

# Gandhi, the freedom fighter and educator: A Southern Theorist

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*The concept of Southern Theory is a response to Northern sociological theory, which is considered to be incomplete because it does not consider global dynamics, which would include the life-experiences of people of the South and the impact of socio-cultural changes brought about by colonialism and globalization. Raewyn Connell introduced the term Southern Theory to emphasize the intellectual power and political relevance of social thought emanating from formerly colonized countries. The term Southern Theory can be confusing, overarching theories that incorporate new ideas that would represent the experiences of unequal development are imperative in a globalized world. The ideas of non-violence and moral togetherness that Gandhi represented are discussed in this paper along with his education experiments and theories. Being radical, his educational ideas were not accepted in India after independence because the country needed to “catch-up” with the development of industrialized countries after centuries of colonial subjugation. But his profoundly different ideas of achieving social/political change through non-violence, and his ideas on education for working towards a social order free from exploitation and violence, represented local needs and a new way of looking at society and education.*

*Keywords: Interdependence; peace; education; non-violence*

## **SOUTHERN THEORY<sup>1</sup>**

The emerging term Southern Theory assumes a “fundamental division between the global South and the North” (Munck, 2016). It is a recognition of the ethnocentrism in the social science disciplines (sociology, history) (Patel, 2014). It is a response to contemporary social science theories arising out of Europe because they are not universally applicable and do not reflect the experiences of societies around the globe (Philips, 1992). Societies outside the European/North American sphere have been identified as “cultures to be studied” by anthropologists (Munck, 2016) rather than for enquiry into the social, moral and cultural upheavals arising out of colonialism and globalization.

This paper begins with a brief discussion of Southern Theory and its assumptions and points to some contradictions in the concept. It will touch on some of the challenges to

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is partially based on the themes and ideas about Gandhi elaborated in Ghosh (2019).

the contemporary meta-narratives that have been used in academic writing and the counter-narrative challenges that have come from different theories, such as postmodernism, post-structuralism, and postcolonialism (subaltern studies). The paper will then discuss how people like Gandhi and Tagore had original ideas that are particularly relevant to their societies. In describing Gandhi's work, we see how his focus was to get rid of colonialism and, particularly, colonialism of the mind through Western influence and industrialization, and how his educational ideas did not match the needs for reconstructing a new India. The paper concludes with a discussion of the relevance of some of Gandhi's ideas related to peace in the world and for global citizenship education today.

To make a geographical break in theoretical development is both confusing and controversial. It is confusing because the question arises of whether Southern Theory constitutes the ideas of educational reformers from the Global South or the ideas of those who write from the Global North, but are originally from the Global South. The term itself was introduced by an Australian sociologist, Raewyn Connell, in 2007 to refer to sociological ideas emanating from the geographical South because Northern sociological theory is incomplete. They do not apply to all areas of the world, since such theories do not consider global dynamics which would include the life-experiences of people of the South and the impact of socio-cultural changes brought about by colonialism and globalization. The geographical break is controversial because other theories, such as postmodernism, postcolonialism (inspired originally by the work of Edward Said), and poststructuralism (without going into their contributions and failures), all challenged "modernist Western knowledge construction, representation, and truth claims" (Hickling-Hudson, Mathews, & Woods, 2004, p. 4) that are involved in the complexities of decolonization as well as with the consequences of contemporary forms of globalization (Tikly, 2004). As Bhabra (2007, p. 880) put it: "the postcolonial revolution . . . points to what is missing in sociology: an engagement with difference that makes a difference to what was initially thought".

In particular, Subaltern Studies (initiated in the 1980s by Ranajit Guha), starting from a concern with the reconstruction of the worlds of subaltern experience (peasant movements), was given a global reach when it focused on the deconstruction of the various ways in which colonial power had been used. Spivak was influential in arguing "for a more post-structuralist scholarship, attentive to the textual construction of power, and the discourses of domination" steering Subaltern Studies to acknowledging "the centrality of gender and race (and, in the Indian context, caste)" (in *Ranajit Guha*, 2016). Subaltern historians (Chatterjee, 1993; Pandey, 1997) were concerned with a critique of Eurocentrism which saw the Western historical experience as the norm. As has been pointed out, Subaltern Studies was the first academic project that "helped crack the structures of academic orthodoxy wide open" (*Ranajit Guha*, 2016). Moreover, theorists, such as Paolo Freire (1970) from Brazil, have greatly influenced critical pedagogy in the West. The French West Indian psychoanalyst Franz Fanon's (1961) work on the social, cultural and psychological consequences of colonization and decolonization has not only inspired academic discourse but has also inspired national liberation movements in several parts of the world. Homi Bhabha's (1994) concepts of hybridity, mimicry, difference, and ambivalence deal with the ways colonized people negotiate with the power of the colonizer. So, it is not that there have not been theorists

from the South but their work is only recently emerging as a powerful challenge to existing models of socio-historical analysis.

Globalization and its most recent manifestation, the COVID 19 pandemic, highlight the “histories of interconnection that have enabled the world to emerge as a global space . . . (And) any new understanding of the global cannot simply be asserted” but needs to address the deficiencies and limitations of what has already been emphasized (Bhambra, 2014, p. 155). As Anne Hickling-Hudson and her colleagues (2004) suggest, we should consider how to combine our resources rather than fragment ourselves by debates that do not get to the heart of our shared concerns.

The question arises as to why it is that influential ideas like that of “writers as diverse as al-Afghani in the Islamic Middle East, Chatterjee and Tagore in Bengal . . . and Sun Yat-sen . . . in China” to quote Raewyn Connell (2007, p. 14), are not part of quotidian scholarship in the North? One reason could be that Said (1979), Bhabha (1994), Guha (1993), Spivak (1988), Chatterjee (1986), Pandey (1997), Freire (1970), Fanon (1961) (to name only a few) were all scholars who studied and wrote from the North and published in Western journals and through Western publishers. Philip Altbach (1971) pointed out that, since the 1970s, the neocolonialism through which countries of the North have maintained power in intellectual publishing, not to mention some other problems such as domination of English (and to some extent French) language in publishing, put vernacular writings at a disadvantage in the countries of the South.

Several writers have observed that the impact of colonialism reaches far beyond the economic and political spheres. Theorists like Fanon (1961), Freire (1970), and Albert Memmi (1965) considered the colonization of the mind as the most insidious condition of being oppressed. In India, Rabindranath Tagore, like Fanon, “thought much about the deformation of the mind brought about by colonial education” (see, Ghosh & Naseem, 2003). Tagore’s education outlined an approach of liberating the minds of people in colonial India but has profound relevance for education today (Ghosh, Naseem, & Vijn, 2010). Although he was the first Asian to get the Nobel Prize, he is less well-known in the West compared to Gandhi. As Amartya Sen (1997) points out, despite his enduring presence in West Bengal and India “his near total eclipse in the rest of the world” is partly due to his image in the West as a “remote spiritualist”. The Nobel Prize in Literature 1913 was awarded to Rabindranath Tagore “because of his profoundly sensitive, fresh and beautiful verse, by which, with consummate skill, he has made his poetic thought, expressed in his own English words, a *part of the literature of the West*” (emphasis mine) (*The Nobel Prize*”, n.d.). That is ironic because Tagore was proudly Indian and wrote in his own language, which was Bengali. He renounced the knighthood that had been conferred on him by the British because “badges of honour make our shame glaring in the incongruous context of humiliation” suffered in the Jallianawala Bagh massacre in Amritsar, Punjab in 1919 (Dutta & Robinson, 1997).

Like Gandhi, Tagore found colonialism humiliating. Both Tagore and Gandhi thought of colonization of the mind as the worst effect of colonization, and education as a means of liberating the minds of people. Ashis Nandy is perhaps most influential in his observation of the deep-rooted impact of colonialism on the cognitive and affective domains of the colonized. Nandy has attempted, in *The Intimate Enemy* (1983), to analyze Gandhi’s cultural-psychological sensitivities to colonization’s “civilizing mission”:

The appeal of Gandhi's vision to the ordinary Indian was that it looked grounded simultaneously in India's high culture and its vernacular traditions... Gandhi was... a constant reminder of (1) how the Enlightenment vision had been used to justify virtually all the major forms of Satanism of our times – from the four-continent slave-trade to the creation of three new White continents through conquests and genocide; and (2) how all major forms of organized dissent in the West have justified their violence by turning to social evolutionism and sundry theories of progress which remain racist, ethnocidal and provincial at their core (Boni, n. d.).

## **GHANDI'S EARLY YEARS**

This paper will go briefly over how Gandhi's ideas, very different from dominant Western ideas on society and education, brought non-violent resistance to British colonial rule and how he was largely responsible for Indian independence. As Nandy points out (Gopalakrishnan, 2017), Gandhi was influenced by India, where he grew up, but he spent his formative years, from 23 to 44 years old, in South Africa. His concept of *Satyagraha* emerged at a mass meeting in 1906 in South Africa, a country which had apartheid (institutionalized racial segregation). Gandhi himself faced racism when travelling in a first-class compartment from which he was thrown out and which spurred him to stay in that country and fight for the rights of Indians there. Yet he has been accused of racism against Black South Africans although he is also credited for inspiring the anti-colonial movements there. Several people have pointed to Gandhi's racist beliefs. In an interesting article titled, *Was Gandhi a racist?*, Adavi, Das, and Nair (2016) write that Gandhi changed his attitudes towards race after attending The Universal Races Congress in London in 1911:

Within a span of seven years after his return to India in 1914, Gandhi transformed from being a supporter of the British Empire into a staunch anti-imperialist. This transition opened Gandhi's eyes to the relation between power and knowledge, and specifically, between imperialism and racism as well as imperialism and culture. Gandhi's anti-imperialism extended from politics to aesthetics.

What made Gandhi extraordinary, Adavi et al say, is that he “transcended these irrational prejudices”. Scholars have noted the great contradictions that existed simultaneously in his ideology and which have had repercussions in post-independent India. There are two areas in particular where this is evident: his conception of women and his views on the caste system in India. He made women an integral part of the freedom movement, but he advocated separate roles and responsibilities for them. Similarly, while he fought ceaselessly against the evils of untouchability, he did not challenge the caste system itself. In fact, he almost never mentioned it in his writings. He defended the “traditional hierarchies of caste and gender” (Rao, 2014, p. 294) which are the foundations of inequality in Indian society. Nanda (2012) points out that he rejected the idea that untouchability was part of Hinduism, he believed in the caste system although his ideas on the caste system also changed with time. He was rooted in the context of his time. Tagore, who disagreed with many of his ideas, such as the caste system, saw him at the same time as a person with extraordinary abilities and gave him the name “Mahatma” (great soul).

Born into a middle-class, staunch Hindu family from a traditional vegetarian community, his family strictly followed the caste hierarchy and practised “untouchability”. Although the *Constitution of India 1950* legally abolished

“untouchability” after Independence, the practice of ostracising lower castes whose occupations entail “polluting activities” by denying them access to the facilities used by caste Hindus still continues in many parts of India. Caste position is determined by birth and cannot be changed. Gandhi was influenced by his religious upbringing and had many prejudices in his early years, but, with time, he “underwent an intellectual moulting and his transformed world view altered his own perceptions” (Adavi et al., 2016). Gandhi earned his law degree in London and was challenged by B. R. Ambedkar on his ideas of caste. Gandhi was a caste Hindu (he belonged to the Vaishya or Baniya caste) and Ambedkar was from an ‘untouchable’ caste but, like Gandhi had been admitted to the Bar in London and also had degrees from Columbia University in the US and a DSc from London University. Ambedkar did not agree that the reason for the poverty and oppression of the “untouchables” was economic, rather he believed that their subjugation was due to their identity and low self-esteem and that education was the only way to reverse that phenomenon. Ambedkar, known in India as the chief architect of the Indian constitution, was a brilliant Southern Theorist who is almost totally unknown in the West.

Today, the genius of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi is known around the globe for leading the greatest non-violent, anti-colonial struggle in history, and his ideas of non-violence and *Satyagraha* are emulated by many. Gandhi saw the colonizer as the oppressor, and freedom for him was not only political but, more importantly, it was freedom from ignorance, vulnerability and fear, freedom of the self from the ego through service to society at the individual level.

### GHANDI'S IDEAS

Gandhi was influenced by both Eastern and Western thinkers as well as by several religious writings, such as those of the Buddha, Mohammad, and Christ (and was especially affected by the *Sermon on the Mount*). He read Socrates as well as Hindu philosophy from the *Gita* and the *Upanishads*. His ideas were a complex mix of the social experiences of his position in colonial India and apartheid South Africa, and the influences of several philosophies and ideologies. His ideas, including his theories on education, were shaped by a firm belief in God, the dignity of human life, and dignity of labour. Albert Einstein is known to have pointed out that Gandhi 's great contribution to our time was his determination to moralize politics. Gandhi believed that moral values, such as love, truth, and nonviolence, applied to both one’s private and the various areas of public life (such as politics or business). Religion and love were important and he was categorical that violence was never the answer but that non-violent force may be necessary. He was totally against violence: “an eye for an eye will only make the whole world blind”.

His core principle was *Ahimsa* or non-violence, but he is known for *Satyagraha*, which in Sanskrit means ‘holding on to truth’ that was his mass passive resistance movement against colonial rule, as well as for *Sarvodaya* or welfare for all. The ideals of equitable distribution of wealth, the dignity of labour and communal social structure based on an agricultural economy were influenced by John Ruskin, born exactly two hundred years before in 1719 and author of *Unto This Last*, which transformed Gandhi’s life (Gandhi, 1940). Like Ruskin, Gandhi believed in a hierarchical order (e.g. the caste system) but worked for the upliftment of the untouchables and oppressed people within the existing social order.

Another book which left a lasting impression on Gandhi was Leo Tolstoy's *The Kingdom of God is Within You*, which was banned in Russia and was published in Germany. Tolstoy and Gandhi corresponded for several years. He was the source of the non-violent resistance and inspired Gandhi's ideas about peace and justice. Although strongly influenced by Tolstoy's idea of non-violence, the two differed in political strategy. Unlike Tolstoy, who was a pacifist and suggested self-denial (following Christ), Gandhi was for political involvement. Guided by the Bhagwad Gita, Gandhi went beyond non-violence to self-realization through non-violent resistance against the British government in the form of boycotts, sit-ins, strikes and demonstrations, and fasts for which he was famous. To him, non-violence was an act of courage, not of fear. He did not think of non-violent resistance as passive, because civil disobedience or non-cooperation was not merely opposition but a process of reconstructing society through love and the search for truth: it was pro-active rather than reactive.

## EDUCATION

Gandhi is not known for his ideas on education, although he experimented with different models of schooling in South Africa even before he did in India, and published extensively on education. For him, education was an integral part of reconstructing India. His ideas on education were thought to be too idealistic and impractical to be accepted in post-independent India, whose natural development had been impeded with two and a half centuries of colonial subjugation and, at independence, there was an urgent need to modernize and industrialize.

In South Africa, Gandhi experimented with two models of education. The Phoenix Settlement was established to try communal living. All persons living in the farm received equal wages no matter what they did, and education was achieved through manual work. The aim was to struggle against inequality in a society based on *Satyagraha* or non-violence in the face of injustice and the racist laws in South Africa. After three years, he left the establishment in the hands of one of his sons and started the Tolstoy Farm. There, he introduced vocational training of both boys and girls between the ages of six to sixteen in co-educational classes. The students worked on the farm and had about two hours of book learning daily taught in the mother tongue through unconventional methods. He also introduced spiritual training and the students participated with their fellow students in their respective religious observances. He aimed at holistic development through manual labour to develop the ideals of social service and moral citizenship in children. This became the focus of his *Satyagraha* movement in protest of discriminating laws against Indians in South Africa. Tolstoy Farm was disbanded three years later but it had served as an ideal laboratory for his ideas on education. Upon his return to India, he started the Sabarmati Ashram to continue experimenting in education and it runs to this day. Built on his educational philosophy of *Sarvodaya*, the aim of the Ashram is the child's full and holistic development to achieve the well-being of everyone.

Gandhi had several publications on education (*The Problem of Education*, 1932). He regularly wrote about educational matters in his weekly English newspaper, *Young India*, and another weekly newspaper, *Harijan*, published in English, Hindi as well as in his mother tongue Gujarati.

His ideas (Gandhi, 1940) on education were radical and focused on self-realization and self-knowledge, with the aim of serving society: “true education lies in serving others” (Rajput, 1998). Gandhi focused on Indigenous content which would be relevant to the lives of students because he saw Western education as imprinting the image of the oppressor on the minds of Indians. He focused on craft around which education should be given. His ideas were outlined in *Nai Talim* (basic education), an alternative model of mass elementary education proposed in 1936. He suggested a curriculum for mass elementary education following the spiritual principle that knowledge and work are not separate.

Gandhi’s views on basic education for all ages were greatly influenced by his philosophies of *Satya* (truth), and *Ahimsa* (non-violence). His philosophy included a firm belief in God. He had felt the absence of spiritual knowledge in his own education and did not agree with secular education. However, he did not insist on any organized religion or religious belief to be part of education. A staunch Hindu himself, he nevertheless believed that other faiths contained their own value. They were to be respected and were worthy of study. To him, religion was “service of humanity . . . The term ‘religion’ I am using in its broadest sense, meaning thereby self-realization or knowledge of self” (Gandhi, 1940, p. 47).

*Nai Talim* was not only aimed at political freedom from the colonial power but freedom of the colonized mind, freedom from fear: “Education is that which liberates” (Gandhi, 1946). To achieve a nation-state which was based on moral laws, it was essential to have Indigenous education and remove the stronghold of modern Western industrial civilization, which Gandhi saw as involving violence against people as well as against nature. Gandhi was a humanist and he saw truth, love, and non-violence as the means towards achieving a humanistic society. Love is not only an essential ingredient of a child’s education but a child should learn that hate can be conquered by love. In its philosophy, content, and method of teaching, it was a radical change, emphasizing apprenticeship and manual skills, and mother tongue as the medium of instruction. The Ministry of Education and Social Welfare, Government of India described Gandhi’s concept of basic education in 1956: “Basic education as conceived and explained by Mahatma Gandhi, is essentially an education for life and, what is more, an education through life. Its aims are creating eventually a social order free from exploitation and violence.” (Pandey, 1997, p. 182).

Gandhi believed that the teacher should be directive and act as a role model for the students while serving as a living example to impart a spiritual education. The life and character of the teacher were important in modelling moral training which his educational experiments had shown him. He did not give much thought to the economic aspect of the teacher and assumed that the crafts would bring in enough money to make the schools self-sufficient (Adams, 2009).

The teaching method he advocated was “learning by doing” or experiential learning, which many educators such as Dewey and Tagore also advocated. The focal point was “crafts” (e.g. spinning) for self-sufficiency which was not merely for production but for developing the intellect (Deshmukh, 2010). Tagore, too, favoured craft education but that was not his focal point. Gandhi was totally against the focus on the 3Rs (reading, writing and arithmetic) for the majority of children who were disadvantaged in India. Rather, the development of the whole child was more than cognitive development because spiritual and moral development was more important than intellectual and

vocational training. So, he emphasized the 3Hs: heart (character development and moral training), hand (practical skills), and the head (mind). Seeing the danger in widening the gap between those who were schooled and those who were not, Gandhi focused on manual labour for all students to develop in them the dignity of labour. With the majority of people living in the villages, he wanted to involve the life of the community with popular education – formal and informal – through mass political participation.

With its focus on crafts, manual training for all, Indigenous content, and languages, and non-conventional methods of pedagogy, *Nai Talim* was a major departure from the Brahmanical tradition of earlier education in India as well as from the colonial model of education. Gandhi's proposal for basic education was rejected by the National Planning Committee members who did not think that the broad education that would be necessary to teach various academic subjects to build a new India after decades of colonial rule could be done through vocational education. But Gandhi's main focus was independence from colonial rule and, therefore, education for him was to be the practice of freedom. To him, freedom meant not only political independence but liberation from Western values imparted through Western education and culture. Gandhi was jailed often for his non-violent resistance to colonial authority and spent altogether about seven years in prison.

Gandhi has been criticized for his “puritanical, conservative and pacifist thinking” (Pathak, 2016), considered to be against progress and development, and detrimental to postcolonial India. Ambedkar (1971) questioned Gandhi's fight for the rights of Indians while, domestically, the caste system in India was (and continues to be) a matter of extreme injustice. Gandhi did not succeed in ending the social inequalities of the caste system that has now become entrenched in a spiralling complexity of inequality and quotas. Nor did he include women as equals, even though he brought them into the freedom movement. Partha Chatterjee (1993) pointed out that mainstream politics in the public realm did not articulate gender politics during Gandhi's time. However, this is arguably not a legitimate explanation of Gandhi's attitude towards either gender or caste because he did go outside the box in his defiance of British imperialism. Gandhi simply did not attempt to make structural changes to the oppression and the degradation experienced by women and the lower castes in the educational environment and society in India.

So, there are several contradictions in Gandhi's message. But the significance of his message of non-violence is for peaceful development and change, for an ethics of care and moral togetherness in a fractured world (Ghosh, 2017). Connell (2007) points to Gandhi's “highly sophisticated response to colonialism” as having most successfully “cracked the code of British imperialism” (p.187). By “cracking the code” Gandhi indeed proved the key argument Connell makes that “colonised and peripheral societies produce social thought about the modern world which has as much intellectual power as metropolitan social thought and more political relevance” (p.xii).

Gandhi's ideas have de-centred ideas of power and dependency and shown that non-violence and moral togetherness can be instruments of change. If peace, rather than power and domination, is really what countries around the world aim for, then global theories would need new concepts to re-cast theories of culture and society. Yet, the North-South divide endures (Arrighi, Silver, & Brewer, 2003) because decolonization and different degrees of industrialization have not reduced the underlying gap, and



global hierarchies of inequality and influence tend to reproduce themselves (Munck, 2016) even though there are recent signs of shifts in power. Unprecedented natural disasters like tsunamis, hurricanes, earthquakes, wildfires, and, currently, COVID 19 do not see political borders and affect all areas around the globe, and have underlined human vulnerability and interdependence so that we must think of our place in the globe rather than in a nation-state. The definition of what it means to be a super-power has changed, and less powerful countries have shown, for example, that they are more successful in managing the pandemic than those whose might could not conceal their vulnerabilities resulting in huge losses. This has made it imperative to develop alternative ways of seeing the world with humility and humanity in decolonized spaces free of oppression and inequality, as Gandhi suggested.

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