

---

## UNIT 3 WESTERN PHILOSOPHY: GREEK TRADITION, RUSKIN, TOLSTOY AND THOREAU

---

### Structure

#### 3.1 Introduction

Aims and Objectives

#### 3.2 Greek History, Tradition and Philosophy

#### 3.3 John Ruskin

#### 3.4 Leo Tolstoy

#### 3.5 Henry David Thoreau

#### 3.6 Gandhi and Thoreau

#### 3.7 Summary

#### 3.8 Terminal Questions

Suggested Readings

---

### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

---

Gandhi was born in a traditional Hindu family, but went to England for education at an early age. Coming from a small town in Gujarat must have resulted in a cultural shock, but Gandhi tried to adjust to the new environs by wearing western clothes, adopting their mannerisms, and understanding their culture.

In those days, all the educated Indians thought that the word, 'British' was synonymous with fairness, justice, and equity. The title of Dadabhai Naoroji's book, *Poverty and UnBritish Rule in India*, is an example. The presumption was that whatever was unfair and unjust, was 'UnBritish'. Around this time, the attitude of the educated Indian leadership was slowly changing, and leaders like Tilak and Gokhale were emerging stronger in India. At this juncture, it is interesting to note that Gandhi adopted Gokhale as his political guru. By doing so, Gandhi started on a moderate course, like all Indians educated in the western method.

Gandhi studied the western authors of his interest, right from Socrates, and Plato. But a few thinkers, who had compassion for the mankind, attracted his attention, and he studied them thoroughly, and started implementing their philosophy in his day-to-day life. Socrates appealed to him as a satyagrahi. Plato's concept of education is seen in his approach to education, where he stresses basic education. Tolstoy influenced him so much that he started a settlement, Ashram, and named it Tolstoy Farm; Ruskin influenced economic thought, and Thoreau, his idea of civil disobedience. Even though he went to the west in an impressionable age, we see that he matured over the years, imbibing the best in western philosophy and values.

**Aims and objectives**

After studying this Unit, you would be able to understand:

- The main currents in Greek tradition with an emphasis on the views of Socrates
- The economic views of Ruskin
- The brief history of non-resistance and the philosophy of Tolstoy
- Thoreau's conceptualisation of civil disobedience.

---

## **3.2 GREEK TRADITION: HISTORY, TRADITION AND PHILOSOPHY**

---

Ancient Greece has been the cradle of western civilisation since the beginning of history. Greek art, literature, philosophy, metaphysics, epistemology, politics and ethics, astronomy, mathematics, logic etc., have shaped and moulded the western thought for many centuries and the process has continued even after the dawn of Christianity. Arnold Toynbee rightly remarked, "By seventh century after Christ, when ancient Greek civilisation may said to have finally dissolved, our own civilisation was ready to shoot up and thrive". W.C.K.Guthrie, the author of *A History of Greek Philosophy* is of the opinion that Greek philosophy forms the basis of western philosophy. He calls it 'the formative period' of western thought 'the making of the framework...until at least the latter part of nineteenth century' which is indicative of the 'dateless character' of Greek thought.

**Greece, The Land and People**

Greece, or Hellas as the Greeks called it, is a peninsula extending from the mainland Europe into the Mediterranean Sea. The land which could not support agriculture produced seafarers. The availability of excellent marble stone brought out the creativity in artists, sculptors and architects. Mountainous terrain where movement was difficult resulted in the formation of small city-states. City-state, which in Greek is the *polis*, meaning fortified site, contained the people, the fort, the city and the countryside. Of the city-states, two were significant. They were Athens, a seat of democracy and Sparta, essentially a military state. The year of first Olympiad that is 776 B.C., is marked as the beginning of Greek history.

The spirit of enquiry made Greeks the pioneers of rational thinking in Europe. There is hardly any area of enquiry that escaped the searching critical eye of Greeks. As Plato rightly remarked, 'philosophy is the child of wonder'. Religion and superstition never appealed to them, and in their search for reality they transcended their personal experience and became universal. Though, as Livingstone puts it, Greek thought suffered from two major limitations of 'difference of scale', aimed at universality and the thought was confined to the experiences of small city states and the 'difference of outlook between Greek and modern speculation', that is, it starts from universal to particular and the modern is vice versa. Yet their universal appeal cannot be ignored.

**History of Greek Philosophy**

Guthrie divides the history of Greek philosophy into two categories taking into account the difference of outlook and interest and also the centres of influence. Nevertheless the thread of continuity runs through, making them a continuum.

### Pre-Socratic period

During the Pre-Socratic period the focus of the philosophers was on the nature of universe and the true basis of conduct. Thales, considered as the 'first European philosopher' belongs to this period. **Milesian School** focussed on the study of *matter* as an intellectual pursuit. The nature of external world and its unity were the subjects of discussion. This school held that world has one substance, a single principle which is manifested differently in the beings and the change is due to its intrinsic character. **Heraclitus**, considered *fire* or the *hot and dry* as the basic substance and concluded that everything is in a state of flux, emphasising movement. His influence on the philosophical thought of Greece was phenomenal. **Democritus**, an advocate of materialism, gave the theory of atom, and the spontaneous movement of atom. His political views about the origin of state, political obligation, good ruler influenced Socrates, Plato and Aristotle.

As opposed to this monism, **Empedocles** advocated that four substances have made up this world and they are earth, water, air and fire. Thus the focus of early Socratic philosophers was towards understanding the nature, its components and the change.

**Pythagoras** focussed on the *study of form* with an intention to find a sound basis for life; applied the mathematical truths to the human life and came out with the principles of asceticism as an outcome of the principle of limit, community living and the doctrine of three classes based on the innate quality of the soul.

### Socratic period

The relative philosophy of Sophists was essentially 'practical and political'. Sophists were greatly responsible for the shift of focus of philosophical enquiry from nature to man. **Protagoras**, 'the most famous' (Guthrie) philosopher gave the doctrine of 'man the measure'. He writes: "Man is the measure of all things, of the things that are that they are, and of the things that are not that they are not". This became the basis of empiricism of Sophists.

### Socrates

**Socrates** (470-399 B.C.), an Athenian, believed that he had a divine commission to make others understand their mistake and improve. Aristotle was of the opinion that Socrates brought a shift of focus in philosophy 'from nature to practical morality and political thought'. Later Cicero writes "Socrates called down philosophy from the skies and implanted it in the cities and homes of men". He "brought it into communal life, compelling it to attend to questions of virtue and vice, good and evil".

Socrates followed his inner conviction under all circumstances, as is evident during his lifetime and even at his death. He never compromised with untruth and ignorance. He stood out alone in support of what he considered to be right. His action corroborated what he thought. There was no gap between preaching and practice. He was indifferent to pleasure and pain; what mattered most was the good of the soul, not the body.

Karl Popper in his book *Open Society and its enemies* (Vol I, p.207) beautifully summarises the mission of Socrates. He writes, "Socrates' death is the ultimate proof of his sincerity.....He showed that a man could die, not for fate and fame and other grand things of this kind, but also for the freedom of critical thought, and for a self-respect which has nothing to do with self-importance or sentimentality".

Though Socrates did not write anything, the details about his life, trial and conversations in the prison and drinking poison (hemlock) can be found in Platonic dialogues and Xenophon's writing. The great noble speech of Socrates is found in Plato's *Apology*; Plato's *Crito* is devoted to Socrates' refusal to escape punishment. The views of Socrates can be summed up as follows:

1. **Method of Socrates:** He followed inductive method, where general truth is understood through particular cases. Socrates followed question-answer method of analysis. This served two purposes: firstly it aimed at discovering truth and secondly it educated others to understand truth.
2. **Ethics is more important than science because of its practical use:** Xenophon opined that on four grounds Socrates rejects the pursuit of science and prefers study of ethics: Human affairs concerns us and therefore one cannot ignore the study of it; No two scientists come to an agreement as to what is correct in science; natural science is of no use; the secrets of nature are unfathomable.
3. **Virtue is knowledge:** The wrong doing is due to ignorance. Men do wrong because they do not know what is right. Socratic analogy for virtue was art or craft, not theoretical science. Hence knowledge is not just intellectual but practical. It is not just the natural gifts, learning and practice but it requires disciplining of mind by practice of dialectics and body by self-control.
4. **Wrong doing is involuntary:** For Socrates the most precious possession of man is his soul. Wrong doing is harmful to the soul. Out of ignorance, unknowingly one does wrong; therefore he needs to be persuaded and made to realise the distinction between right and wrong.
5. **An unexamined life is not worth living:** The search for self-knowledge is one's supreme duty, without which good life is not possible. Guthrie writes "one of Socrates' most instant exhortations to his fellow citizens was that they should look after – care for, tend-their souls". Body is the tool and the soul is the workman, the former should be under the control of the latter. In *Apology*, Plato writes "deck the *psyche* with her proper adornments, self-control, justice, courage, freedom and truth".
6. **Political obligation:** Socrates preached and practised obedience to state laws, the basis of obedience being the contract between the individual and state. 'The willingness of the individual to live in society governed by laws implies acceptance of contract...hence to disobey the law means dishonouring one's agreement' (Norman Gulley, 1968). The duty to obey laws is thus a moral duty. His refusal to escape punishment is a proof of his respect for law.
7. **Immortality of soul:** He believed that soul existed before the body and therefore death cannot destroy it. Death, for him, was 'either nothingness or a migration of soul from one world to another'.

Platonic utopia and Aristotle's investigations too form significant part of Greek tradition.

**Plato**, in his famous work *Republic*, gives a picture of an ideal state, the spirit of which is justice—individual and social. Individual justice refers to the harmony in the three elements of human soul namely reason, spirit and appetite. Individual justice can be attained by temperance. Corresponding to these elements there are three classes in the

community and the proper harmonious functioning of three classes results in justice in society. Education is a device through which one can know the vocation for which he is best suited.

Plato's views on education were far ahead of his time in many respects. He advocated uniform, state-controlled education for both boys and girls. He was of the opinion that a state that was devoid of the services of half of the population will be paralysed and there is no difference between man and woman as far as the elements of the soul are concerned.

Plato goes to the extent of providing a detailed curriculum. No wonder Rousseau declared that, *Republic* was the finest treatise on education ever written. He dwells on subjects which are to be taught at different stages, keeping in mind the growth of mind, body and soul. The purpose of education for Plato is turning the eye of the mind inward.

Gandhi drew support to his views from different sources, and one such support is ancient Greek philosophy in general and Socrates in particular. Socrates, a great satyagrahi, who was fearless even at the doorstep of death, inspired Gandhi. Gandhi had read Plato's dialogues. The summary of the views of Socrates in his defence were introduced to the readers of *Young India* by Gandhi in his series on 'the life of a Satyagrahi'.

---

### 3.3 JOHN RUSKIN (1819-1900)

---

John Ruskin, the author of *Unto this Last*, was an eminent critic of art and architecture, and evolved into a critic of social and economic architecture of his time. Son of a rich Scottish wine merchant, his mother was a devout Christian, and put her son through a Bible course along with his schooling. In 1837, Ruskin went to Oxford, and took a degree in 1842. He grew in eminence day by day, and became a celebrated critic of art and architecture. He had the reputation of introducing many talented painters to the British society, who, without his scholarly support, would have slipped into oblivion.

Gandhi held Ruskin in great esteem, for his book, 'Unto this last', which he read on his train journey from Johannesburg to Durban in 1904, and that was a turning moment in his life. Gandhi writes in his Autobiography, "I was determined to change my life in accordance with (Ruskin's) ideals". Of all the books that he had read, he said, "the one that brought about an instantaneous and practical transformation in my life was *Unto this last*. I translated it later into Gujarati, entitling it 'Sarvodaya' (the welfare of all)". He summarises Ruskin's ideas in three main lessons.

1. 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 from their work.
3. That a life of labour, i.e., the life of the tiller of the soil and the craftsman, is worth living.

Gandhi adapts Ruskin to the Indian context, for his anti-industrial, pro-labour, and pro-community views, and redefines Ruskin's values in the Indian rural context. Ruskin's concern is up to the last man, and Gandhi's 'Sarvodaya', is the welfare of all, differing in sequential aspect but spiritually the same.

### Ruskin's Time

The Victorian era, in which Ruskin lived, was an age of contradictions. The period enjoyed a long phase of peace, with social turmoil caused by the industrial revolution. The social historians observed contrasting characteristics. It was an age of 'faith and doubt', 'morality and hypocrisy,' 'splendour and squalor', and 'idealism and materialism'. Ruskin was a product of age, and drew inspiration from Plato and Bible; art and architecture. Even though he was a great art critic, he entered the field of Economics and attacked the well established theoreticians of his time with iconoclastic zeal.

### *Unto This Last*

The book *Unto This Last* gets its title from the Bible (Mathew xx14). It is a reference to the words of Jesus in the parable of workers in the vineyard. The book was first published as a serial of essays in Cornhill Magazine. The initial response to the book was hostility, derision, and opposition. Firstly, it tried to attack the Economics of Laissez Faire, and the concept of 'economic man', who is solely guided by the utility, and not at all concerned with the human values.

Secondly, it presses the need to consider human values, and ethical considerations for the economic activity. His critique of the eminent economists of the day, like Ricardo, J.S. Mill and Malthus created uproar, and Ruskin was criticised as lacking in logic and systematic thinking in a science, that was not his. However, Ruskin managed to make a dent in the conventional Economics. His kind of thinking began to be recognised.

**The Roots of Honour:** The first essay, named as 'The roots of honour' argues that the orthodox theory of Economics is outdated, as it considers man to be an 'economic being', ignores human relations, like the relationship between the employer and the employee. The author says that human relations should be based on affection and justice, not on hostility and competition. He gives the examples of 'five great intellectual professions', in which men should be ready to die, on 'due Occasion', namely,

The soldier, who is ready to die on the battlefield,

The physician, who will not desert a patient in need.

The pastor, who would preach truth, in all circumstances,

The lawyer, who would not give up the path of justice for any consideration.

The merchant-what is his due occasion of death

The author says, that it is the main question for the merchant, as for all of us, and says that a man who does not know when to die, does not know how to live. Ruskin feels that merchant does not have the commitment to stick to principle in adverse circumstances. Therefore, the author says that for proper employer-employee relations, wages should not be left to the market forces, irrespective of fluctuating demand for labour. The wages should be so determined that the worker should be ready to take responsibility for his work; the merchant comes in bad light for the author, as he does not take responsibility like the earlier categories. The employer-employee relations should be such that responsibility is established, and worker should be ready to suffer for his job.

**Veins of Wealth:** The second chapter, called 'Veins of Wealth', brings out a distinction between the 'Mercantile Economy' and the 'Political economy', where the former is concerned with riches people accumulate at the cost of others, and the latter deals with the economic well-being of the state, and citizenry. Unequal distribution of wealth is

harmful to the nation, and mercantile economy leads to such distribution and reduction in the power of the state. A proper distribution of wealth should be based on moral considerations. That gives the state power over men, and the real wealth would be happy and contented citizens.

**Just Distribution of Wealth:** The third chapter, called 'Qui Judicatis Terram' (*You are the Judges of the earth*) examines how wages can be properly distributed, leading to proper wealth distribution. The author admits that absolute justice is unattainable, and just wages depend on promise to give a person wages equivalent to the labour he has given. It has to be determined in terms of currency, and it is difficult to assess, but a practical, approximate assessment is possible. Underpayment and overpayment of wages is to be avoided, and this gives a chance for the poor to come up, and diminishes the power of the rich to acquire luxury and exercise moral influence.

Distress of the working man is due to forces of competition and oppression, let loose by the laissez faire economy, and government should make efforts to make these forces ineffective by cooperation. The author says that by proper efforts, proper exercise of judgement, this condition, conducive to working class, can be brought about.

**Redefining Economic Terms:** In the fourth chapter, 'Ad Valorem', the author tries to define the various economic terms, like value, wealth, price, and produce, and states that the definitions of traditional economists are inadequate. 'Any valuable thing' should be available for life. He says that the gold used to decorate the coffin has no value. Price is the exchange value and is expressed in currency. The price of a thing is the quality of labour given by a person to acquire it. The price of labour is invariable, if it has given quality and kind. Political economy considers production as an end in itself, but the author says that production should end in consumption, and the end consumption is life.

Having defined the various terms, the author argues that positive labour is the real wealth of the nation, and economics of self interest is harmful to the nation. The real wealth of a nation is a happy and contented work force, which seeks not only food, but also facility, for education, wisdom and salvation. Only with such a social condition, there will be bread and peace "unto this last as unto thee".

### **Ruskin and Gandhian Economic Thought**

Elizabeth T. McLaughlin, in her scholarly work, 'Ruskin and Gandhi', says that Ruskin can be easily called the "father of Gandhian economic thought". When Gandhi summarised Ruskin's thought, (given in paragraphs above), he said that the first principle he knew, and the second one he had dimly realised. He says, "The third never occurred to me. *Unto this last* made it clear as daylight for me that the second and third were contained in the first." In Gandhi's autobiography, the heading of the chapter relating to Ruskin is "Magic spell of the book."

McLaughlin states that Ruskin influenced Gandhi's conception of soul-force as a substitute for physical force; he was the chief source of Gandhian economic ideas, but above all, "he changed Gandhi as a person". This is far more than exerting influence. The suddenness of the change was more akin to an instantaneous religious conversion. She says, "Gandhi's discovery of Ruskin's book was as significant a contribution to his development and as genuine as an encounter between two deeply concerned human beings, as any actual meeting could have been".

Gandhian economics has continued to hold sway on people's minds, and successor to Gandhi in his economic thought was J.C. Kumarappa, whose work, *Economy of Permanence* brings out the Gandhian thought and puts it in a systematic and theoretical format. His ideas are India specific, and Gandhi himself certified that Kumarappa was his heir apparent in carrying forward his ideas on Economics.

Another person who significantly contributed to this branch is E.F.Schumacher, whose work, *Small is Beautiful* had an impact on economic thinking all over the world. He said that he was treating Economics "as if people mattered". His book, "Small is Beautiful" had Gandhi's picture on the cover. He popularised the concept of "intermediate technology", which in his own words, would complement a man's initiative, instead of killing it. He said, "Bring machine to the man, and not man to the machine". He has profusely quoted J.C.Kumarappa and his work throughout his book, and has drawn inspiration from him.

Thus, the tradition of Ruskin continues, through his disciple, M.K. Gandhi. Ruskin once told his admirer that he would not care whether one enjoyed his books or not, but the important question was that, "have they done you any good?" His book continues to do good to the world through his able follower and admirer.

### **3.4 TOLSTOY, COUNT LEO NIKOLAEVICH (1828-1910)**

Born in 1828, Tolstoy was one of the greatest influences on Gandhi. He was born into Russian aristocracy, and led a life of pleasure and indulgence. At the age of fifty, his introspection began, and started getting tormented internally. Tolstoy confesses, "my life was but a long indulgence of my passions: it was a thing without meaning and evil". Questions relating to nature and self, good and evil, purpose of life, started agitating his mind. He studied many western philosophers like Plato, Kant, and Pascal. Schopenhauer, who was opposed to rationalism, and based morality on feelings, sympathy, asceticism, and saintliness, had a special appeal for him.

Dissatisfied, he turned to religion for solace, and sought answers for his questions there. His main intention was to free himself from 'nihilism'. His eminence as a novelist is unsurpassed. He wrote great novels like *War and Peace*, and *Anna Karenina*. His other works include *My confessions*, *My faith*, *The Christian teaching*, *What are we to do*, *My life*, *My Religion*. The work which influenced Gandhi most was a long essay called, *The Kingdom of God is within You*.

**Influences on Tolstoy:** Tolstoy belongs to a line of Christian thinkers who believed in the non-resistance to violence, either by the individual or the state. He points out in his long essay:

- *From the very foundation of Christianity the doctrine of not resisting evil by violence has been professed, and still is professed by the minority of men.*
- *There have been many Christian sects which practiced non-resistance as a creed. The Quakers, a sect which believes in non-resistance, which, for more than two hundred years, has been practicing the teachings of Christ, as to non-resistance of evil by violence, and not to use weapons for self-defence.*

*Tolstoy is in the line of non-resistance thinkers, who include the Christian sects like Quakers, Mennonites, Bogomiles, Paulicians, and other independent thinkers, who were inspired by the Gospel. One of them was Lloyd Garrison, who in 1838 took*

part in a discussion in a society for the Establishment of Peace among men- on means of preventing the war. They issued a declaration signed in 1838 which was signed by many members, to carry forward the work of peaceful and universal reformation. The Quakers, especially with a book published in 1827, showed that Christianity can be never reconciled with violence, far less with war. In spite of that, they wondered, how can church preach that war and Christianity can combine, which is continuously being preached.

Another person who influenced Tolstoy was Adin Ballou, who preached the principle of non-resistance for fifty years. 'Jesus Christ is my lord and master', declared Ballou, and said that if there is a conflict between being a citizen under the Constitution and being a Christian, he would prefer to be a good Christian, as ever. He died in 1890.

Tolstoy was also influenced by Chech Chelcicky, whose work was known by the title, 'Net of Faith'. A Christian, according to Chelcicky, cannot be a ruler or a soldier, nor can he take part in government, not even can be a landowner, or a merchant, because all these activities involve violence in one kind or the other. Hence he can only be an artisan or husbandman.

Tolstoy was a very devout Christian, who sought intellectual, philosophical, and moral justification for his daily life in the teachings of Gospel. He was an anarchist, who thought that Christianity is a substitute for the state. His philosophy can be summed up as follows.

1. **Human life:** His philosophy of life is derived from Gospel. Though he believed that infinite perfection that Christ delivers cannot be attained, efforts can be made in that direction. He writes, "Striving towards full and infinite perfection will constantly increase the good of men, so that good can be endlessly increased". The animal life should become divine. This can happen only when man frees himself from animal force and subjects himself to divine force. Tolstoy considered this a true life. Tolstoy conceptualised human life at three levels: animal, social and divine in ascending order, the highest being divine, where the essence of soul is limitless love.
2. **Social and divine conception of life:** He makes a distinction between social commandments and Christian commandments, calling the latter positive prescriptions and the former negative sign-posts: no ill-will towards any one, perfect chastity even in thought, not promising anything for the future, not to employ violence and to love enemies. Tolstoy, through this view of life, tried to answer the rationalists and the positivists who challenged it as impracticable.

The social conception of life restricts the expanse of love to oneself, family, tribe, and clan and at the highest nation. It does not go beyond this. For Tolstoy there is a possibility of endless extension of sphere of love. It brings man back to his "elementary consciousness; not of himself as animal but of himself as God- the divine spark in himself."

3. **Universal sympathy and love:** Tolstoy believed that man's animal tendency and separateness makes him work towards the satisfaction of his own passions and needs, taking him away from his true self. There are six enemies that hinder the realisations of true self. They are sensuality, avarice, idleness, ambition, sexual sin etc. In order to overcome these sins, man must free himself from intoxication of body and mind. Since intoxication cannot be completely overcome, he thought that it can be

minimised. Hence he preferred an ascetic life to sinful life. He wrote in his article, 'Demands of love' (2.10.1897), wherein he asserted that "We must go forward prepared to die. Only that life is true which knows no limit to sacrifice- even unto death".

4. **Rejection of force and violence in all forms:** According to Tolstoy, 'men are caught in a circle of violence', which has *four links* of a chain. The first one is *intimidation*, where the existing state organisation is held to be sacred and immutable, where anybody opposing it is punished barbarously, and no attempt to alter it is acceptable. Russia prosecuted the so-called Nihilists, America anarchists, and France imperialists. The various devices of the state, like railways, telegraph, telephones, photography, and perfected method of disposing them of men without killing them, give advantage to the governments to prosecute men and intimidate them. He says that there is no possibility of overthrowing the governments, however cruel and insensitive they may be.

The second one is *corruption*. This, according to Tolstoy, is taking taxes from the working class, and distributing it among the officials, who, for this remuneration, keep the people enslaved. He says that these 'bought officials', from the highest to lowest rank, make an unbroken chain, and the more submissive they are, greater is the violence, and promote their own welfare by the money they get.

The third means, he says, is the *hypnotisation of the people*. This is adopted to retard the spiritual development of men, and giving them a concept of life, on which the power of the government rests. They are taught the superstition of patriotism, and the pseudo obligation to obey the state. The fourth method is to select some men, who have been influenced by the three methods above, and subject them to *stupefaction and brutalisation* so that they become instruments of the state, to promote its brutalities.

5. **Rejection of private property:** Tolstoy rejected the concept of private property. He maintained that the private property promoted crime, and the state becomes an instrument in preserving the private property and the consequent crime. He identified himself with the downtrodden and toiled men, and said that the crimes committed by such people are less harmful to the society than the crimes committed by the state.
6. **Principle of non-violence:** This principle, glorified in the words of Christ, had not attracted much attention, as it was relegated to background and small creeds, which professed non-resistance and non-violence, were not heeded, and this thought was never allowed to come into the mainstream Christian thought form. Tolstoy began to preach them, and more importantly began to practise them, and he began to attract scorn and denunciation. He was excommunicated by the Most Holy Synod, and was placed under police supervision, and many of his works were suppressed by the censor. When Gandhi adopted the principle, he could give it a mass base, and make it a tool of the oppressed. He compared Tolstoy to the ancient sages in India, who gave eternal values, which were adopted and practised by generations of men.

---

### 3.5 HENRY DAVID THOREAU (1817-1862)

---

A philosopher, non-conformist, naturalist, individualist, and a rebel with a cause, Thoreau is one of the notable American thinkers of the 19th century. His experiments of living with nature, in harmony with it, which have been documented in his work, 'Walden Pond',

have become ideals for naturalists and conservationists. He was not a reformer, and did not wish to be a reformer. He agreed with Socrates that each person has to scrutinise right or wrong with his individual reasoning. He was a friend and contemporary of Ralph Waldo Emerson, and was a supporter of John Brown, who fought for the abolition of slavery in America.

His father was a pencil maker, and Thoreau worked in this profession in 1844. He also worked as a schoolteacher, after his graduation from Harvard. He gave up pencil making after sometime, and remarked that it would take ten years to stabilise in the trade, and by that time, he would be on his way to the 'devil'. He also worked as a surveyor, and worked on his job in the mornings, and devoted the rest of the day for the pursuit that was dear to his heart: upholding the individual dignity and liberty.

Thoreau is well known for his two works, the first and the foremost being his essay, '*Duty of Civil Disobedience*,' published in 1849. This work, which upheld the individual liberty and dignity against the machinery of the state, influenced thinkers like Tolstoy, in 19th century, and Gandhi in 20th century. Another important work is '*The Service*', in which he advocated the doctrine of simplicity, after he came out of his Walden Pond experiments. His doctrine was based on his earlier experience, which led to his respecting and revering nature, and perfect his own unique self. This idea got crystallised in his thirties and forties, and a complete statement of this came about in his early essay, '*The Service*'. He aimed at achieving a perfect mankind, by making each man perfect, thus achieving universal perfection.

The duty of man, according to Thoreau, was to perfect his unique self, whatever may be his calling. "Every stroke of the chisel must enter our own flesh and bone", he said. What he said in his writing, he proceeded to realise in his life. He wanted to put his spiritual assertions into practise, so that he could test his assertions on the anvil of pragmatism. He did not get any opportunity to do that, and realised that the market economy, which did not allow any creativity, sucked in the man, and reduced him to a faceless worker, "the slave of the strongest." He said, "We do not ride on the railroad, it rides upon us", and said that each of the sleepers put on the railway line is a man. "The rails are laid on them, and they are covered with sand, and the cars smoothly run over them".

He and the fellow thinker, George Ripley, established their experimental orders on the same principles. Neither of them provided for the employer-employee relations as that would lead to the class conflict and economic exploitation. He spoke of a simple life, where man would not hire another, nor would he work for another. Each man would eat what he grew, and grow only what he ate, and avoid as much as possible, the trade and barter. Their aim was that each man should receive the entire value for his labour, and to *eliminate the distinction between the work by hand and work by mind*. By doing so, they thought that man's activity would lead to his perfection. Both the applications were not practical, and remained academic curiosities. Only the spirit of their experiments, and the goodwill both thinkers had for the mankind, remain as examples of efforts to marry spiritualism to practical behaviour.

### **On Duty of Civil Disobedience**

Thoreau's essay, published in 1849, had a great influence on Gandhi. It gave moral and ethical support to Gandhi's movement, which he had just then launched in South Africa. Thoreau discussed the nature of governments, and what he expects of them. He says, "it is not enough if we have a government which governs the least, but we should have a

government which does not govern at all". He says that government is at best, an expedient.

He discusses the role of the government taking two issues that were current at that time. The Mexican War and the abolition of slavery were the two burning topics of the day. He says that when a majority government decides to go to war, it is not due to any wisdom on its part, but it is physically strong and may not have the conscience.

He says that all voting is a sort of gaming, playing with the right and wrong, and the wise man will not leave the right to the mercy of chance. He says that when majority votes for the abolition of slavery, there is little slavery left to be abolished by their vote. A man's vote hastens the abolition when he asserts his freedom by his vote.

He says that we tacitly support the immoral activities of the government, and after the first blush of sin, comes the indifference, and from immoral, it becomes unmoral, not necessary at all to the life we have made. He admits that unjust laws do exist, but can one wait until the majority is persuaded to alter them? If someone resists the law, they think, the remedy would be worse than evil. Why not provide for the reform, and why not cherish its wise minority? He says that it is the fault of the government that makes remedy worse than the evil. Thoreau writes:

"If the injustice is a part of the necessary friction of the machine of the government, let it go, let it go: perchance it will wear smooth—certainly the machine will wear out. If the injustice has a spring, or a pulley, or a rope, or a crank, exclusively for itself, then perhaps you may consider whether the remedy will not be worse than the evil, but if not is of such a nature that it requires you to be agent of injustice, to another, then I say, break the law. Let your life be a counter-friction to stop the machine. What I have to do is to see at any rate, that I do not lend myself to the wrong which I condemn".

Thoreau says that if the Constitution does not provide for a remedy to the citizen, then the very Constitution is evil. He states with the conviction of a crusader, that if a government imprisons unjustly, the true place for a just man is also a prison. He exhorts, "cast your whole vote, not strip of paper merely, but your whole influence. A minority is powerless while it conforms to the majority, it is not even a minority then; but it is irresistible when it clogs by its whole weight."

When he was jailed for not paying the taxes, he said, "I cannot help being struck with the foolishness of the institution which treated me as if I were mere flesh and blood and bones to be locked up. As they could not reach me, they had resolved to punish my body, just as the boys, if they cannot come at some person against whom they have spite, will abuse his dog. I saw that the state was half witted, that it was timid as a lone woman with her silver spoons, and that it did not know its friends from its foes, and I lost all my remaining respect for it, and pitied it." He was ready to submit to the authority of the government, "if they know and can do better than him, and in many things, even those who neither know nor can do so well, is still an impure one: to be strictly just, it must have the sanction and consent of the governed."

---

### **3.6 GANDHI AND THOREAU**

---

The influence of Thoreau on Gandhi has been written about, widely, whenever the freedom movement in India is discussed. While emerging as the leader of people of Indian origin in South Africa, Gandhi was fighting the Asiatic Registration Act, which required

people of Asiatic origin, residing in Transvaal to register themselves. They had to give fingerprints, and failure to register attracted punishment and deportation. Gandhi launched his agitation against it, and in his article dated September, 11, 1907, in *Indian Opinion*, declared the 'advent of Satyagraha'. The article declared that Indians would not submit to the Ordinance, and would suffer all the penalties for their disobedience. This article quoted Thoreau, and his views on civil disobedience, and the necessity to oppose a tyrannical rule. If Gandhi were to quote profusely from Thoreau, he must have read it by that time. But, Gandhi in many of his letters makes it clear that he had adopted the method of civil disobedience before he read Thoreau, but reading Thoreau underlined, fortified, and justified his belief.

In his 'Appeal to American Friends' in 1942, Gandhi wrote, "You have given me a teacher in Thoreau, who furnished me through his essay on the 'Duty of civil Disobedience', scientific confirmation of what I was doing in South Africa". Americans like to believe that Thoreau was a decisive influence on Gandhi. But, Gandhi himself denies this, and his letter written to P.Kodanda Rao, of the Servants of India society, states as follows:

*"The statement that I derived my idea of Civil Disobedience from Thoreau is wrong. The resistance to authority in South Africa was well advanced before I got the essay of Thoreau on Civil Disobedience. But the movement was then known as passive resistance. As it was incomplete, I coined the word, 'Satyagraha' for Gujarati readers. When I saw the title of Thoreau's great essay, I began to use his phrase to explain the struggle to English readers".*

Gandhi was well advanced in his tactic of Satyagraha and civil disobedience, even before he read Thoreau's essay. But his essay provided the legitimacy for the western readers, and made west understand his methods. Gandhi had named his movement as "passive resistance", but there was nothing passive about it, as it involved boycotting schools, colleges, courts, and making bonfire of imported clothes, and courting arrest by violating the prohibitory orders. The concept of Satyagraha was far wider than the 'civil disobedience', which moved only after a tyrannical government moved to subjugate its citizens. Satyagraha moved on its own, as an engine of protest, against injustice.

---

### 3.7 SUMMARY

---

Gandhi's early initiation to western education, and stay in England made him come under the influence of western thinkers. He hailed Socrates, his teachings, and called him a great Satyagrahi. His thoughts on education were influenced by Plato. Ruskin was his inspiration for his economic policy, and translated the former's book, "Unto This Last" as "Sarvodaya" in Gujarati, which amplified the ideas of Ruskin in Indian circumstances. Tolstoy was a leading thinker of the Christian principle of non-resistance to violence. His book, "The Kingdom of God is within you" influenced Gandhi so immensely. His admiration of him was so immense that he started a community living farm named after Tolstoy, to follow his principles. Thoreau gave justification to Gandhi's struggle against the state, when it took steps which were repressive. Gandhi was already leading the struggle against the South African Government when he read the essay by Thoreau, 'On Civil Disobedience'. He was so impressed by it, that he wrote a series of articles in his magazine about it. It not only got moral support from Thoreau, but also enabled the western world to understand Gandhi.

---

### 3.8 TERMINAL QUESTIONS

---

1. Why did Gandhi call Socrates a great Satyagrahi? Substantiate.
2. Critically examine the principles of Ruskin's economics. How did he differ from classical economists?
3. Examine the influence of non-resistance thinkers on Tolstoy.
4. Examine Thoreau's arguments in support of civil disobedience
5. Bring out the influences of western thinkers on Gandhi's economic and political philosophy.

---

### SUGGESTED READINGS

---

1. Guthrie, W.K.C., A History of Greek Philosophy, Volumes I-IV, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
2. Livington, R.W.,(ed), The Legacy of Greece, Oxford University Press, London.
3. John Ruskin., 'UNTO THIS LAST'
4. Gandhi., M.K., 'SARVODAYA',
5. Leo Tolstoy., The Kingdom of God is Within You and Peace Essays, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1951.
6. Thomas Weber., Gandhi as Disciple and Mentor, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2007.
7. Henry David Thoreau., Life Without Principles
8. Henry David Thoreau., 'On the duty of Civil Disobedience'
9. Stroller, Leo., 'Thoreau's Doctrine of simplicity', in The New England Quarterly Vol. 29. No.4 (December 1956), pp.443-461.
10. Ramana Murti, V.V., 'Influence of Western tradition on Gandhian Doctrine', in Philosophy East and West, Vol.18. No.1 / 2(January-April, 1968), pp.55-65.
11. Hendrick, George., 'The influence of Thoreau's Civil Disobedience on Gandhi's Satyagraha', in The New England Quarterly, Vol. 29, No.4, (December 1956), pp.462-471.
12. Relevant portions of The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, Volumes 1-96, Publications Division, New Delhi.