

THE  
COLLECTED  
WORKS  
OF  
MAHATMA  
GANDHI

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THE PUBLICATIONS DIVISION

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XXXVII

(1928)



I very much liked your caution regarding the common kitchen. Our ideal of the Ashram is that even visitors should observe *brahmacharya* while they stay in it. This rule is made categorical in the new set of rules. That has naturally added to the number of those taking their meals in the common kitchen. How can we say that even those who take the vow of *brahmacharya* are not *brahmacharis* of their own will? I, however, believe your statement that many have joined the common kitchen out of their respect for me. The kitchen has led to a new idea during the past few days. There is no suggestion that it should be abandoned, but a proposal is being discussed whether those who cannot sincerely be its members and cannot whole-heartedly adopt its other implications should not leave the Ashram.

I shall await your letter regarding the effect of the use of linseed oil. How do you obtain fresh linseed oil? Do you obtain a day's or a month's requirement, at a time? Do you get oil pressed by an indigenous or an English mill? If it is oil pressed in an indigenous mill and if you know the process through which the seed is passed before it is pressed, please let me know. If you do not know this, get the information and let me have it.

*Blessings from*  
BAPU

From a copy of the Gujarati: C.W. 801. Courtesy: Balkrishna Bhav

### 302. SPEECH ON BIRTH CENTENARY OF TOLSTOY<sup>1</sup>

*September 10, 1928*

My present state of mind does not at all permit me to join in celebrating any day or festival. Some time ago a reader of *Navajivan* or *Young India* asked me a question: "You have stated<sup>2</sup>, writing about *shraddha*, that the right way of performing the *shraddha* of our elders, on their death-anniversary day, is to recall their virtues and make them our own. May I ask you, therefore, how you observe the *shraddha* days of your elders?" I used to observe these days when I was young, but I don't mind telling you that now I do not even remember the dates on which they fall. I do not recall to have observed any such day during the

<sup>1</sup> The speech was delivered at a meeting held in the Ashram under the auspices of the Ahmedabad Youth Association. An English version of the speech appeared in *Young India*, 20-9-1928.

<sup>2</sup> *Vide* Vol. XXXIV, pp. 430-1.

past many years. Such is my unhappy state of mind, or rather, you may say, my charming or, as some friends believe, profound, ignorance. I believe it is enough if we fix our attention every minute of the day on the task in hand, think about it and do it as methodically as we can. We thereby celebrate the death anniversary of our elders as also the memory of men like Tolstoy. If Dr. Hariprasad had not drawn me into the net, it is quite likely that I would have arranged no celebration in the Ashram on this day, the 10th; it is even likely that I would have forgotten the day altogether. I had letters three months ago from Aylmer Maude and others engaged in collecting Tolstoy's writings, requesting me to send an article on the occasion of this centenary celebration and to draw the country's attention to this date. You must have seen an abstract of Aylmer Maude's letter, or perhaps the whole of it, published in *Young India*.<sup>1</sup> Afterwards I forgot all about this matter. This is an auspicious occasion for me, but I would not have felt sorry if I had discovered that I had forgotten it. All the same, I welcome the opportunity which members of the Youth Association have offered of celebrating this day in the Ashram.

I wish I could say that, like Dattatreya, I had accepted many persons in this world as my gurus, but I am not in that position. I have said, on the contrary, that I am still in search of a guru in religious matters. It is my belief, which grows stronger day by day, that one must have especial fitness to find a guru. A guru comes unsought to him who has it. I lack such fitness. I have described Gokhale as my political guru. He had satisfied all my expectations of a guru in that field. I never doubted or questioned the propriety of his views or instructions. I cannot say that of anyone as a guru in religious matters.

And yet, I would say that three men have had a very great influence on my life. Among them I give the first place to the poet Rajchandra, the second to Tolstoy and the third to Ruskin. If I had to choose between Tolstoy and Ruskin and if I knew more about the lives of both, I would not know to whom to give preference. At present, however, I give the place to Tolstoy. I have not read as much of Tolstoy's life as many others may have, and in fact I have not read very much of his writings either. Among his works the one which has had the greatest effect on me is *The Kingdom of God Is within You*. The title means that God's Kingdom is in our heart, that if we search for it outside we shall find it nowhere. I

<sup>1</sup> *Vide* Vol. XXXVI, pp. 73-4.



read the book forty years ago. At that time, I was sceptical about many things and sometimes entertained atheistic ideas. When I went to England, I was a votary of violence, I had faith in it and none in non-violence. After I read this book, that lack of faith in non-violence vanished. Later I read some of his other books, but I cannot describe what effect they had on me. I can only say what effect his life as a whole had on me.

I attach importance to two things in his life. He did what he preached. His simplicity was extraordinary; it was not merely outward; outward simplicity of course he had. Though he was born in an aristocratic family and had all the good things of life to enjoy, had at his disposal all that wealth and possessions could give a man, he changed the direction of his life's voyage in the prime of youth. Though he had enjoyed all the pleasures and tasted all the sweetness which life can offer, the moment he realized the futility of that way of life he turned his back on it, and he remained firm in his new convictions till the end of his life. I have, therefore, stated in some message I have sent that Tolstoy was the very embodiment of truth in this age. He strove uncompromisingly to follow truth as he saw it, making no attempt to conceal or dilute what he believed to be the truth. He stated what he felt to be the truth without caring whether it would hurt or please the people or whether it would be welcome to the mighty emperor. Tolstoy was a great advocate of non-violence in his age. I know of no author in the West who has written as much and as effectively for the cause of non-violence as Tolstoy has done. I may go even further and say that I know no one in India or elsewhere who has had as profound an understanding of the nature of non-violence as Tolstoy had and who has tried to follow it as sincerely as he did.

I feel unhappy about this state of affairs, I do not like it. India is *karmabhumi*<sup>1</sup>. The sages and seers of this country have made the biggest discoveries in the sphere of non-violence. But we cannot live on inherited wealth. If we do not continue to add to it, we would be eating it away. The late Justice Ranade has cautioned us against this. We may complacently quote the Vedas and Jain literature and talk profound things, or propound great principles and strike the world dumb, but people will not believe in our sincerity. Hence Ranade pointed it out as our duty that we should add to our inheritance. We should compare it with the writings of other religious thinkers and if, as a result of such

<sup>1</sup> Land of duty, contrasted with *bhogabhumi*, land of enjoyment

comparison, we discover anything new or find new light shed on a subject, we should not reject it. We have, however, failed to do this. Our religious heads are always one-sided in their thinking. There is no harmony between their words and deeds. We do not have among us men who, like Tolstoy, would speak out the plain truth irrespective of whether or not that would please the people or the society in which they work. Such is the pitiable condition of this our land of non-violence. Our non-violence is an unworthy thing. We see its utmost limit in refraining somehow from destroying bugs, mosquitoes and fleas, or from killing birds and animals. We do not care if these creatures suffer, nor even if we partly contribute to their suffering. On the contrary, we think it a heinous sin if anyone releases or helps in releasing a creature that suffers. I have already written and explained that this is not non-violence, and I take this occasion, when I am speaking about Tolstoy, to repeat that that is not the meaning of non-violence. Non-violence means an ocean of compassion, it means shedding from us every trace of ill-will for others. It does not mean abjectness or timidity, or fleeing in fear. It means, on the contrary, firmness of mind and courage, a resolute spirit.

We do not see this non-violence in the educated classes in India. For them Tolstoy's life should be a source of inspiration. He strove hard to put into practice what he believed in, and never turned back from his chosen path. I do not believe that he did not find that stick<sup>1</sup>. He himself said, of course, that he had failed to discover it, but that was his humility. I do not agree with his critics that he did not find that stick. I might perhaps agree if anyone asserted that he did not fully act upon the principle of non-violence of which he had had a glimpse. But, then, has there been anyone in this world who could act upon the principle of non-violence fully while he lived? I believe it impossible for one living in this body to observe non-violence to perfection. While the body endures, some degree of egotism is inescapable. We retain the body only so long as egotism persists. Bodily life, therefore, necessarily involves violence. Tolstoy himself said that anyone who believed that he had realized his ideal would be lost. From the moment he believed that, his fall would begin. The further we travel towards an ideal the further it recedes. As we advance in its search, we realize that we have one step after another to

<sup>1</sup> In his introductory remarks, Dr. Hariprasad had said that Tolstoy had failed to find the green stick with many virtues which his brother had advised him to discover.

climb. No one can climb all the steps in one leap. This view does not imply cravenness of spirit or pessimism but certainly there is humility in it. Hence our sages and seers said that the state of *moksha* meant utter emptiness. He who aspires after *moksha* must develop a state of such emptiness. One cannot attain this without God's grace. That state of emptiness can only remain an ideal as long as one lives in this body. The moment Tolstoy saw this truth clearly, grasped it with his intellect and started on his journey towards the ideal, he had found the green stick. He could not describe it, but could have only said that he had found it. If, however, he had in fact said that he had found it, progress in life would have been over for him.

The seeming contradictions in Tolstoy's life are no blot on him or sign of his failure. They signify the failure of the observer. Emerson has said that a foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds. We would be utterly lost if we tried to live and show that there was no contradiction in our lives. In trying to live in that manner, we would have to remember what we did yesterday and then harmonize our actions today with that; in trying to preserve such forced harmony, we would have to resort to untruth. The best way is to follow the truth as one sees it at the moment. If we are progressing from day to day, why should we worry if others see contradictions in us? In truth, what looks like contradiction is not contradiction, but progress. And so, what seems to be contradiction in Tolstoy's life is really not contradiction, but only an illusion in our minds. Only the man himself knows how much he struggles in the depth of his heart or what victories he wins in the war between Rama and Ravana. The spectator certainly cannot know that. If the person slips ever so little, the world will think that there was nothing in him; this, of course, is for the best. One should not condemn the world on that account and so the saints have said that we should rejoice when the world speaks ill of us, but tremble with fear when it praises us. The world cannot act otherwise than it does; it must censure where it sees evil. But, whenever we examine the life of a great man, we should bear in mind what I have explained. God is witness to the battles he may have fought in his heart and the victories he may have won. These are the only evidence of his failures and successes.

By saying this, I do not wish to suggest that you should cover up your weaknesses, or, when they are as big as hills, think that they are as small as grains of sand. What I have said is in regard to other people. "We should look upon others' weaknesses, huge as the Himalayas, to be as small as mustard seeds and ours,



as small as mustard seeds, to be as big as the Himalayas. When we become aware of the slightest lapse on our part or seem to have become guilty of untruth, intentionally or otherwise, we should feel as if we were burning, as if we were caught in flames. A snake bite or a scorpion sting is of little consequence; you will find many who can cure them. Is there anyone, however, who can cure us of the sting of untruth or violence? God alone can do that, and He will do it only if we strive in earnest. Hence, we should be vigilant against our weaknesses and magnify them to the utmost, so that, when the world censures us, we should not think that people were mean-minded and exaggerated our faults. If anyone pointed out a weakness in Tolstoy, though there could hardly be an occasion for anyone to do so for he was pitiless in his self-examination, he would magnify that weakness to fearful proportions. He would have seen his lapse and atoned for it in the manner he thought most appropriate before anyone had pointed it out to him. This is a sign of goodness, and I think, therefore, that he had found that stick.

Tolstoy drew people's attention to another thing through his writings and his life, and that is the idea of "bread labour". It was not his own discovery. Another author had mentioned it in a Russian Miscellany. Tolstoy made his name known to the world and also put before it his idea. The cause of the inequalities we see in the world, of the contrasts of wealth and poverty, lies in the fact that we have forgotten the law of life. That law is the law of "bread labour". On the authority of Chapter III of the *Gita*, I call it *yajna*. The *Gita* says that he who eats without performing *yajna* is a thief and sinner. Tolstoy has said the same thing. We should not distort the meaning of "bread labour" and forget the real idea. Its simple meaning is that he has no right to eat who does not bend his body and work. If every one of us did bodily labour to earn his food, we would not see the poverty which we find in the world. One idler is the cause of two persons starving, for his work has to be done by someone else. Tolstoy said that people came forward for philanthropic service, spent money for the purpose and earned titles as reward for their service, but he said it would be enough if, instead of all this, they did a little physical work and got off the backs of others. That is true indeed. In that lies humility. To do philanthropic service but refuse to give up one's luxuries is to act in the way described by Akha Bhagat, "Stealing an anvil and gifting a needle". Can we hope thereby to go up in a *viman*<sup>1</sup> to heaven?

<sup>1</sup> Flying machine



It is not that others have not said what Tolstoy said, but there was magic in Tolstoy's language, for he acted upon what he preached. He who was accustomed to the comforts of wealth started doing physical labour. He used to work on the farm or do other labour for eight hours a day. That does not mean that he gave up literary work. In fact, after he started doing physical labour his literary work came to have greater life in it. It was during spare time in this period of *yajna* that he wrote what he described as his most important work, *What Is Art?* Physical labour did not tell upon his health, and he believed that it sharpened his intellect. Students of his works will bear testimony that he was right.

If we wish to benefit from Tolstoy's life, we should learn these three things from it. I am addressing members of a youth association, and I wish to remind them that they have to choose between two paths in life: one of self-indulgence and the other of self-restraint. If you think that Tolstoy lived and died well, you will see that there is only one right path in life for all, especially for the young—and that is the path of self-control. That is particularly true in India. Swaraj is not something to be won from the Government. If you examine the causes of our degradation, you will see that we are more responsible for it than the Government. You will then see that the key to swaraj is in our hands, and not in England nor in Simla nor in Delhi. It is in your pocket and mine. Our lethargy is responsible for the delay in remedying the degradation and listlessness of our society. If we overcome that, there is no power on earth which can prevent us from raising ourselves and securing swaraj. We ourselves choose to lie helpless on the path and refuse to lift ourselves out of that condition. I should like to tell the members of the Youth Association that this is a golden time for them, or from another point of view, a hard time, a time of trial, if I put it in a third way. It is not enough that they pass university examinations and secure degrees. They will have secured real degrees only when they pass the examination of life and stand the test of hardships and difficulties. This is a period of transition, a golden time for you. You have two paths before you: one leading to the north and another to the south, one to the east and another to the west. You have to choose between the two. You must consider which path you will choose. All kinds of winds—poisonous winds, in my view—are blowing into the country from the West. There are, of course, some beautiful currents too, like Tolstoy's life. But these do not blow with every ship that arrives! You may say 'with every ship' or 'every day', for every day a ship arrives in the Bombay or

Calcutta port. Along with other foreign goods, foreign literature too arrives. Its ideas intoxicate people and draw them to the path of self-indulgence. I have no doubt about that. Do not be vain and believe that your thoughts, or what in your immaturity you have read in books and understood from them, are the only truth, that what is old is barbarous and uncivilized and that truth lies only in things newly discovered. If you suffer from such vanity, I don't think you will bring credit to your Association. If you have still not fulfilled my hope that you have learnt humility, culture, a sense of propriety and purity from Sarala Devi, do so in future. Do not be puffed up because you have been praised for some good things you have done. Run away from praise, and don't think that you have done much. If you collected money for Bardoli, worked hard and sweated for the cause, if a few of you went to jail for it, I ask you, as a man of experience, 'Is it much that you have done?' Others may say that you have, but you should not rest satisfied with what you have done. You have to purify your inner life, and it is from your conscience that you have to obtain a real certificate. Truly speaking our *atman* too is generally asleep. It was said by Tilak Maharaj that in our languages we have no word corresponding to 'conscience'. We do not believe that everyone has a conscience; in the West they do. What conscience can an adulterous or dissolute man have? Tilak Maharaj, therefore, rejected the idea of conscience. Our seers and sages of old said that one must have an inner ear to hear the inner voice, that one must have the inner eye, and must cultivate self-control to acquire these. Hence, in Patanjali's treatise on yoga, the first step prescribed for the student of yoga, for one aspiring after self-realization, is the observance of the disciplines of *yama-niyama*<sup>1</sup>. There is no path but that of self-control for you or me or others. Tolstoy showed this by leading a long life of self-control. I wish and pray to God that we should be able to see this as clearly as daylight, and should leave this meeting with a resolution that we shall learn the lesson of self-control from Tolstoy's life.

Let us resolve that we will never give up the pursuit of truth. To follow truth, the only right path in this world is that of non-violence. Non-violence means an ocean of love, whose vastness no one has ever been able to measure. If it fills us we would be so large-hearted that we would have room in it for the whole world. I know this is difficult to achieve, but not impossible. Thus we heard the poet say, in the prayer with which we commenced, that

<sup>1</sup> Rules of moral and ethical discipline

he would bow his head only to him who was free from attachment and aversion, who had overcome all desires and who was the perfect embodiment of non-violence, that is, love, whether he was named Shanker or Vishnu or Brahma or Indra or whether he was Buddha or Siddha<sup>1</sup>? Such non-violence is not limited to refraining from killing disabled creatures. It may be dharma not to kill them, but love goes infinitely further than that. What does it profit a person that he saves the lives of disabled creatures, if he has had no vision of such love? In God's court, his work will have little value.

The third thing is bread labour—*yajna*. We earn the right to eat only by putting the body to hard work, by doing physical labour. *Yajna* means any work done for the service of others. It is not enough that we do physical labour; we should live only in order that we may serve others, and not that we may run after immoral and worldly pleasures. If a young man who has trained his body with rigorous exercise spends eight hours every day in such exercise, he is not doing 'bread labour'. I do not belittle your doing exercise and training your body; but such exercise does not constitute the *yajna* which Tolstoy has advised and which is described in Chapter III of the *Gita*. He who believes that this life is for *yajna*, for service, will day by day give up running after pleasures. True human effort consists in striving to realize this ideal. It does not matter if no human being has succeeded in doing that to perfection; let the ideal ever remain distant from us. We should walk and break stones, as Farhad did for Shirin, our Shirin being the ideal of non-violence. This certainly holds our little swaraj, but it holds everything else too.

[From Gujarati]

*Navajivan*, 16-9-1928

<sup>1</sup> One who has attained spiritual realization