

## THE INFLUENCE OF GANDHI ON LIFE AND WORK OF JRD TATA: A STUDY IN COMPARISON

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### ABSTRACT

*Gandhi, known as the one who clouded the sun that never set on British empire and western powers with his philosophy, preaching and practice but lesser known for bringing light to the rationality of civilization, the structure of law and governance, resilience of economy and commerce and universality of a harmonious societal role. His influence, direct and indirect, reached individuals, leaders, business leaders, politicians, philanthropists, institutions and many a nation.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Philosophy, Preaching And Practice, Resilience Of Economy And Commerce*

### INTRODUCTION

One of these persons was none other than the legendary business leader, JRD Tata who shared many common traits with the Mahatma though more than three decades younger and who also got impressed and influenced by the Mahatma. This article will strive to answer: what are the common traits in Gandhi and JRD? What are the contrasting traits in the two personalities? How did JRD get influenced by Gandhi? How did JRD try to inculcate the Gandhian philosophy in his work and the functions of Tata Group?

### DISCUSSION

Comparison between M K Gandhi and J R D Tata? How? Apparently, it seems to compare North and South. When one was a simplistic man the other was the flamboyant and fashionable figure, one was a passionate pilot and loved cars the other preferred walking and traveled third class, one always mentored family members for joining the business empire the other did not insist or encourage the clan in politics. The list may go on and on if we contrast certain things. Digging deep, the contrasting aspects more or less move around the khadi dhoti and Armani suit. Nevertheless, there are interesting common aspects especially talking about the bigger picture and the mental makeup of both the illustrious men of the twentieth century. It is also known that they knew each other very well, shared thoughts and views and JRD Tata, the younger one of the two had a profound veneration and trust on Gandhi. "Gandhiji," says JRD, "was by far the greatest personality and to this day the most extraordinary human being I have ever met: he inspired in me, as in most people, a mixture of awe, admiration, and affection combined with some skepticism about his economic philosophy despite which one would follow or support him to the end, come what may. Perhaps the most unexpected and endearing trait I found in him was his almost childlike sense of

fun to which he gave vent in a chuckle which he sometimes used deliberately to put one at ease in his presence. The most considerate and courteous of men who would never leave a question or a letter, however unimportant unanswered.” [1]

The matching traits of both the personalities may be coincidental or gradually acquired by JRD as he came in contact with Gandhi and under his influence and inspiration as a young business leader with a zeal to do something for his country. Of course, the love for country and fervor to do something for the betterment of the country was already seen in the Tata genes. Jamshedji Tata himself strived all his life to develop his country in all the ways he could. “JRD explained the impact of their trusts: The wealth gathered by Jamsetji Tata and his sons in half a century of industrial pioneering formed but a minute fraction of the amount by which they enriched the nation. The whole of that wealth is held in trust for the people and used exclusively for their benefit. The cycle is thus complete. What came from the people has gone back to the people many times over”. [2]

The formative years of both the personalities were poles apart. JRD was born and brought up in France in a rich family. There was a lot of influence of western culture in his life including the languages. His first language was French and gradually started using English after joining Tata Group in India but like Gandhi, he gradually fell in love and mastered the English language. “French, not English, was his mother tongue. As a result, he found dictating in English difficult. By dint of effort, he mastered English and soon came to love the language.” [3] Gandhi was born in a remote place in India in an orthodox Hindu family and not so rich as well. JRD came to India to commence his career and life and Gandhi went to the west to study further and commence his career. Their behavior in society their likes were naturally influenced by their upbringing. JRD was fond of cars, planes and a flamboyant and reckless life “As a young man, on his visits to Europe, JRD took in motor racing events and tennis championships. He said: ‘I would have liked to be a motor racer. I have liked living dangerously.’” [4] and Gandhi practiced restrained life which became more and more disciplined as time passed “My life is based on disciplinary resolutions.” [5]. But we shall see subsequently how both the men changed themselves and how their thoughts evolved in working for a bigger cause of humanity.

The study of the life of leaders though may commence with formative years or childhood, its real and explicit meaning is seen as they embark in the practical world, brave cyclones, create storms, nurture knights and evolve as a transformed person. The life of Gandhi from an introvert simpleton to an introspective activist in Africa, from the journey of self-improvement and realization to leading and developing a nation that accepted it as the father, is known to the world. “Mohandas K. Gandhi was instrumental in establishing India as an independent state though he never held an elected or appointed office. He had no formal position from which to lead people. Gandhi’s moral authority created such strong social and cultural norms that it ultimately shaped political will. He governed his life by an awareness of a universal conscience that resided within the people, the international community, and the British themselves.” [6] The life of JRD also traveled from a Tata scion to Chairman of the group, from lavishly living tycoon to a simple man dedicating and focusing on nation-building rather than the profit motive. “One of the Trust meetings where JRD said: ‘Why do we spend most our income on education and medical purposes? What does the nation need? What about urban slums and tribal development?’ Words like ‘what does the nation need?’ came up often with him. The word ‘profit hardly ever came up because that was no primary motivation.’” [7]. Here we also need to remind the fundamental difference of formal authority that JRD got because of the family business

and moral authority that Gandhi won because of his life and actions.

The functions of the personalities were different. Gandhi worked on several fronts like politics, spiritual upbringing of the people, societal leveling, economic development of the nation, developing various institutions and leaders etc. The primary motive of JRD, being the head of an industrial group, was to do business and earn a profit. Here the difference between a common business leader and JRD comes into limelight. He concentrated equally on the trusts and philanthropic activities and as time passed and Tata group became more affluent, his time and dedication for nation building and philanthropic activities increased, perhaps, more than the business activities. "JRD had helped the Sir Dorabji Tata Trust to approve Dr.HomiBhabha's proposal for the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research [TIFR] which a decade later became, 'the cradle of India's atomic programme.' His concept of development is as relevant as it was nearly fifty years ago." [8]. Many Tata Trusts work for building the nation and JRD was responsible for developing the number of such trusts and activities which later on were 'gifted' to the government. Family Planning Association of India, Air India, and many others.

A leader has to be a good people manager first and foremost. He/she needs to be a good communicator. The constant reach of the leader to the inside and the outside world is required for the right impact and deliverance of success. "Gandhi explored new fields of communication. He would sit and sway and say nothing and then he would smile and touch his palms together in greeting. He had communicated. In interviews, Gandhi did not merely make statements or answer questions. His chief purpose was to establish a close relationship with the other person because that contributed more to understanding than his words." [9]. Gandhi is a case study in communication and here we talk about all the aspects of communication like body language, writing, speaking, negotiation, correspondence etc. "JRD says, I came long ago to the conclusion that the three most important requirement for getting along with people were, first, communication. The importance of frank and sometimes continuous discussion between people of groups." [10]. It was not possible for the head of the largest group in the country to refrain from active communication. He had to deal with innumerable stakeholders, travel places, negotiate, discuss etc. Like Gandhi, JRD too would have evolved as an effective communicator.

Gandhi was known for writing a lot and writing helped him in channelizing his thoughts and clearing the cobwebs if there were any. It was more of an introspective activity for him. JRD too had the habit of scribbling down and writing. His writing habit was so much so that initially it was difficult for him to give dictation to his stenos. It was an effective mental activity for him too. "In big things, it is important to record or write down. Once you write things down it helps in the thinking process. In the important things of life, one should make the effort to think; it is not enough to be impatient or angry." [11]

Effective leaders also need to be considerate and empathetic while managing people. The greatest challenge for them is to deal with different type of people and sometimes to tolerate them despite their faults and negativity. An effective leader will also try to develop the people around and work for the service of people. This is pertinent for any leader be it political, spiritual or business. Development of the people is the core function of the leaders and if the people are developed, intuitions, companies, and nations will develop effortlessly. There has been hardly any example like Gandhi in the history who developed leaders of international repute in one lifetime. The people who followed him and learned from his ways and life too became historical figures not only in India but also in other counties. Just by following Gandhi leaders like Nelson Mandela and Martin Luther King Jr. could bring about change in the society and be called 'Gandhi of Africa' and Gandhi of America.'

Such example is unparalleled. “Gandhi embodied what today would be recognized as the “servant leadership” paradigm, which he applied to create an enterprise of utmost efficiency.” [12] Succession Planning and leadership development is a crucial and important element in any business organization. If the company is big or wants to be big, the top people or the founders have to nurture more such leaders who may outgrow them as well without any insecurity. A good leader is known for his/her work but a great leader is known for the mentoring and nurturing of other leaders. “When he stepped down after fifty-two years as Chairman of Tata Sons, the press noted that he was the only eminent industrialist in the country who had nurtured within his own organization, people who had grown into corporate giants in their own right.” [13] The size of the Tata Group and the number of corporate leaders talk volumes about the great leadership qualities of JRD.

Leader’s vision, intervention, objectivity must go beyond personal likes and dislikes and interests. Many a time it is the duty of the leader to let go of an organization or project from shackles of self-belief and interest to let it grow and succeed. An effective leader is one who takes the reins and gallops in the right direction, here the leader does not run or give strength to run but shows the right direction, vision and if need controls for galloping. “The Servants of India Society has lost its force and its appeal. At that point, Bapu came to the fore and his new words and his new message began to permeate the public consciousness.” [14]. As Gandhi breathed new life and vigor to nationalism and all the movements including swadeshi, JRD too breathed new vigor and vision in Tata Group especially the post-independence India. JRD not only showed the vision to his company but also to the newly formed government of India and people. This objective and selfless service are highly commendable. He put his self and family interest aside for the growth of Tata Group making it open and democratic. “JRD was a member of Tata family, he recognized that Tata Sons could not realize its full potential for expansion and profit if it continued strictly as a family business. He therefore boldly broke with tradition and, instead of automatically putting family members in charge of the many Tata companies; he hired the best of the best.” [15]

Personal philosophy and charisma of leaders do have an impact on the people and organizations but it is also the working style and habits that matter a lot. These habits and styles define the leader. A leader has to walk the rope only then can he/she understand balance and teach others the art of balancing. Gandhi was an excellent and impeccable example himself and only he could tell, ‘My life is my message’ in the history of humanity aptly. Precision and excellence are the qualities any leader or for that matter, professional must have. If he/she does not have this quality they cannot and must not be followed. These qualities will drive the project successfully and inspire others to follow their example. “He planned his campaigns meticulously. Which law was to be broken when, by whom, in which place and in what manner- to these matters he gave careful attention and issued precise instructions.” [16]. When you are the biggest and the greatest non-violent freedom movement, the greatest social and economic movement in the history of mankind, precision in work, time management etc. have to be immaculate. “JRD’s ability to clear papers with speed and clarity came from Peterson, as also some of his passion for perfection. At eighty-seven he is as particular as ever. ‘I know that aiming at perfection has its drawbacks. It makes you go into details you can avoid. It takes a lot of energy but that is the only way you can achieve excellence. So, in that sense, being finicky is essential.’ [17]. Such was the personal habits of the two great personalities here of constant strive for excellence in every walk of personal and public life.

JRD like Gandhi was always in search of the right thing. Doing the right and adhering to what is moral was the center point of all his dealings be it allotment of shares to a retired director or paying taxes. Gandhiji considered the truth and moral were Gods and so did JRD. “Gandhiji has been known to retire from a case in open court, and in the middle of the hearing, having realized that his client had deceived him.” “...it may even be the duty of a lawyer to defend a client whom he knows to be guilty. There I disagree. The duty of a lawyer is always to place before the judges and to help them to arrive at the truth, never to prove the guilty as innocent.” [18]. A businessman considers profit and saving tax is next to profit. JRD has once presented a plan of how the group can save tax by jugglery of figures which was legal. “‘Not illegal, yes’, JRD responded softly. ‘But is it right?’ [19] and the rare thing happened that the company was ready to pay extra tax. Can we imagine what type of selflessness required to let go? Can we imagine the level of commitment to truth and morality in the mind and practice of leaders?

Gandhi and JRD both were humans and all humans they had their regrets and mistakes and their failures and frustrations. Gandhi regretted having bad handwriting and JRD always regretted lack of education as he never went to a college. [20]. Gandhi despite his entire efforts for non-violence and unity had to face terrible violence at the end during the partition and the country envisioned and nurtured by him finally broke into pieces. JRD had to face a situation wherein he was fired from the chairmanship of Air India the airline company founded, nurtured and practically ‘gifted’ by him to the government due to political self-interests. This was perhaps the greatest shocks of his professional life. “Sir William Hildred, former Director-General, IATA, wrote, “I was shocked and angry when I learned that political maneuvering had led to your leaving the air industry which you have served with supreme distinction for so long.” [21]

Last but not least, Gandhi’s work was political as he was laying the foundation of a nation. His views and writings on politics, democracy, law, and justice etc. are referred to and will be done so for ages to come. JRD was not a political figure though he used to attend Congress meetings during the freedom struggle. He did not enter politics directly but supported the Gandhian cause of freedom and social uplift. “While I usually came back from meeting Gandhiji elated and inspired.” [22] Though being a personal friend of Nehru, Indira and many other politicians and ministers, he never dabbled into direct politics or intervened. Of course, he always had a say. It is noteworthy that he resonated Gandhi’s ideas on democracy, governance and parliament decades after freedom. He continued advocating the same points and problems in free India what Gandhi talked in enslave India. “The best men are supposed to be elected by the electors. But, as a matter of fact, it is generally acknowledged that the members are hypocritical and selfish. Each thinks of his own interest. It is the fear that is the guiding motive.” [23] Unfortunately, what Gandhi feared and told in 1908 JRD had to repeat in 1968 in free India. “Can we blame our politicians, untrained and uninformed in any of the specialized disciplines? They have this new game of parliamentary politics mainly concerned with maintaining their own political position and status. Can we blame them for succumbing to the lust for power and for the many privileges attached to political power?” [24]

## CONCLUSIONS

“Till I went to the Congress meeting, I thought this freedom movement could not work but then I saw the real impact of Gandhi.” [25] “Those who made the greatest impact on me were, naturally, political figures, starting with Gandhiji, who led the freedom struggle.” [26]. It is obvious looking to the functions of Tata Group and the manner in which JRD himself

evolved from a flamboyant young man with western influence to a philanthropic tycoon concerned about rural development and anti-materialistic “Let industry be established in the countryside “adopt” the villages in its neighborhood; let some of the time of its managers, its engineers, doctors, and skilled specialists be spared to help and advise the people of the villages and to supervise new developments undertaken by co-operative effort between them and the company.” [27], “JRD observed, ‘while we want to build a prosperous society we do not want it to be merely a materialistic society.’ [28]After coming in contact with Gandhi and digesting his philosophy the influence grew deeper and wider as he moved ahead in life and so did Tata Group post freedom of India. The influence cannot be called completely Gandhian as the Tata Group itself was founded on the spirit of nationalism by Jamsheji Tata. JRD carried forward in a big way especially the freedom of India. In fact, JRD was more of a Gandhian heir than Nehru as JRD understood and tried to inculcate Gandhian principles of rural development, national development, planning, trusteeship, swadeshi, dignity of work and labor. Albeit, he did it from the standpoint of a business leader using business for national building and spreading happiness where profit comes as a by-product. “The world’s economic experience in the first decade of the twenty-first century has demonstrated that, far from being optional in business, let alone incompatible with profit, sound ethics are integral with the processes of commerce and are essential to sustained profitability. Gandhi could have told any businessperson this very thing a hundred years ago, during the first decade of the twentieth century.”[29]. There is a lot to learn from Gandhian philosophy for the world especially when there are global problems snarling and raising its paw on the globe. JRD and Tata Group initiated it long ago which others can follow easily taking their example. “Fortune magazine had written in 1944: In any economy-even in the US- the House of Tata would be noteworthy. . . to the Indian, the natively created House of Tata represents a source of national pride, a signpost on the rocky road toward an industrial future. The story of Tata both mirrors and colors the history of the growth of Indian industry. . . Tata will remain what it is today- one of India’s greatest national assets.” [30]

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