

The Gandhian Ethic of Work in India

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The understanding of religious ferment in Asia would be lessened without an attempt to take a comparative look at some effects of the evangelical ethic. For purposes of definition, let us call an evangelical ethic a religiously endorsed doctrine urging active participation in the secular world. Typically, an evangelical ethic includes hard work and self-denial as integral parts of the religious life. Alternatives to an evangelical ethic might include a religious ethic urging withdrawal from active participation in the world (for example, monasticism), a religious ethic urging the correct observance of established rituals or ceremonies (for example, when a religion stresses ethnic identity), or a religious ethic advocating harmony between man and his environment (for example, within a group that sees tensions or conflicts as the greatest evil).

To what extent did evangelical ethics in Asia arise spontaneously from within Asia and to what extent were they brought in from the outside? In the case of Sam Jordan, a missionary to Persia, it is clear that he brought the ethic with him from outside Asia. With Nakamura Keiu, outside Christian contact was again an important stimulus. But with Mohandas Gandhi, the picture is somewhat more ambiguous. Although an Indian, he spent important developing years outside India, in Britain and South Africa. Although a staunch Hindu, he admitted to being deeply influenced by other religions. In Gandhi's case, these considerations make it more difficult to determine whether his version of the evangelical ethic came from within or without Asia.

In trying to analyze the origins of Gandhi's evangelical ethic, let us begin by looking at those forces that Gandhi himself said were important determinants. Gandhi maintained that he first recognized the central importance of this ethic in 1904.

By then he had already achieved some prominence in South Africa. As a lawyer, he had defended the local Indian colony from its white oppressors and had helped form the National Indian Congress. He had drafted an Indian petition and had sent it to the South African legislature. During the Boer War, he had aided the British by organizing the Indian Ambulance Corps. He had opened a law office in Johannesburg and had established a weekly journal, *Indian Opinion*. But he had not formally recognized the evangelical ethic. Then, in his thirty-fifth year, Gandhi took the train from Johannesburg to Durban. Henry S. L. Polak, an English friend, saw him off at the station, leaving Gandhi with a book to read during the journey. The book was *Unto This Last* by John Ruskin, a British critic of art and architecture, an Oxford professor of art, a writer, and a social philosopher. Gandhi described his subsequent experience as follows:

The book was impossible to lay aside, once I had begun it. It gripped me. Johannesburg to Durban was a twenty-four hours' journey. The train reached there in the evening. I could not get any sleep that night. I determined to change my life in accordance with the ideals of the book.

I believe that I discovered some of my deepest convictions reflected in this great book of Ruskin, and that is why it so captured me and made me transform my life.

The teachings of *Unto This Last* I understood to be:

1. That the good of the individual is contained in the good of all.

2. That a lawyer's work has the same value as the barber's inasmuch as all have the same right of earning their livelihood for their work.

3. That a life of labour, *i.e.*, the life of the tiller of the soil and the handicraftsman is the life worth living.

The first of these I knew. The second I had only dimly realized. The third had never occurred to me. *Unto This Last* made it as clear as daylight for me that the second and the third were contained in the first. I arose with the dawn, ready to reduce these principles to practice.¹

This book was a catalyst that triggered a chain of events in Gandhi's life. Later he discovered that the Russian writers Leo N. Tolstoy and, before him, T. M. Bondaref had discovered the same "divine law, that man must earn his bread by labouring with his own hands." But throughout his life Gandhi continued to give John Ruskin credit for his original enlightenment.

Gandhi's esteem for Ruskin's *Unto This Last* is especially remarkable in view of the fact that two of the three teachings Gandhi discovered in Ruskin's book bore little relation to what Ruskin had written.

The first teaching that Gandhi identified, "that the good of the individual is contained in the good of all," could be derived from Ruskin's statement that

riches are a power like that of electricity, acting only through inequalities or negations of itself. The force of the guinea you have in your pocket depends wholly on the default of a guinea in your neighbour's pocket. If he did not want it, it would be of no use to you . . . the art of making yourself rich . . . is therefore equally and necessarily the art of keeping your neighbour poor.²

Interestingly enough, Gandhi maintained he knew this teaching before reading Ruskin.

The second teaching, "that a lawyer's work has the same value as the barber's inasmuch as all have the same right of earning their livelihood for their work," might have been traced by Gandhi to Ruskin's statement that "a labourer serves his country with his spade, just as a man in the middle ranks of life serves it with sword, pen, or lancet."³ If so, then Gandhi seriously misinterpreted Ruskin, for Ruskin made it clear he did not believe that the work of the labourer and the work of the middle ranks had "the same value," as Gandhi concluded. Ruskin stated:

I never said that a colonel should have the same pay as a private, nor a bishop the same pay as a curate. Neither did I say that more work ought to be paid as less work (so that the curate of a parish of two thousand souls should have no more than the curate of a parish of five hundred). But I said that, so far as you employ it at all, bad work should be paid no less than good work because the moment people know they have to pay the

bad and good alike, they will try to discern the one from the other, and not use the bad.⁴

Later Ruskin added:

If there be any one point insisted on throughout my works more frequently than another, that one point is the impossibility of Equality. My continual aim has been to show the eternal superiority of some men to others . . . and to show also the advisability of appointing such persons or person to guide, to lead, or on occasion even to compel and subdue, their inferiors, according to their own better knowledge and wiser will.⁵

The third teaching that Gandhi discovered in Ruskin, "that the . . . life of the tiller of the soil and the handicraftsman is the life worth living," was an invention purely of Gandhi's—not of Ruskin's. Ruskin did state:

We need examples of people who, leaving Heaven to decide whether they are to rise in the world, decide for themselves that they will be happy in it, and have resolved to seek—not greater wealth, but simpler pleasure; not higher fortune, but deeper felicity; making the first of possessions, self-possession; and honouring themselves in the harmless pride and calm pursuits of peace.⁶

But such people need not be tillers of the soil or handicraftsmen. Moreover, throughout *Unto This Last* Ruskin referred to the importance of physicians, soldiers, curates, and writers in contrast to those who performed more menial tasks. And Ruskin concluded:

Labour is the contest of the life of man with an opposite;—the term "life" including his intellect, soul, and physical power, contending with question, difficulty, trial, or material force.

Labour is of a higher or lower order, as it includes more or fewer of the elements of life: and labour of good quality, in any kind, includes always as much intellect and feeling as will fully and harmoniously regulate the physical force.⁷

Perhaps the puzzle of Gandhi "misreading" Ruskin is partially explained by Gandhi's own statement that "I discovered some of my deepest convictions reflected in this great book of

Ruskin." In the final analysis, Gandhi did not receive direction from Ruskin. Rather, Gandhi found support from Ruskin for some of his own deepest convictions. The three teachings Gandhi identified were conclusions he himself had nearly reached by other means. Ruskin's book merely served as a catalyst for finally announcing these conclusions. Gandhi's only mistake was in attributing them to Ruskin rather than to himself. Perhaps the young Indian still needed support from a Western intellectual before publicizing ideas he felt differed so radically from those of most Western intellectuals.

Characteristically, once Gandhi was convinced of the validity of a position, he changed his life accordingly. With the help of some friends, he bought a farm near Phoenix, in the Transvaal, moved the presses and offices of the weekly journal *Indian Opinion* to the farm, and assigned equal monthly allowances of three pounds each to the composer, the editor, and the errand boy. In time, a small colony of Gandhi's friends and supporters moved out to the farm. Those with servants retained them, and those who were married continued to live in family units. On Phoenix farm Gandhi began some of his early experiments with grinding flour by hand. And Gandhi reports that here, in 1906, after he had adopted the vows of celibacy, he looked upon the Phoenix settlement as a religious institution.⁸

In 1910 Gandhi needed a base of operations closer to Johannesburg and to his campaign for equal treatment of Indians. Again, with the help of friends, Gandhi established Tolstoy farm twenty-one miles from Johannesburg, where he began more radical communal and economic experiments. Among the settlers were Hindus, Muslims, Christians, and Parsees. They prepared their own bread, marmalade, and caramel coffee, and made their own sandals and furniture. In organization, the farm was more self-consciously similar to the traditional Hindu ashrams of gurus and their disciples. Gandhi retained in his own hands the managing authority. There was to be no smoking or drinking. Vegetarianism was practiced even by Muslim members of the farm. For a time, no one even ate cooked foods or drank milk. One could use public transport only when on an errand for the commune; otherwise one had to walk. There were no servants; all work on the farm was done by the participants, including the disposal of waste and nightsoil.

The pattern of a religious cooperative community continued in Gandhi's later ashrams in India—Satyagraha ashram (first

near Ahmedabad and later by the Sabarmati River), Wardha ashram, and finally Sevagram ashram in Segaon, a village close to Wardha, in central India. In these later ashrams Gandhi established regulations for all members, including vows of truth, nonviolence, celibacy, control of the palate, and *swadeshi* (using only local products).⁹ He resorted to moral instruction and occasional personal fasting to encourage the observance of these vows. One of the goals of his later ashrams was to become an economically self-sufficient community that could serve as a blueprint for all of India's villages.

Within the context of experiences with his ashrams, Gandhi formulated the defining characteristics of what he called "bread labor." Bread labor, as Gandhi saw it, is a "divine law"—the principle that "to live man must work."¹⁰ All work is not automatically bread labor, however. First, the work must involve bodily labor. When asked "May not men earn their bread by intellectual labor?" Gandhi replied: "Intellectual work is important and has an undoubted place in the scheme of life. But what I insist on is the necessity of physical labour. I venture to say that in ancient times, brahmanas worked with their body as with their mind. But even if they did not, body labour was a proved necessity at the time."¹¹ "The needs of the body must be supplied by the body."¹² To underscore his point, Gandhi insisted that even Nobel prizewinners like the poet Rabindranath Tagore and the mathematician C. V. Raman should earn their bread by manual labour.¹³ Gandhi felt that at times he himself was deficient in this regard, spending his days meeting visitors, writing articles, and organizing movements rather than tilling the fields. In 1925 he said: "For me at the present moment spinning is the only body labour I give. It is a mere symbol. I do not give enough body labour."¹⁴ For many Gandhians, spinning became a symbol they could observe in their homes before departing for a day of nonmanual work—again, a symbol of bread labour.

Second, work, to be bread labour, has to be voluntary. Gandhi wrote: "Compulsory obedience to a master is a state of slavery, willing obedience to one's father is the glory of sonship. Similarly, compulsory obedience to the law of bread labour breeds poverty, disease and discontent. It is a state of slavery. Willing obedience to it must bring contentment and health."¹⁵ According to this, the millions of Indian peasants engaged in

farming are not necessarily performing bread labour. They are working only out of necessity.

Third, bread labour has the goal of social service. Gandhi wrote:

The ashram holds that every man and woman must work in order to live . . . every healthy individual must labour enough for his food, and his intellectual faculties must be exercised not in order to obtain a living or amass a fortune, but only in the service of mankind. If this principle is observed everywhere, all men would be equal, none would starve and the world would be saved from many a sin.¹⁶

Even the humblest peasant can turn his daily activities into bread labour if he recognizes that he is serving mankind through his work and then voluntarily continues to perform it. Gandhi's incorporation of social service into bread labour provided him with a moral base from which to reevaluate traditional Hinduism. Using his criteria of bread labour, Gandhi denounced the mendicants and the mendicant charity that centuries earlier had become an integral part of Hinduism:

My friendship for the paupers of India has made me hard-hearted enough to contemplate their utter starvation with equanimity in preference to their utter reduction to beggary. My ahimsa ["nonviolence"] would not tolerate the idea of giving a free meal to a healthy person who has not worked for it in some honest way, and if I had the power, I would stop every sadavrata where free meals are given. It has degraded the nation and has encouraged laziness, idleness, hypocrisy and even crime. Such misplaced charity adds nothing to the wealth of the country, whether material or spiritual, and gives a false sense of meritoriousness to the donor . . . the rule should be, "No labour, no meal."¹⁷

Along the same lines, Gandhi denounced the life of withdrawal and contemplation that had been a part of classical religious life for nearly three thousand years: "If I had the good fortune to be face to face with one like [Buddha], I should not hesitate to ask him why he did not teach the gospel of work, in

preference to one of contemplation. I should do the same thing if I were to meet [the great saints Tukaram and Dnyanadev]."¹⁸

Turning to his own gospel of work, Gandhi wrote: "If I could persuade myself that I should find Him [God] in a Himalayan cave I would proceed there immediately. But I know that I cannot find Him apart from humanity . . . the only way to find God is to see Him in His creation and be one with it. This can only be done by service of all."¹⁹

To an outside observer, Gandhi's focus on service-directed work was sharply different from the focus of most Hindu traditions. Early Hinduism had stressed sacrifice (*yajna*) and the tending of sacrificial fires. To this the *Upanishads* had added the importance of asceticism, withdrawal from the world, and salvation (*moksha*) through insight or knowledge. Later the *Bhagavad-Gita* had stressed man's correct performance of his birth-given tasks: the Brahmana to pray; the warrior to wage war; and so forth. "Better one's own duty, (tho) imperfect, than another's duty well performed; Better death in (doing) one's own duty; Another's duty brings danger" (III.35).²⁰ In the latter portions of the *Gita* a new path to salvation had been described, the path of *bhakti*, or devotion. During the next centuries, this path had become increasingly important, with man's most important religious activity being the passionate worship of God. Religious virtuosi now engaged in the establishment of devotional communities, where attention was focused on adoration and the search for a personal revelation of God. One might conclude that Gandhi's work ethic was compatible with none of these.

To draw such a conclusion, however, would be to overlook Gandhi's capacity to discover new meanings in old scriptures. Nowhere did he change his personal religious goal from the *moksha* goal of classical Hinduism: "What I want to achieve,—what I have been striving and pining to achieve these thirty years,—is self-realization, to see God face to face, to attain Moksha."²¹

However, his reinterpretations of certain scriptural passages so altered their original meanings that he was able to read them to support his doctrine of bread labour. For example, Gandhi reworked the meaning of sacrifice (*yajna*) as follows:

[I] venture to suggest that in the verses 12 and 13 of chapter III (in the *Gita*) the word *yajna* is capable

of only one meaning. The fourteenth verse makes it absolutely clear which means:

"By food the living live; food comes of rain, and rain comes by the pious sacrifice, and sacrifice is paid with tithes of toil."—Arnold

Here, therefore, there is not only the theory, in my opinion, of bodily labour propounded, but there is also the theory established of labour not only for oneself but for others, when and only when it becomes *yajna* or sacrifice.²²

Similarly, Gandhi found roots for his doctrine of bread labour in the first verse of the *Ishopanishad*—a verse he felt summed up the whole of Hinduism. As Gandhi translated it, this *mantra* (verse) described the basic unity of Brahma and Atma: "All that there is in this universe, great or small, including the tiniest atom, is pervaded by God."²³ Gandhi went on from there to conclude: "This *mantra* tells me that I cannot hold as mine anything that belongs to God, and if my life and that of all who believe in this *mantra* has to be a life of perfect dedication, it follows that it will have to be a life of continual service to our fellow creatures."²⁴

Gandhi was even able to reinterpret *bhaktā* (devotee) and *bhakti* (devotion) in a way that supported his doctrine of bread labour.

The Gita has defined the *bhaktā* in three places. . . . But a knowledge of the definition of a *bhaktā* is hardly a sufficient guide. They are rare on this earth. I have therefore suggested the Religion of Service as the Means. God of Himself seeks for His seat the heart of him who serves his fellowmen. That is why Narasinha Mehta who "saw and knew" sang "He is a true *Vaishnava* who knows to melt at other's woe." Such was Abu ben Adhem. He served his fellowmen, and therefore his name topped the list of those who served God. . . . He who spins before the poor inviting them to do likewise serves God as no one else does. "He who gives me even a trifle such as a fruit or a flower or even a leaf in the spirit of *bhakti* is My servant," says the Lord in the *Bhagavadgita*. And He hath His footstool where live "the humble, the lowliest and the lost." Spinning, therefore, for such is the greatest prayer, the greatest worship, the greatest sacrifice.²⁵

In short, once having discovered his ethic of work or the doctrine of bread labour in the writings of Ruskin, Tolstoy, and Bondaref, Gandhi looked back into the classical Hindu scriptures and identified passages that also lent Hindu support to the doctrine. In Gandhi's eyes, *yajna* (sacrifice) became bread labour; recognition of the Brahma-Atma mystery led to bread labour; *bhakti* (devotion) was bread labour.

To return to a question raised early in this paper, to what extent did evangelical ethics arise spontaneously from within Asia and to what extent were they brought in from the outside? In Gandhi's case, the evangelical ethic he advocated emerged from a complex mixture of Asian and non-Asian sources. In his own words, he discovered some of his deepest convictions reflected in the writings of the non-Asians Ruskin, Tolstoy, and Bondaref. Closer examination indicates that the non-Asians may have provided legitimacy for his views, but his views had developed independently from the non-Asian authors he cited. They arose out of Gandhi's personal response to his childhood in India, youth in Britain, and early career in South Africa. Had Gandhi not read Ruskin, Tolstoy, and Bondaref, one might guess that he still would have eventually announced his views.

Once he had publicly declared his convictions, indicating their non-Asian roots, Gandhi then looked for parallel roots within the Hindu heritage. His search was successful. In such basic scriptures as the *Ishopanishad* and the *Bhagavad-Gita* he discovered statements supporting his doctrine of bread labour. These scriptures, in turn, provided him with the assumptions and figures of speech he used to preach this ethic to his countrymen. The following passage illustrates as eloquently as any the harmonious blend that Gandhi created:

It has been truly said, that desire for enjoyment creates bodies for the soul. When this desire vanishes, there remains no further need for the body, and man is free from the vicious cycle of births and deaths. . . . We thus arrive at the ideal of total renunciation, and learn to use the body for the purposes of service so long as it exists. . . . Every moment of our life should be filled with mental or physical activity. . . . One who has consecrated his life to service cannot be idle for a single moment.²⁶

NOTES

1. M. K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, 2d ed. (Ahmedabad, 1940), pp. 298-99.
2. John Ruskin, *Unto This Last: Four Essays on the First Principles of Political Economy* (New York, 1872), pp. 44, 45.
3. *Ibid.*, p. xiii.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 82n.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 87.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 135.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 113.
8. M. K. Gandhi, *Ashram Observances in Action*, trans. Valji G. Desai (Ahmedabad, 1955), p. 4.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 125-51.
10. M. K. Gandhi, *From Yeravda Mandir*, trans. Valji G. Desai, 3d ed. (Ahmedabad, 1945), p. 35.
11. *Harijan*, Feb. 23, 1947, p. 36, cited in M. K. Gandhi *Bread Labour (The Gospel of Work)* (Ahmedabad, 1960), p. 18.
12. *Harijan*, June 29, 1935, cited in Gandhi, *Bread Labour*, p. 17.
13. *Harijan*, Feb. 23, 1947, cited in Gandhi, *Bread Labour*, p. 18.
14. *Young India*, Nov. 5, 1925, cited in Gandhi, *Bread Labour*, p. 16.
15. *Harijan*, June 29, 1935, p. 156, cited in M. K. Gandhi, *Economic and Industrial Life and Relations* (Ahmedabad, 1957), I, 98-99.
16. Gandhi, *Ashram Observances in Action*, p. 60.
17. *Young India*, Aug. 13, 1925, cited in Gandhi, *Economic and Industrial Life and Relations*, I, 128-29.
18. *Harijan*, Nov. 2, 1935, p. 298, cited in Gandhi, *Economic and Industrial Life and Relations*, I, 127.
19. *Harijan*, Aug. 29, 1936, p. 226, cited in Nirmal Kumar Bose, ed., *Selections from Gandhi*, 2d ed. (Ahmedabad, 1957), p. 25.
20. Franklin Edgerton, trans., *The Bhagavad-Gita*, Vol. 38 of the Harvard Oriental Series, ed. Walter E. Clark (Cambridge, Mass., 1952), III.35, p. 39.
21. Gandhi, *An Autobiography*, p. xii.
22. *Young India*, Oct. 15, 1925, p. 355, cited in Gandhi, *Bread Labour*, p. 10.
23. *Harijan*, Jan. 30, 1937, p. 407, cited in Gandhi, *Bread Labour*, p. 6.
24. *Harijan*, Jan. 30, 1937, cited in M. K. Gandhi, *The Gospel of Renunciation* (Ahmedabad, 1961), p. 11.
25. *Young India*, Sept. 24, 1925, pp. 331-32, cited in M. K. Gandhi, *My God* (Ahmedabad, 1962), p. 43.
26. Gandhi, *From Yeravda Mandir*, pp. 25-26.