

## **Re-thinking Gandhiji and Tagore's Ideology**

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The disparity in belief and approach between Tagore and Gandhi is usually thought to be a familiar subject for debate and discussion with scholars of Indian history & literature. Tagore's famous letter to the Mahatma at the commencement of the Non-cooperation Movement, reproving it as asceticism which found 'a disinterested delight in any unmeaning devastation,' 'a struggle to alienate our heart and mind from those of the West', 'an attempt at spiritual suicide' has been cited repeatedly as sealing substantiation of their very fundamental disagreement regarding the road to a better future for India. It is also believed that Tagore was cynical of the other core features of Gandhi's agenda, like the latter's recommendation that *everyone should spin as a part of their daily routine*. Besides the two most distinguished personalities of modern India projected two very different self-images. There was little in common between the saint in loin cloth and the divinely handsome poet in his flowing robes. One's primary concern was the creation of a *moral utopia* while the other was *high priest* of life's many splendours. However, such genuine variations in belief and world-view have averted notice from the vast areas of agreement between the two. An obvious fact which one must emphasize in investigating these similarities is that their individuality notwithstanding, Tagore and Gandhi were both in many ways typical products of nineteenth-century India. Crucial to the moral-intellectual concerns of that time was the attempt to come to grips with the colonial encounter. Self-conscious emotive and academic exercises to work out a methodology in a situation perceived to be debasing generated other related efforts: appraising the west, assessing the force and flaws of the Indian tradition and its true disposition and schema for reforming the Indian society. The domino effects were of course not homogeneous, but there are exclusive regularities in the thought patterns of modern India's naissance fathers. In the gamut of ideas which comprise the Indian dialogue in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, those traceable to Gandhi and Tagore are remarkably similar in many ways. Tagore's thinking on the themes mentioned above can be located

evenly within the tradition of nineteenth-century Bengali thought from Rammohan to the poet's contemporary, Vivekananda. The modern Indian antecedents of Gandhi's ideas remain unexplored. His discipleship of Gokhale is known, but little has been written on his relationship to the debate between the reformers and the traditionalists in western India. In short, the resemblance between Tagore and Gandhi can be traced to a large extent to the shared concerns of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Indian intelligentsia trying to work out world-views and agenda in the context of their colonial encounter. The purpose of this paper is, however, not to trace the sources of their thought. It is only an exercise aimed at identifying their ideological similarities.

Gandhi's first convoluted comment on the Indian problem, his *Hind Swaraj*, identified one basic evil, *modern civilization*. It was a menace to all that was meaningful in human values, not only in India but the world over. The British, as sufferers of this plague, were to be sympathized with, not despised. It was not any race or nation but modern civilization itself and the Indian mania with it that subjugated India. At the heart of that vile civilization was the view of man as a being of desires and capitalism had a vested interest in stimulating these desires. Burgeoning of wants hence became the *sine qua non* of the entire structure which dehumanized man, legitimized violence against nature and deprived life of meaning and purpose beyond the endless fulfillment of desires. The consequences of such soul-annihilating pursuits were loss of self-government, reciprocal distrust and violence and the exploitation of man by man. Man, both as worker and consumer, had become slave to machines. Imperialism and racism were integral to such a civilization. Even its apparent benefits were of a highly ambiguous nature. Modern medicine produced patterns of dependence which were highly unnatural. The much-vaunted vitality of the West was little more than mechanical activism. Only on two points was Gandhi willing to admit some moral value to modern civilization. He admired its *spirit of scientific enquiry* for he saw in it a genuine quest for truth. He also found much to learn in the organizational aspect of western life: the civil virtues were informed by the moral qualities of discipline and co-operation.

Similarly, Tagore, notwithstanding his appreciation for many features of western life, was basically in agreement with Gandhi's

judgement. Gandhi had described Indian obsession with the west as *moha*, the high road to cultural suicide. The poet compared the western impact with *disease*. He did add by way of regret an explanation: 'Everything is for the good in its own place; but even what is good becomes dangerous rubbish in an inappropriate setting.' Gandhi wrote that money was the God of the west. Tagore too states the same idea in a more elaborate language: *Every feature of western civilization is an item commanding very high price. Everything from pleasure to warfare costs a great deal of money. Money has become a great power as a result and the worship of money now outshines all other forms of worship. This is the greatest weakness of western civilization.* He allied this apotheosis of money to another vital trait of western civilization which he found even more disconcerting. Gandhi had condemned its mindless activism. In Europe there were already signs that nature was calling for reimbursement. The surfeit of effort in every sphere of life had created archetypes of augmentation which relegated human beings to a position of inconsequentiality. Tagore was explicit in his rejection of this material civilization. He did not believe in it, he wrote to Gandhi, just as he did not believe *in the physical body to be the highest truth in man*. If Gandhi condemned the totality of modern civilization as evil, to Tagore its ultimate evil consisted in nationalism, which separated man from man and led to destructive conflict. Gandhi, the leader of India's militant nationalism, provided in his writings indirect support for such views. He saw Europe's greed for territories as a function of her aggressive nationalism. The nationalism he prescribed for India was one which would not ignore the interest of other nations, nor make even one's own community its primary concern.

The Indian civilization of Gandhiji's imagination was essentially rustic in character in contrast to the city-based modern civilization of the West. Its endurance over millenia despite numberless assaults was a confirmation of its viability and moral validity. It was spiritual because the essentially spiritual nature of man was its discovery. Gandhi recognized an age-old culture hidden under 'an encrustment of crudity' in rural India and that despite what he saw as the perceptible brutishness of peasant life. The self-governing, self-sufficient and harmonious village communities of yore were the institutional bulwark of this ancient culture. He saw in the caste

system a social order which recognized the basic differences in human temperament: untouchability was an anomaly, a fall from grace. Indian society was essentially tolerant perceiving, from the days of the Upanishads onwards, the truth underlying apparently divergent beliefs. It was also a grand synthesis of different cultures, with an infinite capacity for assimilation and accommodation. Thus in terms of human values it was superior in every way to the competitive, materialistic and violence-prone civilization of modern Europe driven by insatiable desire forever seeking satisfaction of new wants. On parallel lines Tagore's idealization of Indian society and his implied declaration of faith in its essential superiority was based on an imaginative interpretation of what he had seen and experienced. He too repeatedly emphasized its essentially rural character. And what Gandhi had described as the predominantly spiritual proneness of India's civilization, the poet pictured in terms of very concrete images. He contrasted Europe's endless and frantic pursuit of pleasure with the Indians' very different style of quest for happiness. He saw an essential balance, an element of unity between the various aspects of their existence in the life of the peasants in rural Bengal. The poet found the illiterate villagers and the insignificant village beautiful because their steady adherence to a set of feelings, beliefs and attitudes over many generations gave them a sense of dignity and imparted a quality of sweetness to their life. He saw in their faces an impression of compassionate patience, a simple-hearted trustfulness which moved him. Even in the life of urban India of his times he found a quality of contentment and happiness undiminished by the dearth of material goods. He found it more satisfying and worthier in terms of human value than anything he had encountered in Europe. He cited one concrete example in support of his argument. The Indian villager never turned away a guest or supplicant from his door and did not consider any discomfort entailed by his act of hospitality as discomfort. A profound and age-old belief in the sacredness of this duty had become a part of his emotional make-up. Tagore was not unaware of the miseries of rural life and its pervasive sin of pettiness. Many of his short stories, based on his intimate knowledge of rural Bengal, are tales of man's inhumanity to man. But he still saw the quality of dignified integrity as the central feature of India's traditional civilization, a quality of wholesomeness he missed in Europe. He also came very close to Gandhi's position in his perception of India's political traditions. While he did not

emphasize the notion of self-sufficient village republics he questioned the value of state power and, in fact, of nationhood itself for the life of a people. He shared with other Bengali thinkers of the nineteenth century the notion that society rather than the state was the central focus of Indian life. Like Gandhi, he too was extremely suspicious of centralized state power. Only, he went further to reject the need for nationhood which raised barriers between man and man and led to vicious conflict. The fact that the idea was alien to India was for him a plus point. His agenda for national reconstruction, like Gandhi's, emphasized the rural unit rather than the grand edifice of the state.

The main features of Gandhi's schema for national reconstruction are well-known. He saw the central problem of Indian life as not something of external origin, but a blemish in the Indian character—a persistent lack of courage and an ensuing propensity to blame others for one's misfortune. The degradation and humiliations India suffered ultimately derived from this flawed character, for one is inevitably trampled if one behaves like a worm. India's fascination with western civilization was a by-product of the same weakness, a loss of confidence in one's traditions. Independence for him was a necessity primarily because it was a *sine qua non* for preserving the very worthwhile features of Indian civilization. The centralized state, which was to him a dehumanizing machine destroying all sense of personal responsibility, he considered unsuitable for India's essentially rural civilization. Though he accepted it as necessary after 1930, the self-governing village communities were to be the base of India's future polity. And Indians would need to go through a process of self-purification, *atma-suddhi*, to escape from hybridization. They needed serious introspection to reinterpret the central principles of her civilization, and learn from others, as she had done in the past, in terms of her own self-perception, not those of western assumptions. The agenda for reconstruction had to start from the bottom and be based, not on any sentimental attachment to an abstract *Bharat-mata*, but an active love of the people. The worker in the cause had to shun pretentious living and refuse comforts denied to others. The constructive programme emphasized village industries, health, education, use and development of indigenous languages, fight against untouchability and integration with India's tribal population. The instrument of self-purification would be the practice of *satyagraha*. India would not close her doors and windows to the world

outside and allow 'noble winds from all over the world' to blow, but only on her own terms.

Tagore's political agenda included the concept of a leader whose authority one would accept despite his inevitable human failures. There is no doubt that he recognized Gandhi as that leader. His initial response to the Non-cooperation movement was very different from his subsequent feelings of revulsion:

*It is in the fitness of things that Mahatma Gandhi frail in body and devoid of military resources, should call up the immense power of the meek; that has been lying waiting in the heart of the destitute and insulted humanity of India. The destiny of India. . . is to raise the history of man from the muddy level of physical conflict to the higher moral altitude.*

He saw the movement, not as one for national liberation, but as one for the emancipation of man from national egoism. I am not sure if this perception is very different from Gandhi's vision of *satyagraha*. A few days after he wrote the above passage, Tagore penned his better known condemnation. As in 1905 so in 1921, he was horror-struck by the devastating acts which inexorably go with all mass agitations. He rejected what he believed to be the negative implications of the movement in terms of his values. These were not very different from what Gandhi stood for. Only the latter did not see Non-cooperation as a threat to his universalist values. He too, like Tagore in his initial response, saw the movement as a step towards the moral liberation of all men.

The correspondence between Gandhi's programme and Tagore's thoughts on the reconstruction of Indian society 1890s onwards is indeed striking. He too, as noted above, regarded the centralized state as an institution alien to India. The colonial state had caused the worst degeneration because Indians now looked for its approbation rather than that of their own society in undertaking any act of service. Petitions and complaints to the government, whining when the authorities failed to respond, had become the prime instruments for the solution of the country's problems. He welcomed the spirit of *swadeshi*, not because it would harass the English or

incite the Indian industry, but because it might teach us to give up our comforts and make a modest act of self-denial the basis of national unity. The privileged and the educated, if they desired national regeneration, would have to start with a sense of unity with the masses and construct bonds of love with the impoverished villagers through selfless service. Tagore criticized the excesses of the boycott movement during the anti-partition agitation because it hurt the interests of the poor for whom the elite had done nothing apart from expecting unconditional support when it suited the latter. Indians must learn to live by their own strength, *atma-shakti*, and the way to do it was constructive effort in rural India in education, health, handicrafts without any dependence on government. His emphasis was not on agitation but building self-confidence and ties of unity between the elite and the masses. He repeatedly uses an expression – *kalyan* - moral and material well-being. It is an expression with resonances which encompass the body and the spirit, the individual and wider humanity. Tagore's conception of *kalyan* uniting the entire society bear close resemblance too Gandhi's idea of *sarvodaya*. The former's efforts were not limited to prescriptions. He did set up an organization to implement his programmes and his Sri-niketan was something more than a craft school. Its purpose was rural reconstruction through training in productive crafts suitable for rural society. And while Santiniketan embodied the ideal of universal man, with its emphasis on simple living, joyous education and unity with nature, its affinities with Gandhian ideals were not insignificant.