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Source: *Peace Research*, February 1998, Vol. 30, No. 1 (February 1998), pp. 83-95

Published by: Canadian Mennonite University

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23607541>

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In 1915, Gandhi established his now-famous ashram on the banks of the Sabarmati River in Ahmedabad, India. There he would often take his colleagues for an evening stroll to the gates of the Sabarmati Central Prison, where he told them, "This is our other Ashram," and he explained:

In our Ashram there are no walls. The only walls we have are those of Ashram disciplines. But unlike the prison walls, they do not imprison, but protect us and release us into greater freedom.... Imprisoned, we shall miss no delights of the palate or any other physical indulgence, having accustomed ourselves to plain fare and the simple life.... And since in prison a civil resister voluntarily observes the prison discipline and welcomes the hardships incidental to jail life as a part of suffering for truth, we shall feel happy and free like a bird even behind prison walls, we shall never weary. When the whole of India has learnt this lesson, India shall be free. For, if the alien power then turns the whole country into a prison, it will not be able to imprison its soul.¹

Gandhi had built two communities before this one. These were in South Africa, where he developed his philosophy and techniques, and they were a fundamental element in his plan for the regeneration of India. Phoenix, near Durban in the colony of Natal, was founded in December 1904. Tolstoy Farm, near Johannesburg in the Transvaal

Colony, lasted from June 1910 until January 1913, at which time Gandhi returned to Phoenix where he remained until his departure from Africa in July 1914.

The Phoenix Community

Phoenix was established in 1904 to reduce the costs of Gandhi's weekly newspaper, *Indian Opinion*. He purchased 100 acres for his print shop and staff housing, 15 miles from the city. He persuaded four Europeans and three Indians besides himself to settle there. Gandhi used both idealistic and practical arguments for his plan. The rural surroundings would be healthier than the city, and "each could become his own agriculturist." There would be economic incentives also: saving money on rents and food, and having the option of buying a plot of the land at the actual cost price. The workers would receive a monthly advance for necessary expenses, and the profits would be divided at the end of the year. This system of deferred payment would relieve the management of the necessity of finding large sums of money every week. Undergirding the practical advantages lay the power of the ideal, in the shape of the weekly newspaper *Indian Opinion*, the object of which was "to bring the European and Indian subjects of King Edward closer together." The community would foster a "closer brotherly combination between the European and the Indian Workers."² One of the original settlers testified, "To say that I approved of the proposal suggests a certain amount of wishful thinking. I was certainly in love with the idea, and my love for Gandhi was sufficient to make me want to succeed in this venture."³

His English friends, who shared his interests in vegetarianism and theosophy,⁴ were conscious of English communes inspired by the "simple life" and handicrafts movements, some under Tolstoyan influence.⁵ He did not ascribe a religious basis to Phoenix. Nevertheless, conceptions of duty, equality, brotherhood, and service were implicit in the idea.⁶

The settlers were thought of as a democracy of equals, with certain powers reserved to Gandhi, who owned the land and the press,

and retained a veto over major decisions such as membership and finances.⁷ The members of the community were of two classes. The partners were called settlers or “schemers” because they accepted the terms of the scheme. These received a monthly allowance, a share in the profits, land on which to build, and the option of purchasing two acres of land at cost. The remainder were workers on salary, Indian for the most part, though at least one was Cape Coloured and some Zulu laborers were sometimes hired. There were wives and children, and later a few students at the school. In total there were about 30 persons. Gandhi himself lived only a short while at Phoenix. His work was in Johannesburg, over 300 miles away. His wife and children stayed in Phoenix.⁸

Gandhi began his first satyagraha (non-violent protest) campaign in 1906, with active arrests beginning at the end of 1907. By 1910, the wealthy merchants had largely tired of the effort, and the resisters were men of more modest means.⁹ In order for these men to seek imprisonment, provision had to be made for their families, in the form of rent and food money. Gandhi saw common residence in a rural setting as a means of reducing expenses while maintaining the effectiveness of the program. The resisters’ families could live together on a farm.¹⁰

The Tolstoy Farm

Since Indians were prohibited from owning land in the Transvaal, Herman Kallenbach (an architect with whom Gandhi had been sharing a house) purchased a farm of 1100 acres, 2 1/2 miles long and 3/4 mile wide, located about 22 miles southwest of Johannesburg near Lawley station. (Today the segregated Indian township of Lenasia almost touches this farm.) He offered it rent-free to the passive resisters for the duration of the struggle.¹¹

Gandhi named the farm the Tolstoy Farm. The name of Tolstoy signified a resistance to all the errors of industrial civilization and the quest for political domination. Both Gandhi and Kallenbach were admirers of the prophet of non-violence and simplification, and Gandhi had exchanged letters with him shortly before establishing the

Farm. Since the establishment of Phoenix, he had become more deeply acquainted with the Tolstoyan movement, which spawned co-operative colonies in England and elsewhere. Soon after the Farm opened, a British writer, Isabella Fyvie Mayo, began at Tolstoy's request a weekly correspondence with Gandhi. As Gandhi saw it, his community was not an isolated event but part of a worldwide spiritual movement.

On Saturday, June 10, 1910, the settlement was inaugurated by Gandhi, his eldest sons Harilal and Manilal, and Kallenbach. They intended to make it their home, and go into the city only on Mondays and Thursdays. Johannesburg Indians rallied to the new venture, visiting on Sundays, donating building materials, labor and supplies, and beginning to take part in its life. A group photo taken in July shows 11 men, four boys, three women and two babies, a population of 20. The Farm had a house, two wells, and nearly 1000 fruit trees. Construction of additional facilities began immediately, while the community lived mainly in tents during the chilly nights of the South African winter. A chawl (dormitory) for women, 50 feet long, was the first, then a larger one for the men and boys, while a third building was raised for offices, a workshop, and a school. The accommodations were considered sufficient for a population of 10 women and 60 men.¹²

It is uncertain how many wives and dependants of jailed satyagrahis actually moved to the Farm. In a year-end report Gandhi noted that many of the men would not give permission to their wives to come.¹³ Some families did come, but the numbers were small.

In 1911 General Smuts, Minister of the Interior for the new Union of South Africa, introduced an immigration bill which would meet many of the Indian grievances, and Gandhi suspended passive resistance in April. At this point the necessity of maintaining resisters' families ceased, and Tolstoy Farm might have been closed. Gandhi stayed on, citing his obligation to help Kallenbach recoup his losses, and later to establish a school. In January 1913, Gandhi and the school left the Farm for Phoenix.

"I am constantly trying to keep away the shortcomings of Phoenix from this Farm," Gandhi wrote to his cousin Maganlal in August.¹⁴ There would be no private garden plots; all would cultivate the entire land together. There would be one kitchen and common meals. There would be neither private homes nor family living quarters. The Farm would not be a village of families but one joint family. "Tolstoy Farm was a family, in which I occupied the place of the father," he acknowledged.¹⁵ The ideas of Ruskin and Tolstoy on the importance of hand labor were given greater emphasis on the Farm. There being no industry such as the press, the residents did more physical labor, first in construction and then in the fields and orchards. Kallenbach went to the Marianhill monastery to learn sandal making, and they became self-sufficient in footwear. The material incentives of profits and land rights offered to the Phoenix settlers were absent at the Farm.

The simplification of diet and material possessions continued. The men all wore workingmen's trousers and shirts of coarse blue cloth, much like a prison uniform. Gandhi determined that open sandals were the best footwear for that climate, and these were made. Food was served in a single bowl such as prisoners use, and wooden spoons made on the Farm were the only utensils. The use of prison experience as a model for ashram discipline was a consequence of the satyagraha campaign. The prison-like clothing, diet, and living accommodations were designed in part to make prison seem easy. One who contained within him the disciplines of self-control could accept prison with equanimity.

For medical care, they relied on nature cures: fasting, massage, dietary changes, and treatments using earth and water. (The articles which made up Gandhi's first book on health began appearing in *Indian Opinion* in January 1913). Residents who needed to go into the city ordinarily walked, and there was a good-natured rivalry for the fastest time.

When passive resistance was suspended, Gandhi made two important changes in his life, which brought the Farm closer to the ashram ideal. He ceased his practice of law, and he devoted himself

entirely to the Farm and especially to its school. It was then that he was first able to establish a school under his own direction, and experiment in education for a life guided by the idea of satyagraha. Gandhi's work as a schoolteacher began in June or July 1911. In the beginning there were five boys and two girls in his class.¹⁶ They did two or three hours of manual work in the mornings and Gandhi taught class from 1 p.m. until 4:30. By February 1912, the class had grown to 25 pupils: eight Muslims, two Parsis, five Madras Hindu, one Bengali Hindu, and nine Gujarati Hindus, all boys.¹⁷ The composition of the class changed frequently, it seems. On occasion all the students were boys, but often there were girls also. They would include boys of seven, or young men of 20, and girls up to 12 or 13 years old. Gandhi taught them together, and they ate together, and even slept in a group on an open verandah. "The boys and girls met freely. My experiment of co-education on Tolstoy Farm was the most fearless of its type," he recalled, but added that he would not repeat the experiment due to some bitter experiences.¹⁸ However, the involvement of women in the ashram life, as students, teachers, and satyagrahis, was one of Gandhi's significant innovations on the tradition.

The curriculum was described in early 1912:

Manual training is combined with mental but the greatest stress is laid on character-building. No corporal punishment is inflicted, but every endeavour is made to draw out the best that is in the boys by an appeal to their hearts and their reason. They are allowed to take the greatest freedom with their teachers. Indeed, the establishment is not a school but a family, of which all the pupils are persuaded, by example and by precept, to consider themselves a part. For three hours in the morning the boys perform some kind of manual labour, preferably agricultural, of the simplest type. They do their own washing, and are taught to be perfectly self-reliant in everything. There is, too, attached to the school a sandal-making class, as also a sewing class.... No paid servants are kept on the farm in connection with either the school

or the kitchen. Mrs. Gandhi and Mrs. Sodha, assisted by two or three of the pupils, who are changed every week, attend to the whole of the cooking. Non-smoking, non-drinking and vegetarianism are obligatory on the farm.

The academic subjects included arithmetic, languages, history and geography, and all the religions represented among the students. "An attempt is made to inculcate in them the spirit that they are first Indians and everything else after that, and that, while they must remain absolutely true to their own faiths, they should regard with equal respect those of their fellow-pupils."¹⁹

In the evening, there were prayers and the singing of hymns, and readings from Hindu and Muslim scriptures. The hymns would be in English, Hindi, and Gujarati. Fasting was also practised; many residents observed both Hindu and Muslim fasts. It was at the Farm that Gandhi began fasting as a religious observance. Summarizing the effects of his teaching, Gandhi concluded, "The children were saved from the infection of intolerance, and learned how to view one another's religions and customs with a large-hearted charity. They learnt how to live together like blood-brothers."²⁰

Gandhi saw education for children as operating on three levels, as described in his autobiography. Physical training was accomplished by actual manual labor in operating the Farm. He also intended to teach each one a manual vocation, thus the sandal making and carpentry, but this was not carried out in a systematic way. Literary training, the secondary level, was offered through the vernacular languages Hindi, Tamil, and Urdu. The third level he considered the most important: spiritual training. Each student was to become familiar with the elements of his own religion, including a general knowledge of his own scriptures. This, however, was but a form of literary education. The spirit, he believed, must be trained, just as the body must be: "I saw, therefore, that I must be an eternal object-lesson to the boys and girls living with me. They thus became my teachers, and I learnt I must be good and live straight, if only for their sakes. I must say that the increasing discipline and restraint I

imposed upon myself at Tolstoy Farm was mostly due to those wards of mine.”²¹ If Gandhi imposed restraints upon himself, he was ready to impose them on his wards also. The first mention of vows as a community discipline occurs in August 1911 in connection with food reform: “All of them observe the vow of doing without salt, vegetables, and pulses between Monday and Saturday.”²²

At Tolstoy Farm, Gandhi was for the first time the physical as well as the moral leader of a community. It was his first taste of the full experience of ashram life. At Phoenix he had been only a visitor and an overseer. Important as this step was, its significance could be seen only in the light of his commitment to satyagraha as a way of life. Since the founding of Phoenix, satyagraha had been born, and this was the purpose of the Farm. Not only was it providing for the resisters’ families so that the campaign might continue, but it was a place of experiments in developing a committed group of satyagrahis. “Tolstoy Farm proved to be a centre of spiritual purification and penance for the final campaign,” he concluded.²³ He saw satyagraha as based on spiritual purification, and that was the meaning of all the activities at the Farm.

At the Farm Gandhi was able to go further into creating a true family of colleagues and disciples, and to test his mode of leadership. Freeing himself of professional and family obligations, he could devote himself thoroughly to the movement and the community. He introduced changes in the conditions for membership, the economic base, diet and eating patterns, housing arrangements, property rights, and religious practices (especially vows and fasting). “My faith and courage were at their highest in Tolstoy Farm,” he said.²⁴ For two and a half years he devoted himself to his experiments in character development, so much so that many then and later criticized him for neglect of the political struggle. Yet in his eyes these experiments were the key to all genuine change.

Tolstoy Farm closed somewhat abruptly. After the visit of the Indian statesman G.K. Gokhale in October and November 1912, Gandhi determined to leave for India in six months, because Gokhale’s conversations with the Union government had led him to

believe that a final settlement was at hand. Therefore, in January 1913, in preparation for the move to India, Gandhi left the Farm and took all of its residents to Phoenix.

On his return to Phoenix, Gandhi introduced some of the reforms practised at the Farm, such as the common kitchen, but private kitchens continued in some households. He proposed that all should give four and a half hours daily to gardening, and that it be done jointly, not in individual plots. Gandhi's very presence invigorated the settlement through the example of his ceaseless purposefulness and through his new ideas. The evening congregational prayer at his house became a means of communicating the spiritual basis of the community. He sought not only to transfer the Tolstoy Farm model to Phoenix, but to improve upon it.

As at the Farm, his chief concern was the school, and it was in this connection that he first undertook disciplinary fasting. The first occasion was in February 1914, after a teacher had violated the rules by buying special food (onions) for the boys. He fasted one day, then followed it with a seven-day fast. A more serious infraction involving the same teacher, this time for sexual misconduct, resulted in a 14-day fast in May 1914. Inexperience in the discipline of fasting and techniques for coming out of it left Gandhi ill for the remainder of that year. The adoption of this method may be seen as a new phase in his moral control of the community.

Passive resistance was resumed in September 1913. Instead of attempting to mobilize the entire South African Indian community, as he had done on previous occasions, he began with 16 residents of Phoenix, both male and female. Their eager quest for imprisonment set off a chain of events in which Gandhi led an army of strikers on foot across the Transvaal, heading for Tolstoy Farm, and over 20,000 Indian workers went on strike all over Natal. The viceroy of India intervened, and negotiations finally produced an Indians Relief Act in June 1914, after which Gandhi felt free to leave Africa, taking with him most of the ashram community, ready to bring satyagraha to India.

In June 1915, he established a new ashram at Ahmedabad in India. "The object of the Ashram," he wrote, "is to learn how to serve the motherland with one's whole life and to serve it."²⁵ From his South African experiments, Gandhi had determined a number of essential features of the ashram model of community:

- The membership should be disciplined. Full members would be under lifelong vows, and other members would practise the disciplines for training and testing.
- The program of the community would consist of manual labor, service, and political action.
- The community should be small, with perhaps 30 at the core.
- The structure would be informal, and the leader's views decisive.
- Property ownership would be secured in a trust, in which the leader's role was prominent, and his were the chief financial decisions.
- The ashram would not only seek to improve specific aspects in the life of the nation; it would in itself be an example of a new way of life open for all to see.
- The ashram must have a spiritual foundation, in which God is sought through acts of truth, non-violence, and service, and in which the fundamental ritual is the daily prayer service.

Gandhi's adoption of community living was initially an extension of his own household practice to the problems of maintaining his newspaper as a voice of the Indian community. As the editorial policy stood for a partnership of Indians and Europeans, this ideal was practised in the community, symbolized by the initial group of four Indians and four Englishmen. The settlement embodied other social models, replacing salaries with shares in the profits, leaving the corrupting atmosphere of the city for the benefits of rural life, and committing all the participants to hand labor in construction and tillage. From the beginning Phoenix was an experiment in ethical alternatives, exploring new patterns of racial equality, economic partnership, and subsistence on the fruits on one's own toil.

Phoenix developed through trial and error, as some of the original plans proved out in unexpected ways. The English component of the community declined, partly from dissatisfaction on the part of some of the original group, and partly due to Gandhi's increasing belief in relying on the powers of the oppressed community itself. The original economic pattern which contained elements of capitalist individualism not only failed to return the expected profits, but was increasingly seen as a barrier to the desired unity of the community. The original living arrangements, which encouraged family dining, family houses and family fields, were not done away with, but overshadowed by a more unitary grouping. The total community moved away from a village model toward a joint family model.

Tolstoy Farm, free from the nucleus of established families and the cluster of activities and paid personnel required to maintain the printing plant, could move in other directions. By 1910 Gandhi had formulated his ideology around the personal idea of brahmacharya (celebacy) and the social idea of satyagraha. These placed new values at the forefront of his community planning. The necessity of discipline through vows was recognized in his personal life and in the establishment of the passive resistance campaign, both beginning in 1906. All economic and living arrangements were done on a communal basis, as the whole community became a "family" with Gandhi as the father. Here Gandhi put his major effort into educational experiments, recognizing that in order to invigorate the Indian community to improve its situation, it would be necessary to have a form of education based on a new scale of values. Transformation of character was a prerequisite for effective self-rule. Like Phoenix, Tolstoy Farm was both an experiment in alternative social arrangements and a demonstration of their value.

The later stage of Phoenix attempted to combine the strengths of both types of community, with a conscious intention to prepare for the liberation of India itself. The Gandhian communities never were retreats from the world; they were attempts to change the world. Both Phoenix and Tolstoy Farm were criticized for being indifferent to some perceived political and economic needs of the South African

Indian community, but Gandhi wanted to change the perception of needs. Increasingly, Gandhi emphasized personal and communal discipline, experimenting with vows, fasting, and the ethical implications of voluntary imprisonment. The dramatic satyagraha campaign of 1913, which for the first time brought a large-scale response from the Indian laboring class, demonstrated the necessity of a small dedicated community for effecting social change through satyagraha.

The 1915 constitution for the Satyagraha Ashram in Ahmedabad was the fruit of Gandhi's South African experiments. Its structure and vows embodied his conclusions that ethical action must be effectively organized through "a centre of spiritual purification and penance."²⁶ Without the strength and self-reliance developed by personal disciplines, and ethical values, real personal and political freedom (swaraj) would remain only an idea.

NOTES

¹ Pyarelal and Sushila Nayar, *In Gandhiji's Mirror* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 17.

² *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (New Delhi: Publications Division, The Government of India, 1958ff), (hereafter CWMG), IV, p. 320.

³ Albert West, memoir (typescript).

⁴ For which see Margaret Chatterjee, *Gandhi and His Jewish Friends* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991), and my *Gandhi and the Nonconformists* (New Delhi: Promilla & Co., 1986).

⁵ For the Tolstoyans and their communities see my *Gandhi, Tolstoy, and the Tolstoyans* (in press).

⁶ CWMG, IV, p. 320.

⁷ CWMG, X, p. 107.

⁸ The early days of Phoenix are described in Pyarelal, *Mahatma Gandhi, III: The Birth of Satyagraha*. (Ahmedabad: Navajivan, 1986), p. 429–443.

⁹ For the best account of the campaign see Maureen Swan, *Gandhi: the South African Experience*. (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1985).

¹⁰ Prabhudas Gandhi reports an attempt in 1909 to lodge the children of passive resisters at Phoenix during the short-lived first attempt at

establishing a school. See *My Childhood with Gandhi* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan, 1957), p. 48–50.

¹¹ CWMG, X, p. 262. Exchange of letters between Gandhi and Kallenbach, May 30, 1910.

¹² M. K. Gandhi, *Satyagraha in South Africa* (Stanford: Academic Reprints, 1954), p. 262. Further details from Surendra Bhana, “Tolstoy Farm: Gandhi’s Experiment in ‘Co-operative Commonwealth’,” typescript, 1976.

¹³ CWMG, X, p. 379.

¹⁴ CWMG, X, p. 308.

¹⁵ M. K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, (London: Phoenix Press, 1949), p. 278.

¹⁶ CWMG, XI, p. 130.

¹⁷ CWMG, XI, p. 237.

¹⁸ Gandhi, *Satyagraha in South Africa*, p. 243.

¹⁹ CWMG, XI, p. 251f, but also see *Autobiography*, p. 282ff, and Millie Polak, *Mr. Gandhi: The Man* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1931), p. 156f, for pupil resistance to these disciplines.

²⁰ *Satyagraha in South Africa*, p. 242.

²¹ *Autobiography*, p. 238.

²² CWMG, XI, p. 154.

²³ *Satyagraha in South Africa*, p. 257.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 244.

²⁵ “Draft Constitution for the Ashram,” CWMG, XII, p. 91–98.

²⁶ *Satyagraha in South Africa*, p. 257.