

The Impact of Theosophical Society on India's Social and Political Life and the Life and Work of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi

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Abstract

There is a vast literature available and many scholarly works on the impact that the members of the Theosophical Society had on the social and political life of India and the life and work of M. K. Gandhi, therefore the present paper is only a humble overview of this relevant subject matter.

The Theosophical Society was founded in New York in September 1875 by a group of prominent spiritualists under the leadership of H. S. Olcott and H. P. Blavatsky in order "to collect and diffuse a knowledge of the laws which governs the universe" and "to establish clear philosophy for the spiritualist movement". In her first major work, *Isis Unveiled*, Blavatsky presented the idea of "India: (as) the cradle of the Race" and suggested the existence of ages long "wisdom tradition" and existence of "curators" of this knowledge, the Mahatmas, that she was in contact with.

After the publication of *Isis Unveiled*, Olcott and Blavatsky established contact with Dayananda Saraswati, the leader of the Indian reformist movement Arya Samaj, merged the Society for a short period with this movement, and permanently moved to India. In his first public lecture on Indian soil, H. S. Olcott made an appeal to the audience to join the Theosophical Society in order to spiritually, culturally and economically renew their country, while A. P. Sinnett, the editor of the Anglo-Indian newspaper *Pioneer*, and A. O. Hume, a retired civil servant, established correspondence with Mahatmas through Blavatsky resulting in Sinnett's publication of *Esoteric Buddhism*, the first presentation of "theosophical philosophy", on the one hand, and in the establishment of Indian National Congress by Hume, on the other.

Gandhi got in touch with theosophy as a young law student in London and became interested also in Hinduism and Christianity and above all in vegetarianism. But it was in South Africa where he got a deeper insight into various religions and was impressed by the theosophical idea of brotherhood and esoteric Christianity through the works of Anna Kingsford and Leo Tolstoy, realising that the path to God (Truth) leads through service and nonviolence, and out of which he developed his method of political struggle, *satyagraha* or passive resistance.

It was during Gandhi's stay in South Africa that the Theosophical Society made a major impact on India's social and political life through its second president Annie Besant. She joined the Indian National Congress, launched the India Home Rule, founded the *New India* newspaper and promoted a number of educational (Central Hindu College) and other civic initiatives. However, she opposed to Gandhi's passive resistance movement on his return to India, while he, considering himself a theosophist and democrat, did not sympathise with the secrecy practiced in the Society's "inner school", and maintained that due to the development of occult powers the Society "lost sight of its central idea – the brotherhood and moral growth of man".

Keywords: Theosophical Society, *satyagraha*, Truth

The Theosophical Society is an organisation which was established with the aim “to collect and diffuse a knowledge of the laws which govern the universe”.¹ It was founded in September 1875, in New York, USA, by a group of prominent representatives of worldwide spiritualist movement. This movement started in the middle of the nineteenth century, attracted all layers of human society and had an extremely important impact on the intellectual and religious life of people all over the world. This impact led to genuine social changes, and that was the reason why spiritualism was described as a democratic movement closely related to vegetarianism, anti-vivisection, anti-vaccination, anti-slavery, women rights and similar. But as among spiritualists there was an absence of any clear doctrine, the aim of the main founders of the Theosophical Society, H. P. Blavatsky and H. S. Olcott, was “to establish clear philosophy for the spiritualist movement”.²

The beginning of the Theosophical Society was promising; however, the public activities soon ceased, the entrance fees were no longer collected and the Bye-laws became inoperative, so the fate of the Society depended entirely on H. P. Blavatsky and H. S. Olcott. Hence, the two of them therefore committed mainly to literary work, corresponding with the interested public through spiritualists’ magazines and daily newspapers while preparing the publication of HPB’s first major work *Isis Unveiled*.

In *Isis Unveiled*, Blavatsky presented the idea of “India: (as) the Cradle of the Race” and discussed the existence of the ancient “wisdom tradition” and the existence of “curators” of this knowledge, the Mahatmas, she was in contact with. She wrote: “No people in the world have ever attained to such a grandeur of thought in ideal conceptions of the Deity and its offspring, man, as the Sanskrit metaphysicians and theologians. [...] The life of several generations would scarce suffice merely to read the works that ancient India has left us on history, ethics (morale), poetry, philosophy, religion, different sciences, and medicine. [...] It is to India, the country less explored and less known than any other, that all the other great nations of the world are indebted for their languages, arts, legislature, and civilization.”³

Following the publication of *Isis Unveiled* the dream of H. P. Blavatsky and H. S. Olcott was to go to India, as they were convinced that the Society would find a fresh impetus there, so they made use of every opportunity to establish connections with the Indian people. This is how they got in touch with the Hindu pandit and reformer Swami Dayananda Saraswati, leader of Arya Samaj movement, dedicated to the revival of pure Vedic tradition. With this connection, they paved the way for their departure to India and established the first Indian branch of the Society in Bombay. Shortly after, at the

1 Ransom, *Short History of the Theosophical Movement*, 76.

2 Lavoie, *The Theosophical Society – The History of a Spiritualist Movement*, 14.

3 Gandhi, in: Gomes, *Isis Unveiled – A New Abridgement for Today*, 125.

beginning of the year 1879, they travelled to India. At the time H. P. Blavatsky wrote: "Our Society was founded at the direct suggestion of Indian and Tibetan Adepts, and in coming to this country, we but obeyed Their wishes."⁴

A month after their arrival in India, in March 1879, H. S. Olcott delivered his first public lecture titled "The Theosophical Society and its Aims", saying: "It is evident [...] that there is room in our Society for the Arya, Brahma, Prarthana, and all the other minor Samayas which represent the progressive mind of *Young India*. Divided, they are comparatively powerless, to do much; united they would make a strength to be felt [...]. If India is to be regenerated, it must be by Hindoos, who can rise above their castes and every other reactionary influence; and give good example as well as good advice. [...] We want to persuade the most learned native scholars [...] to translate into English the most valuable portions of their respective religious and scientific literatures, so that we may help to circulate them in Western countries. At the same time we wish to aid, as best we can, in the extension of non-sectarian education for native girls and married women, which we regard as the corner-stone of national greatness, and in the introduction of cheap and simple machines that can be worked by hand labour and that will increase the comfort and prosperity of our adopted country. We have chosen this land for our home, and feel a desire to help it and its people in any way practicable [...]. Here lies a mighty nation like a giant benumbed with sloth and no one to arouse its potential energies. Here lavish nature has provided exhaustless resources, that combined talent and applied knowledge would turn into fabulous national wealth. [...] In vain the efforts of statesmanship to spread the blessings of education and promote the industrial arts, if they are not seconded by the patriotic endeavours of enlightened Young India. [...] The great and crying want of modern India to-day is a scientific school attached to every College, such as we have in America, and, in each great centre of population, a school of Technology with appropriate machinery where the most improved methods of the principal handicrafts could be taught to intelligent lads. [...] The soul of Aryavarta keeps vigil within the dormant body. Again will her splendour shine. Her prosperity will be restored. Her primitive philosophy will once more be interpreted, and it will teach both religion and science to an eager world. [...] The youth of India will shake off their sloth, and be worthy of their sires. From every ruined temple; from every sculptured corridor cut in the heart of the mountains; from every secret vihar where the custodians of the Sacred Science keep alive the torch of primitive wisdom, comes a whispering voice saying 'Children, your Mother is not dead but only sleepeth!'"⁵ This lecture was a huge success, the Framji Cowasji Hall in Mumbai was crowded. The lecture left a deep

4 Ransom, *Short History of the Theosophical Movement*, 123–125.

5 See Olcott, H. S. *A Collection of Lectures on Theosophy and Archaic Traditions*. Madras: The Theosophical Society and its Aims, 1883.

impression and the Press gave Olcott's speech wide publicity that gained the Society vast popularity and provided the influx of new Indian members which resulted in the formation of several new branches in the years to follow.

The man who contributed a lot to this initial success of the Theosophical Society on the Indian soil was Alfred Percy Sinnett, the editor of *The Pioneer*, India's most influential newspaper, who offered to inform the public on the Society's mission. This led to a close friendship with H. P. Blavatsky and H. S. Olcott which blossomed particularly during their visit to Simla, the heart of the powerful Anglo-Indian community, in the summer of 1880, where they were hosted by A. P. Sinnett and his close friend A. O. Hume, a retired civil servant. As a result of this visit, Mr. Sinnett and Mr. Hume began to communicate with one of the theosophical adepts, Master K. H. The correspondence with Mr. Sinnett began in October 1880 and lasted around four years until he gained sufficient knowledge to be able to outline a philosophy that followed the ancient teachings and came to fruition in the publication of two books titled *The Occult World* and *Esoteric Buddhism*.

Besides, Mr. Hume gained through this correspondence a deeper insight into the circumstances of Indian society, the dangers it was facing and the need for certain political work he had to get involved with. Consequently, he attempted to influence politics in two ways. Firstly, he tried to convince the British authorities to reform the administration of India so as to make it more responsive to the needs of Indian people, and secondly, he tried to promote an all-India organisation so as to give voice to the concerns and aspirations of Indians themselves.⁶ The Theosophical Society was more than just a suitable environment for this second area of Hume's political work, since basically all the Indians who joined the Society had come from western-educated elite and from all over the sub-continent, including Parsees, Christians, Sikhs, some Muslims, as well as Hindus. And as the Theosophical Society began to hold its annual conventions in December 1881, these gatherings provided the opportunities to the members to discuss the past, present, and future of India.⁷ Therefore, early in 1885, Hume helped to form the Bombay Presidency Association, and immediately used this group as a springboard to advance his idea of the Indian National Union. In December 1885, the Indian National Union was organised in Bombay and the attendees immediately renamed themselves into the Indian National Congress,⁸ which became the largest and most prominent Indian public organisation that exercised a decisive influence on the Indian Independence Movement.

In the year of the foundation of the Indian National Congress, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was a 16-year old boy attending high school and already married,

6 Bevir, *Theosophy and the Origins of the Indian National Congress*, 16–17.

7 *Ibid.*, 7.

8 *Ibid.*, 16.

according to the customs of the region. In 1887, he graduated from high school and was soon encouraged by a family friend, a Brahman priest, to consider law studies in London. Enthusiastic about this possibility, he had to promise his mother and his wife that he would abstain from meat, alcohol and women during his studies in London and thus won their approval. In August 1888, he left India to become a student at the University College London. Arriving in London, with no knowledge of the English language and lifestyle whatsoever, he struggled to find a vegetarian restaurant, but was fortunate enough to find it, and on its tables a copy of a pamphlet titled "A Plea for Vegetarianism" by Henry Salt. This led him to join the London Vegetarian Society where he met many vegetarian reformers like Anna Kingsford and Edward Maitland, the authors of the pamphlet. Through them he also became acquainted with the prominent theosophists, such as H. P. Blavatsky, H. S. Olcott, Annie Besant, Edwin Arnold and Keightley Bertram and Archibald, who were studying the *Bhagavad-Gita* and introduced it to Gandhi. This book would become his everyday companion.⁹ At that time the idea of "universal brotherhood" had already become the central object of the Theosophical Society, and its slogan: "There is no Religion higher than Truth". But Gandhi got in touch with the Christian tradition as well and was particularly moved by *Sermon on the Mount*. He wrote: "My young mind tried to unify the teachings of *Gita*, the *Light of Asia* and the *Sermon on the Mount*. That renunciation was the highest form of religion which appealed to me greatly."¹⁰ The London period therefore represented also his introduction into religious studies, which found a more tangible and elaborated expression during his stay in South Africa.

After having completed his studies in law in 1891, Gandhi left London for India and tried to establish a law practice in Bombay but failed and returned to Rajkot to live a modest life. Nevertheless, in 1893 a Muslim merchant Dada Abdullah, who owned a large shipping business in South Africa, suggested him to become a lawyer for his cousin. Gandhi accepted the offer and sailed there to remain in South Africa for the following twenty-one years. There he would later develop his political and religious views and ethics.

At the beginning of his stay in South Africa it was Christianity again, which "kept alive in him the religious sense",¹¹ especially through correspondence with Edward Maitland and the study of *The Perfect Way or Finding the Christ*, a book on esoteric Christianity that Maitland co-authored with Anna Kingsford. He was even more impressed by Leo Tolstoy's *The Kingdom of God is Within You* and its display of independent thinking, profound morality and truthfulness.¹² However, the theosophical influence

9 Gandhi, *An Autobiography. The Story of My Experiments With Truth*, 296.

10 *Ibid.*, 92.

11 *Ibid.*, 296.

12 *Ibid.*, 161.

remained strong as he was in close, day-to-day contacts with South African theosophists, discussing religious matters, particularly the idea of brotherhood. He “criticized the members where their conduct did not appear to [...] square with their ideal”.¹³ However, he continued his studies of Hinduism as well.

The study of religions stimulated his “self-introspection and fostered in me the habit of putting into practice whatever appealed to me”.¹⁴ He came to a conclusion that “the Theosophy is Hinduism in theory, and that Hinduism is Theosophy in practice”.¹⁵ As a result, his desire for self-realisation led him to accept community service as religion of his own. He felt that God could be realised only through service.¹⁶ He became convinced that there was no other God than Truth, and that the “quest for that Truth is the *summum bonum* of life”,¹⁷ while the basis for the quest and realisation of that Truth was *Ahimsa* (nonviolence)¹⁸ and its guiding rule: “Hate the sin and not the sinner!”

Gandhi wrote: “To see the universal and all-pervading Spirit of Truth face to face one must be able to love the meanest of creation as oneself. And a man who aspires after that cannot afford to keep out of any field of life. That is why my devotion to Truth has drawn me into the field of politics; and I can say without the slightest hesitation, and yet in all humility, that those who say that religion has nothing to do with politics do not know what religion means”.¹⁹ That gave rise to his unique way of political struggle “Satyagraha” (*sat* = truth, and *agraha* = firmness) or “devotion to truth”.

At the time of Gandhi’s stay in South Africa, the Theosophical Society had a major impact on India’s social and political life due to its second president Annie Besant. As a prominent social and political activist, she joined the Theosophical Society in 1889 and went to India in 1893. Along with H. S. Olcott she made a tour of the country giving lectures on Indian philosophy and showing her personal preference for the Indian spiritual heritage. Thus she managed to gain further support of the Indian people in her efforts to rebuild the country. In 1898 she founded the Central Hindu School and College in Benares (now Varanasi), which later became the central nucleus of the Banaras Hindu University, and a few years later the Central Hindu Girls School. Both schools were formed on theosophical principles and many prominent Indian theosophists were part of the staff, their aim being to build new leadership for India.

13 *Ibid.*, 296.

14 *Ibid.*, 186.

15 *Ibid.*, 282.

16 *Ibid.*, 184.

17 *Ibid.*, 282.

18 *Ibid.*, 553.

19 *Ibid.*, 554.

In 1906, Annie Besant published a pamphlet *England and India* in which she put forward some ideas associated with the English relations with India and elaborated on her views in terms of religion, education and political relations.²⁰ Namely, Annie Besant shared Mohandas Gandhi's views on religious renaissance that should bring about the political effects and "combine religious and social work with more overtly political work".²¹ Nevertheless, their approach differed significantly in relation to the Esoteric Section (School) of the Theosophical Society. This organisation within the Theosophical Society was formed already by H. P. Blavatsky with the aim to gather more dedicated members for the study of the Secret Doctrine. After HPB's death, Annie Besant became the Head of the organisation. She shared her views in the August number of *Theosophy in India*, under the heading, "The blending of the temporal and spiritual functions," where she frankly and clearly made her ideas regarding the T. S. and the E. S. T public. She wrote: "In the T. S. we have a curious mixture. The Exoteric Society is purely democratic – it is only fair to admit this fully. On the other side we have an Esoteric body which is practically autocratic in its constitution [...] The existence of a secret body to rule the outer Society made the constitution of the T. S. a mere farce, for it was at the mercy of the inner [...] The greatest power will always be in the hands of the E. S., and not in the head of the Society [...] I know that I exercise a quite unwarrantable power. This is what makes some people say there should not be an E. S. T. [...] We must recognize the danger and try to neutralize it." Afterwards she went on to state that the friction between the two heads could be avoided by combining both offices in one person.²²

As far as E. S. T. is concerned, Gandhi said the following in an interview: "I am still a Theosophist but I am not in sympathy with the Movement. I am not in favor of any institution which fosters secrecy. Any secret training or discipline like that practiced in the Inner School of Theosophy offends my democratic sympathies. I want everything open and free to all. I have steadily advocated the leveling of all barriers between peoples of all classes."²³

Annie Besant became active in Indian politics in October and November 1913 when she delivered in Madras a series of eight lectures titled "Wake Up, India: A Plea for Social Reform" addressing education, women's work, industries and social and political issues. A year later, in *Herald of the Star* (Vol. 3, No. 1, 1914, p. 38), she published the article "Social Reform in India", where she announced: "At a meeting of 'E. S.' members, held at Adyar last month, it was resolved to make an attack on the

20 See Besant, Annie. *England and India*. Adyar, Madras: Theosophical Publishing House, 1906.

21 In: Bevir, "History of Political Thought", 19.

22 See "Some Reflections regarding the Theosophical Movement"; in: *The Theosophist*, October 1907, 83–84.

23 Gandhi, in: Wardall, "A Visit to Gandhi", 1–3.

worst of the barriers which check the advance of India along the road of progress, and some of our brethren heroically resolved to sacrifice themselves to this end. They have taken the following promises: 'Believing that the best interests of India lie in her rising into ordered freedom under the British Crown, in the casting away of every custom which prevents union among all who dwell within her borders, and in the restoration to Hinduism of social flexibility and brotherly feeling, I promise: [...] (7) To promote union among the workers in the fields of spiritual, educational, social, and political progress, under the headship and direction of the Indian National Congress.' Clause 7 depends, of course, on the willingness of the Indian National Congress to assume the headship of a movement which combines religious, educational, and social reform with political. If it be unwilling to do so, then some man or other organization must be found to take the lead." Thus, she wrote to ask the prominent leaders of the Indian National Congress to head a fourfold campaign for religious, educational, social, and political reform. But the leaders declined her stating that the Congress should be a purely political organisation.²⁴ Therefore, she formed the All-India Home Rule League and founded *New India*, a daily newspaper, which was a powerful instrument for fifteen years promoting Home Rule that revolutionised the Indian journalism. Home Rule was the first political party in India, its main objective was the change of the regime. This was the reason why Annie Besant was arrested in June 1917, and that led to mass protests strongly supported by Gandhi. The British government was forced to make significant concessions, announcing that the ultimate goal of the British rule was Indian self-government. Annie Besant was released in September and was elected President of the Indian National Congress for a year.

However, Annie Besant opposed to Gandhi's plan of non-cooperation and civil disobedience as she stood by constitutional methods for achieving political reform²⁵ through "loyal educated classes" of India.²⁶ As the Indian National Congress supported Gandhi's policy, Annie Besant became unpopular and lost her position as political Leader.²⁷ Nevertheless, she continued to campaign for India's independence to the end of her life.²⁸ There is no question that Besant's organisational and propaganda techniques transformed the Indian nationalist politics and that her vision of an independent India within the Commonwealth eventually prevailed.²⁹

Gandhi, on the other hand, recognised the need for inspired leadership in

24 Bevir, "History of Political Thought", 45.

25 Shewan, *Annie Besant*, 16.

26 *Ibid.*, 50.

27 *Ibid.*, 17.

28 *Ibid.*, 18.

29 Leonards, "Annie Besant: The Brilliant Outsider", 57.

political and social activity and the role of small groups as pioneers and pathfinders, but also refused to make a distinction between the elect and the masses.³⁰ "In well-ordered organizations, leaders are elected, he said, for convenience of work, not for extraordinary merit. A leader is only first among equals. Someone may be put first, but he is no stronger than the weakest link in the chain."³¹ He felt that the masses are by no means so foolish or unintelligent as we sometimes imagine.³² "They often perceive things with their intuition, which we ourselves fail to see with our intellect. But whilst the masses know what they want, they often do not know how to express their wants and, less often, how to get what they want. Herein comes the use of leadership."³³ Gandhi based the concept of freedom on the very nature of man as an autonomous moral agent and at the same time argued that the survival of society, the continuance of a community, was contingent upon the effective freedom of the individual.³⁴ "Individual freedom alone can make a man voluntarily surrender himself completely to the service of society. If it is wrested from him, he becomes an automaton and society is ruined. No society can possibly be built on a denial of individual freedom. It is contrary to the very nature of man."³⁵ This was the reason that he opposed to the existence of autocratic 'inner school' in the Theosophical Society which reflected in the political approach and in which, according to him, "too much stress has been laid upon [...] intellectual studies, upon the development of occult powers, and that the central idea of Theosophy, the brotherhood of man and the moral growth of man, has been lost sight of."³⁶

But Gandhi also said: "I owe much to the Theosophical friends among whom I have many. Whatever critics may say against Madame Blavatsky, or Col. Olcott or Dr. Besant, their contribution to humanity will always rank high."³⁷ Therefore, it can be rightly said that he highly esteemed the contribution of the members of the Theosophical Society made to the social and political life of India.

30 Iyer, *The Moral and the Political Thought of Mahatma Gandhi*, 139.

31 Gandhi, *Young India*, December 1921.

32 Iyer, *The Moral and the Political Thought of Mahatma Gandhi*, 143.

33 Gandhi, *Harijan*, March 1939.

34 Iyer, *The Moral and the Political Thought of Mahatma Gandhi*, 351.

35 Gandhi, *Harijan*, June 1942.

36 Gandhi, *Harijan*, January 1948.

37 Prabhu, *This Was Bapu*, 13.

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