

Mahatma's Mahatma: Srimad Rajchandra and Metaphysical Evolution of Mahatma Gandhi

Key words :

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, Srimad Rajchandra, Raychandbhai.

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, the person who himself influenced a sea of people worldwide in the most colossal way and still holds the same place in the hearts of the millions, acknowledged Srimad Rajchandra as one of those luminaries who had the greatest impact on his inner side.

Rajchandra (1867-1901), a great Jain poet, philosopher, reformer and a spiritual dignitary, is in Gujrati also popularly hailed as , 'Mahatma No Mahatma' ('Mahatma's Mahatma'), i.e. the spiritual mentor of Mahatma Gandhi. Rajchandra had a tremendous and formative influence on the Father of the Nation. "Such was the man who captivated my heart in religious matters as no other man ever has till now." (Mahatma Gandhi on Shrimad Rajchandra - Modern Review, June 1930). This is how Gandhi was enthralled by the metaphysical vision of Srimad. One can find several mentions of Srimad in Gandhi's correspondences and writings, this asserts the ingrained influence that Rajchandra's personality exerted on Mahatma's life.

This paper intends to throw light upon the ethereal bond which Mahatma Gandhi and Srimad Rajchandra shared with each other and how this bond contributed into the spiritual and philosophical leanings and evolution of Mahatma Gandhi.

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It was the month of July in the year 1891, when the twenty-two year-old Barrister-at-law—Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi returned from England after completing his Law education and reached Bombay. On arriving at the Bombay docks, Gandhi met his brother Lakshmandas. It was then that Gandhi learnt, for the first time, of the death of his mother. She had passed away while he was still in England. Until the very end she had hoped to see her beloved Munnu (Mohandas), but the time ran out for her. The news had been kept from Gandhi to spare him the pain.

Gandhi was stricken with grief. It was at such a sombre time that a friend Dr. Pranjivandas Mehta (Gandhi's Gujarati friend from England days), with whom he was staying in Bombay, introduced Gandhi to a person who could provide him solace and spiritual sustenance. This luminary was none other than Rajchandra, Gandhi narrates, "The doctor introduced Raychandbhai¹ as "a poet", and added, "Though a poet, he is in our (diamond) business. He is a man of spiritual knowledge and a shatavadhani" (One who can pay attention to a hundred activities simultaneously)."²

At the time of this meeting there was not much difference in age between the two; the kavi (24 yrs), born in 1867, was barely two years older than Gandhi (22 yrs), born in 1869. Yet at this point the poet was spiritually far more advanced than Gandhi, who was novice in the matters of incorporeal affairs — though knowing little, but more than desirous to learn. At this particular point of time the meeting between the two played the most crucial part in the spiritual and philosophical leanings and evolution of the young Gandhi.

They bonded really well and had so much in common, 'Soon they were fast friends- after all they both came from Saurashtra, spoke the same language, were close in age and in interests and kindred spirits.'³

An association with Srimad Rajchandra at the very young age when Gandhi had just finished his education, had not even started carrier in legal practice and was miles away from the start of his phenomenal public-political life, sculpted Mahatma's ideology in the most tremendous way.

Before Gandhi would come to know the deeper and spiritual side of the poet, he was first exposed to his "charismatic" side (the word memory test was part of this), which greatly impressed Gandhi.

In his autobiography Gandhi reminisces, "Someone suggested that I should utter a number of words in his presence, saying that no matter to what language they belonged he would repeat them in the same order in which I had uttered them. I could not believe this. I was a young man, had just returned from England, and was a little vain, too, of my knowledge of languages; in those days I was under the powerful spell of English."⁴

It is interesting to note that, Gandhi offered a word-memory test to Rajchandra and while doing so, the western-educated, puffed up young barrister wanted to show off his own newly acquired knowledge of a few European words. As Gandhi further narrates, "Having been to England made a man feel that he was heaven-born. I poured out all my store of knowledge, and first wrote out words from different languages—for how possibly could I afterwards remember them in their due order? I then read out the words. Raychandbhai repeated them slowly one after another and in the same order. I was pleased and astonished, and formed a high opinion about his memory. This was an excellent experience to break a little the binding spell of English on me."⁵

The Poet did not know English at all. He had studied in the Gujarati school and even then he possessed such a powerful memory and such knowledge, and was respected by everyone around him. Gandhi was more than enthralled and was all admiration for kavi.

That very day when he met Srimad for the very first time, taught Gandhi many lessons as he realised so many facts, "The power of memory is not sold in schools. Knowledge, too, can be acquired without going to school if one wants it—is keen on it—and one need not go to England or elsewhere to command respect, for virtue is always respected. I learned these truths on the very day I landed in Bombay."⁶

Though Kavi's glamorous side impressed Gandhi but it was the spiritual aspect of Kavi's personality that left Gandhi immensely and incredibly spellbound and inspired, which Gandhi later on comes across. "He was not above twenty-five then, but my first meeting with him convinced me that he was a man of great character and learning."⁷

Srimad's wide knowledge of the scriptures, his spotless character, and his burning passion for self-realization enthralled young Gandhi to no end. In a letter to his friend and his closest early colleague in Johannesburg, Henry Polak (26 April 1909), Gandhi writes - "The more I consider his life and his writings, the more I consider him to have been the best Indian of his times. Indeed I put him much higher than Tolstoy in religious perception. The books I have read have offered me the highest solace. They should be read over and over again. So far as the English books are concerned, Tolstoy is incomparable in my opinion in chastity of thought. His definition of the purpose of life is unanswerable and easy to understand. Both he and Tolstoy have lived as they have preached."⁸

What inspired Gandhi the most was the fact that despite his "burning passion for self realization", Srimad never neglected his "samsaric dharma". The ease with which he performed his duties as a pearl and diamond jeweller with a perfectly detached attitude amazed Gandhi. At such young age, Rajchandra was a successful "zaveri" (diamond-jeweller), highly respected for his integrity. He had also earned name and fame as a "maha-jnani" (maha: great; jnani: the knower)

with encyclopaedic knowledge of all world-scriptures. Not only that, being a "shatavadhani," Rajchandra could also engage in many different activities simultaneously (e.g. counting money, playing cards, composing poems instantaneously) without ever failing. Gandhi showers praises, "I have not observed in anyone else such a beautiful combination of practical ability and devotion to dharma as I did in the Poet."⁹

Gandhi calls Srimad the 'Diamond Connoisseur' as his commercial transactions covered hundreds of thousands. No knotty business problem was too difficult for him. But still the centre round which his life revolved was the passion to see God face to face. Amongst the things on his business table there were invariably to be found some religious book and his diary. The moment he finished his business he opened the religious book or the diary. Much of his published writings were the reproduction from this diary. "The man who, immediately on finishing his talk about weighty business transaction, began to write about the hidden things of the spirit could evidently not be a businessman at all, but a real seeker after Truth. And I saw him thus absorbed in godly pursuits in the midst of business, not once or twice, but very often. I never saw him lose his state of equipoise."¹⁰

In spite of being an extremely busy businessman, Kavi was extremely forthcoming as regards religious discussions, Gandhi admires him to no end, "Every day he had men like me, in search of knowledge, coming to him. He would not hesitate to discuss religious matters with them."¹¹

Gandhi formed the impression that Srimad was completely upright in his dealings. Gandhi, who was accidentally present sometimes when he negotiated a deal, saw his terms always clear and firm. He never saw any 'cleverness' about them. If the other party tried it, he immediately saw through it, and would not tolerate it. Though he did not know English, he could deal with his foreign agents very efficiently.

“Raychandbhai disproved the prevalent idea that a man who is wise in the sphere of dharma will not be wise in the affairs of practical life. He displayed the utmost vigilance and intelligence in his business. He could judge the worth of diamonds and pearls with the utmost accuracy.”¹²

Gandhi holds that the general belief is that religious-minded men are so simple that everyone can deceive them, that they understand nothing about worldly affairs. But the poet defied it, “(rather) the Poet used to say that it should be impossible to deceive a person of perfect spiritual knowledge. In the presence of such knowledge, hypocrisy and fraud cannot keep their mask for long. Untruth cannot flourish in the presence of truth. In the presence of non-violence, violence ceases. “Where the light of honesty shines, the darkness of deception vanishes. The moment a man of spiritual knowledge devoted to dharma sees a deceitful man, his heart melts with compassion. How can one who has seen the self in him fail to understand another person?”¹³

Gandhi states that there was no business or other selfish tie that bound Kavi to him, and yet he enjoyed the closest association with him. “I was but a briefless barrister then, and yet whenever I saw him he would engage me in conversation of a seriously religious nature. Though I was then groping and could not be said to have any serious interest in religious discussion, still I found his talk of absorbing interest. I have since met many a religious leader or teacher. I have tried to meet the heads of various faiths, and I must say that no one else has ever made on me the impression that Raychandbhai did. His words went straight home to me. His intellect compelled as great a regard from me as his moral earnestness, and deep down in me was the conviction that he would never willingly lead me astray and would always confide to me his innermost thoughts. In my moments of spiritual crisis,¹⁴ therefore, he was my refuge.”¹⁵

As Gandhi remained in close contact with Srimad, he observed his day to day life, probably

his admiration towards him made him do that as he wanted to know about him as much as possible. He observed that Srimad was extremely simple and down to earth. There was a strange power in his eyes; they were extremely bright, and free from any sign of impatience or anxiety. Gandhi recollects fondly, “He looked an embodiment of peace. There was such sweetness in his voice that one simply wanted to go on listening to him. The face was smiling and cheerful; it shone with the light of inner joy. He had such ready command of language that I do not remember him ever pausing for a word to express his thoughts. I rarely saw him changing a word while writing a letter. And yet the reader would never feel that any thought was imperfectly expressed, or the construction of a sentence was defective or the choice of a word faulty. These qualities can exist only in a man of self-control.”¹⁶

Gandhi holds that as a writer (‘Atma Siddhi’ and ‘Mokshamala’ being two of his most prominent works) also Srimad showed his utmost truthfulness and veracity and his writings are of same significance for the people of every faith, “I have always felt that Shrimad’s writings breathe the spirit of truth. He did not write a single word in order to show off his knowledge. His aim in his writings was to share his inward bliss with his readers. I am sure that anyone who wishes to free himself from inner conflicts and is eager to know his duty in life will gain much from Srimad’s writings, whether such a reader is a Hindu or belongs to another faith.”¹⁷

Srimad’s distinctive composition, ‘Apurva Avsar Evo Kyare Aavshe?’ was one of Gandhi’s favourites. It was included in the ‘Ashram Bhajanavali’ - a collection of devotional songs sung at daily prayer meetings. Gandhi often recited Srimad’s poems also.

The Ethereal Bond: The Long Association

From 1891 to 1901 A.D. (from their first meeting till Srimad’s premature death at the age of 34) for a period of ten years they were best friends. During the two years that

Gandhi spent in Mumbai, as he listened to the poet's discourses, questioned him, and engaged in deep philosophical-spiritual conversations with him, he felt a deep, heart to heart and soul-to-soul connection with Rajchandra. And even after Gandhi moved to South Africa, the meetings continued, though not in person, but through correspondence. Srimad's letters and compositions were Gandhi's dear companions. He contemplated upon them time and time again. Gandhi would write about Srimad, speak about Him in speeches, wrote articles and discuss and write about him to his close associates and acquaintances. He continued to be deeply inspired by his bond with Srimad and his spiritual works.

"The acquaintance with the poet grew over the years. Other persons possess a powerful memory, and one need not be dazzled by it. Knowledge of the Shastras, too, is found in plenty in many. But such persons, if they have no real culture, can give us nothing of value. A combination of powerful memory and knowledge of the Shastras will have real worth and will benefit the world only if they exist along with genuine culture of the heart."¹⁸

The strong affinity which both these two dignitaries shared at a deep spiritual and intellectual level was quite similar to what Shri Krishna shared with Arjuna in the Bhagavad Gita — i.e. of a trusted friend, a 'soul mate,' and a spiritual mentor-adviser cum teacher. "Spiritual cravings" bound them together, if Gandhi was drawn to Rajchandra naturally, Rajchandra too, was equally happy and grateful to find someone his own age, who was genuinely inclined towards the matters of soul and spirit. The solemnity and genuineness with which Srimad wrote letters to Gandhi speaks volumes.

As Erik Erikson opines, Rajchandra was the "anchor of young Gandhi's religious imagination during the very period of his life when he felt most lost".¹⁹ Erikson continues, "No doubt young Gandhi recognized in the twenty-five-year-old friend something of what he felt was his

own essence..."²⁰ It was through Rajchandra that Gandhi was discovering and uncovering his true self — his inherent divinity and a whole new world of the inner possibilities of 'atman' or the soul.

Refuge In Spiritual Crisis: Gandhi's Religious Dilemma And Quest

Long before he became Mahatma, Gandhi faced a spiritual crisis in South Africa when once there came a moment in his life when he was lost and Srimad came to his rescue. 'In his earliest days in South Africa Gandhi came into close contact with devoted proselytising Christians and spent much time in religious debates with them. His religious yearnings had these friends see Gandhi as a potential convert. (it seems that his Muslim friends also had the same idea, and it appears that he came close.)'²¹

As a result he had to face a mental storm which arose in his mind. He at once wrote to Kavi Rajchandra and sought his help to clear the doubtful points, which were troubling his mind. He put no less than 27 questions to the Kavi, which were duly answered.²² These Questions and answers have a particular importance and meaning as they come from two great geniuses, who India gave to world in this century. Revolving around a range of metaphysical affairs (Soul and its functions, nature of Dharma, nature of God and creation of universe, possibility of Moksha, Bhagvad Gita, Vedas, Bible, Universe, Bhakti) Srimad's judicious, direct, and pertinent answers resolved Gandhi's doubts and restored his conviction in his own faith. Srimad's teachings left an indelible mark on Gandhi. Srimad's priceless letters and compositions were his constant companions - physically and mentally.

Gandhi himself has narrated descriptively about this spiritual crisis and gives credit to Srimad for providing him refuge, "When I began to feel doubts about Hinduism as a religion, it was Raychandbhai who helped me to resolve them. In the year 1893, I came into close contact with some Christian gentlemen in South Africa. Their lives were pure, and they were devoted to their

religion. Their main work in life was to persuade followers of other faiths to embrace Christianity. Though I had come into contact with them in connection with practical affairs, they began to feel solicitude for my spiritual welfare.”²³

Gandhi goes on, “I carried on correspondence with some friends I had made in London. I placed my doubts before them. I entered into correspondence with every person in India in whom I had some trust, Raychandbhai being the chief among them.

I had already been introduced to him and a close bond had grown between us. I had respect for him, and so I decided to get from him everything he could give. The result was that I gained peace of mind. I felt reassured that Hinduism could give me what I needed. The reader will have some idea of how much my respect for Raychandbhai must have increased because of his being responsible for this result.”²⁴ Rajchandra's letters somewhat pacified Gandhi. He asked Gandhi to be patient and study Hinduism more deeply.²⁵

Contribution to the Nation: ‘Satya aur Ahinsa’ and ‘Sarva-Dharma-Samabhava’

One of Gandhi's greatest assets was his open-mindedness and his constant striving in the quest of truth. These virtues propelled him towards Rajchandra and helped him imbibe much of the distilled wisdom of this person of unique qualities. Gandhi absorbed Rajchandra's open-minded attitude to religion and would later demonstrate the same inclusive, reconciliatory approach to all warring religions. His “sarva-dharma-samabhava” stance of “equal respect for all religions” and his acceptance of different religious/political perspectives were a direct influence of Srimad's ideas. Acknowledging his indebtedness to the kavi, Gandhi states, “Raychandbhai showed through his life that, if a man is devoted to dharma, this devotion should be evident in every action of his. It is not true at all that dharma is something to be observed on the Ekadashi day (Eleventh day of the each half of the lunar month) or during the Paryushan (A week

devoted by Jains to fasting and self-purification), on the Id day (A day observed as sacred by Muslims) or on a Sunday, in temples, churches or mosques, but not in the shop or the King's court; on the contrary, Raychandbhai used to say and hold, and demonstrated through his own conduct, that such a belief amounted to ignorance of the nature of dharma.”²⁶

Explaining Srimad's views on Dharma, Gandhi writes, “Dharma does not mean any particular creed or dogma. Nor does it mean reading or learning by rote books known as Shastras or even believing all that they say. Dharma is a quality of the soul and is present, visibly or invisibly, in every human being. Through it we know our duty in human life and our true relation with other souls. It is evident that we cannot do so till we have known the self in us. Hence dharma is the means by which we can know ourselves. Anyone who has studied the scriptures of different faiths will say that the general nature of this means as expounded in them is the same. No Shastra in any religion says that we may speak untruth or follow it in practice, nor that we may commit violence.”²⁷

Gandhi continues, “In all his discussions with me, he never told me that if I wished to attain moksha I should follow a particular dharma and no other. He advised me only to pay attention to my actions. ..He was always bored by religious controversy and rarely engaged himself in it. He would study and understand the excellence of each faith and explain it to the followers of that faith. If we follow Raychandbhai's point of view, no one need give up his faith and embrace another. Everyone may, following his own faith, win his freedom, that is, moksha, for to win moksha means to be perfectly free from attachments and aversions.”²⁸

Gandhi's long association with Raichandra brought him closer to the Jain scriptures and their teachings of non-violence and truth (ahinsa and satya). These two essentials were the two pillars that supported the grand edifice of

Gandhi's life. Gandhi's unique idea of Satyagrah was based on these twin concepts of nonviolence and truth. Satyagrah to him was not coercion but a vindication of truth through suffering. The Satyagrhi had to believe in truth and nonviolence. His love had to embrace the opponent, because only when such love existed could one suffer willingly so that the opponent could be persuaded to see truth from the perspective of the Satyagrhi. It is obvious that a true Satyagrahi had to have courage and conviction. It is not an instrument of the weak or the timid, but a path of courage and fortitude. Gandhi's life provided the most vivid demonstration of this fact.

To Gandhi truth and nonviolence were not abstract ideals reserved merely for intellectual discussion, but concepts to be realized in life. The practice of nonviolence translated to love for all. Truth was something to be lived so that one practiced what one professed. Throughout his life Gandhi strove to achieve these ideals.

By enriching Gandhi's knowledge in the metaphysical matters Srimad Rajchandra made a gigantic contribution, as Gandhi consistently remained a political leader with spiritual awareness, who always endeavoured to translate politics in terms of spirituality. Gandhi himself acknowledges the tremendous role Srimad played in his philosophical enrichment, he writes 'Three persons have influenced me deeply, Tolstoy, Ruskin and Raychandbhai: Tolstoy through one of his books (The kingdom of God) and through a little correspondence with him, Ruskin through one book of his, Unto This Last—which in Gujarati I have called Sarvodaya,—and Raychandbhai through intimate personal contact.²⁹ Gandhi continues, "He was, on many occasions, my guide and helper."³⁰

The bond between Srimad and Gandhi initiated a brilliant new chapter, not only in their own lives, but in the cultural, political and spiritual history of the nation and the world. Their legacies continue to offer new paradigms to global peace and human progress.

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प्रकाशन शोध प्रक्रिया का अंतिम और अत्यंत महत्वपूर्ण चरण होता है। शोध समाज की मूल्यवान उपलब्धि है। इसे समाज के बीच आना ही चाहिए जिससे समस्त मानवता लाभ उठा सके। प्रकाशन के सीमित अवसर शोध को संकुचित करते हैं।