a personal interest in the passive resistance struggle that is going on in the Transvaal.

I remain,
Your faithful servant,
M. K. GANDHI

COUNT LEO TOLSTOY
YASNAYA POLYANA

Source: *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, The (Delhi, Publication Division, Government of India, 1965) Vol. 10, Item. 252, pp. 306-307*

Date: 1910, September 07

Day: Wednesday

Today's Details:

TOLSTOY'S LETTER TO GANDHIJI

"KOTCHETY",

RUSSIA,

I have received your journal *Indian Opinion* and I am happy to know all that is written on non-resistance. I wish to communicate to you the thoughts which are aroused in me by the reading of those articles.

The more I live—and specially now that I am approaching death—the more I feel inclined to express to others the feelings which so strongly move my being, and which, according to my opinion, are of great importance. That is, what one calls nonresistance, is in reality nothing else but the discipline of love undeformed by false interpretation. Love is the aspiration for communion and solidarity with other souls, and that aspiration always liberates the source of noble activities. That love is the supreme and unique law of human life, which everyone feels in the depth of one's soul. We find it manifested most clearly in the soul of the infants. Man feels it so long as he is not blinded by the false doctrines of the world.

That law of love has been promulgated by all the philosophies—Indian, Chinese, Hebrew, Greek and Roman. I think that it had been most clearly expressed by Christ, who said that in that law is contained both the law and the Prophets. But he has done more; anticipating the deformation to which that law is exposed, he indicated directly the danger of such deformation which is natural to people who live only for worldly interests. The danger consists precisely in permitting one's self to defend those interests by violence; that is to say, as he has expressed, returning blow by blows, and taking back by force things that have been taken from us, and so forth. Christ knew also, just as all reasonable human beings must know, that the employment of violence is incompatible with love, which is the fundamental law of life. He knew that, once violence is admitted, doesn't matter in even a single case, the law of love is thereby rendered futile. That is to say that the law of love ceases to exist.

The whole Christian civilisation, so brilliant in the exterior, has grown up on this misunderstanding and this flagrant and strange contradiction, sometimes conscious but mostly unconscious.

In reality, as soon as resistance is admitted by the side of love, love no longer exists and cannot exist as the law of existence; and if the law of love cannot exist, therein remains no other law except that of violence, that is, the right of the mighty. It was thus that the Christian society has lived during these nineteen centuries. It is a fact that all the time people were following only violence in the organisation of society. But the difference between the ideals of Christian peoples and that of other nations lies only in this: that, in Christianity the law of love had been expressed so clearly and definitely as has never been expressed in any other religious doctrine; that the Christian world had solemnly accepted that law, although at the same time it had permitted the employment of violence and on that violence it had constructed their whole life. Consequently, the life of the Christian peoples is an absolute contradiction between their profession and the basis of their life; contradiction between love recognised as the law of life, and violence recognised as inevitable in different departments of life: like Governments, Tribunals, Army, etc., which are recognised and praised. That contradiction developed with the inner development of the Christian world and has attained its paroxysm in recent days.

At present, the question poses itself evidently in the following manner: either it must be admitted that we do not recognise any discipline, religious or moral, and that we are guided in the organisation of life only by the law of force, or that all the taxes that we exact by force, the judicial and police organisations and, above all, the army must be abolished.

This spring, in the religious examination of a secondary school of girls in Moscow, the Professor of Catechism as well as the Bishop had questioned the young girls on the Ten Commandments and above all on the sixth "Thou shalt not kill". When the examiner received a good reply, the Bishop generally paused for another question: Is killing proscribed by the sacred Law always and in all cases? And the poor young girls perverted by their teachers must reply: No, not always; killing is permitted during war, and for the execution of criminals. However, one of those unfortunate girls, (what I relate is not a fiction but a fact that has been transmitted to me by an eye-witness) having

been asked the same question, "Is killing always a crime?" was moved deeply, blushed and replied with decision "Yes, always." To all the sophisticated questions habitual to the Bishop, she replied with firm conviction: killing is always forbidden in the Old Testament as well as by Christ who not only forbids killing but all wickedness against our neighbours. In spite of all his oratorical talent and all his imposing grandeur, the Bishop was obliged to beat a retreat and the young girl came out victorious.

Yes, we can discuss in our journals the progress in aviation and such other discoveries, the complicated diplomatic relations, the different clubs and alliances, the so-called artistic creations, etc., and pass in silence what was affirmed by the young girl. But silence is futile in such cases, because everyone of this Christian world is feeling the same, more or less vaguely, like that girl. Socialism, Communism, Anarchism, Salvation Army, the growing criminalities, unemployment and absurd luxuries of the rich, augmented without limit, and the awful misery of the poor, the terribly increasing number of suicides-all these are the signs of that inner contradiction which must be there and which cannot be resolved; and without doubt, can only be resolved by acceptance of the law of love and by the rejection of all sorts of violence. Consequently, your work in Transvaal, which seems to be far away from the centre of our world, is yet the most fundamental and the most important to us supplying the most weighty practical proof in which the world can now share and with which must participate not only the Christians but all the peoples of the world.

I think that it would give you pleasure to know that with us in Russia, a similar movement is also developing rapidly under the form of the refusal of military services augmenting year after year. However small may be the number of your participators in non-resistance and the number of those in Russia who refuse military service, both the one and the other may assert with audacity that "God is with us" and "God is more powerful than men".

Between the confession of Christianity, even under the perverted form in which it appears amongst us Christian peoples, and the simultaneous recognition of the necessity of armies and of the preparation for killing on an ever-increasing scale, there exists a contradiction so flagrant and crying that sooner or later, probably very soon, it must invariably manifest itself in utter nakedness; and it will lead us either to renounce the Christian religion, and to maintain the governmental power, or to renounce the existence of the army

and all the forms of violence which the state supports and which are more or less necessary to sustain its power. That contradiction is felt by all the governments, by your British Government as well as by our Russian Government; and, therefore, by the spirit of conservatism natural to these governments, the opposition is persecuted, as we find in Russia as well as in the articles of your journal, more than any other anti-governmental activity. The governments know from which direction comes the principal danger and try to defend themselves with a great zeal in that trial not merely to preserve their interests but actually to fight for their very existence.

With my perfect esteem,
LEO TOLSTOY

Source: *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, The (Delhi, Publication Division, Government of India, 1965) Vol. 10, Item. APPENDIX VI (ii), pp. 512-513-514*

Mrs. Fyvie Mayo - journalist and translator of Tolstoy, she had written an article on the Transvaal Indians' struggle. **Vol. 10**

Address of LEO TOLSTOY

1. "COUNT LEO TOLSTOY
YASNAYA POLYANA
RUSSIA"
2. "KOTCHETY", [KOTCHETY - Castle of Tolstoy's eldest daughter]
RUSSIA,

Address of TOLSTOY FARM (founded by Mahatma Gandhi in South Africa)

"TOLSTOY FARM,
LAWLEY STATION,
TRANSVAAL,"

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