

## TAGORE AND GANDHI: A STUDY OF THEIR CONTROVERSIES

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MUCH HAS BEEN WRITTEN ON TAGORE AND GANDHI, ON THEIR CLOSE cooperation and deep respect for each other. But hardly any attention has been focused on the serious controversies that occasionally raged between these two giants of modern India.

They did not compete with each other for anything, nor were they rivals in any walk of life. They lived and moved in their different worlds, that touched each other only at the periphery; and from each other they received love and respect in profusion.

Still, on occasions they differed, and differed seriously, because their aims and ideals, and their attitude to and outlook on life were considerably different. Their differences have been superbly summed up by Nehru in the following words: "No two persons could probably differ so much as Gandhi and Tagore in their make up and temperament. It is interesting to compare and contrast them. Tagore, the aristocratic artist, turned democrat with proletarian sympathies, represented essentially the cultural tradition of India, the tradition of accepting life in the fullness thereof and going through it with song and dance.<sup>1</sup> Gandhi, more a man of the people, almost the embodiment of the Indian peasant, represented the other tradition of India, that of renunciation and asceticism. And yet, Tagore was primarily a man of thought, and Gandhi of concentrated and ceaseless activity."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In one poem, *Mukti* i.e. deliverance, Tagore says:

"Deliverance is not for me in renunciation,  
I feel the embrace of freedom in a thousand bonds  
of delight.

No, I will never shut the door of my senses,  
The delights of sight and hearing and touch  
will bear thy delight.

Yes, all my illusions will burn into illuminations of joy,  
And all my desires ripen into fruits of love."

In the sonnet, *Mayabad*, i.e. cult of illusions, he says:

"Alas, my cheerless country,  
Donning the worn-out garment of decrepitude,  
Loaded with the burden of wisdom,

- You imagine you have seen through the fraud  
of creation."

In an address to the inmates of Gandhi's institution at Sabarmati, in Gujrat, on 4 December, 1922, Tagore said: "Only unfortunately, human beings make the mistake and get infatuated with the idea of suffering for its own sake and so as an end in itself. This idea is not true." *Young India*, 21-12-1922.

<sup>2</sup> *Visva-Bharati Quarterly* (Gandhi Memorial Peace Number), October, 1949, pp. 279-80. This number will be referred to hereafter as the *Peace Number*.

However, both drew their inspiration primarily from Indian traditions and culture, and from the people around them; yet they sought to imbibe what they considered the best in the cultures of others, and looked forward to a millennium devoid of unnatural barriers between peoples and peoples.<sup>3</sup> Both, in their own way, were intensely religious; while both hated ritualism, and worshipped man as the living God. They had profound pity for the poor and the persecuted, the depressed and the repressed, and readily revolted against tyranny and injustice in any form.<sup>4</sup> Both were eager to remove the barriers raised by privileges and property; yet both were reluctant to apply force for their abolition or fair distribution. They had great faith in the freedom and dignity of man; and hated the civilization that made a machine of him. They were liberals with faith, and socialists who believed in appeals to human sentiment.

They lived fairly long, their lives spanning a climacteric period of Indian history, and their sensitive minds were naturally concerned with the problems affecting and agitating their countrymen. But their responses, as expected, were often different. Gandhi, the leader of the people, had to face those problems rather closely, and saw those from the angle of an idealist in action. But the poetic vision of Tagore embraced the whole world, and he saw its problems and possibilities from a different height and angle. As a poet and philosopher, he normally lived in the world of the muses, but the echo of events around would sometimes disturb the dreamland, and then, like an ancient seer, the Great Sentinel<sup>5</sup> would wield his pen to warn and to advise. And, it was usually on such occasions that Tagore, the poet-philosopher of India and apostle of internationalism, would find himself ranged against Gandhi, the messiah of the Indian masses.

Tagore's first note of caution was expressed in a letter to Gandhi, dated 12 April 1919 (incidentally the day before the Jalianwalla-Bagh massacre

<sup>3</sup> Tagore wrote to Andrews, early in March 1921, while crossing the Atlantic to the U.S.A., "When we protest against injustices hurled against India, we do so as men and not as Indians."

Also see Tagore's *A Vision of Indian History*, Calcutta, 1962, p. 45, and *Nationalism*, London, 1923.

Gandhi said: "I am wedded to India because I believe absolutely that she has a mission for the world . . . . My religion has no geographical limits . . . . For me patriotism is the same as humanity . . . . I will not hurt England or Germany to serve India." *Peace Number*, p. 290.

Again, Gandhi could say during the dark days of the Battle of Britain: "I do not want England to be defeated or humiliated . . . . We are all tarred with the same brush, we are all members of the vast human family." *Harijan*, 29-9-1940.

<sup>4</sup> Even the poet presided over public meetings and led processions during the Anti-Partition Movement in Bengal, in 1905-07, and many of his songs inspired young men to face the police and brave the gallows. In May 1919, he renounced the coveted knighthood in protest against the brutal massacre at Jalianwalla-Bagh, and in late 1931 he came to Calcutta to preside over a protest meeting against police firing on political prisoners in jail at Hijli in the district of Midnapore, West Bengal. See also note no. 21.

<sup>5</sup> Replying to Tagore's criticism of the so-called fetish for the *charkha*, i.e. the spinning wheel, Gandhi referred to him as the Great Sentinel. *Young India*, 13-10-1921.

took place), where he warned the latter (when he gave the call for a country-wide cessation of work) against rousing popular passion, which might get out of control. He wrote: "Power in all its forms is irrational; it is like the horse that drags the carriage blindfolded. . . . Passive resistance is a force which is not necessarily moral in itself; it can be used against truth as well as for it. . . . I know your teaching is to fight against evil by the help of the good. But such a fight is for heroes and not for men led by the impulses of the moment."

But Gandhi, the practical idealist, had his own aims and objectives. His immediate aim was to rally and resuscitate the nation, stunned by unexpected use of force. Fear reigned everywhere, and Gandhi's primary task was to inspire self-confidence among his people and to remove their awe for the alien authority. Non-violent non-cooperation was his answer to the situation, as he saw it, and "*Swaraj* <sup>6</sup> in a year" was the slogan with which he sought to rouse his countrymen to united action. But to Tagore, the rationalist, such an appeal to emotion was revolting. He frankly said: "But when he talks of '*Swaraj* in a year' I fail to fall in with him . . . . When my nation has turned a deaf ear to the dictates of reason and good advice, and believes in the chimera of '*Swaraj* in a year' I cannot help entertain some fears for her."<sup>7</sup> To Tagore, the internationalist, who was then in the U.S.A. seeking and preaching East-West cooperation, and who, in the words of Gandhi, had "a horror for anything negative,"—the very term non-cooperation, particularly as it was then practised by the students in India, was repulsive. He gave expression to his innermost feeling when he said: "All humanity's greatest is mine. The infinite personality of man can only come from the magnificent harmony of all races."<sup>8</sup> Naturally, to him, "There is something undignified in the announcement of the non-cooperation movement."<sup>9</sup> He wrote to Andrews on 5 March 1921: "The idea of non-cooperation is political asceticism. Our students are bringing their offerings of sacrifices to what? Not to a fuller education, but to non-education. . . . I believe in the true meeting of the East and the West." A week later he again wrote: "We from the East have come to her [West] to learn whatever she has to teach us, for by doing so we hasten the fulfillment of this age. We know that the East also has her lessons to give, and she has her own responsibility of not allowing her light to be extinguished."<sup>10</sup> He again wrote on 10 May 1921: "The cry which has been raised today of rejecting Western culture only means the paralysing of our own power to give anything to the West."<sup>11</sup>

<sup>6</sup> "*Swaraj*" in Sanskrit literally means self-government but actually stands for independence.

<sup>7</sup> Tagore, "Call of Truth," *Modern Review* (Calcutta Monthly), October, 1921.

<sup>8</sup> *Peace Number*, p. 290.

<sup>9</sup> Tagore to Andrews from New York, on 7-1-1921.

<sup>10</sup> *Letters to a Friend*, (George Allen and Unwin, London, 1928), pp. 131-33.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 163-65.

But Gandhi was concerned, primarily, with arousing India, and transforming the lives and spirit of her common people. So he had little patience with the poet's anxiety over young people leaving schools and colleges. He was opposed to the prevailing literary education (that made one unrealistic and bookish) in general and to English education (to the neglect of their mother-tongue and own culture) in particular. The existing educational system in India, according to him, merely produced intellectual robots and social parasites, ignorant and contemptuous of their own people and heritage.

So to the poet's admonitions, Gandhi said: "I have never been able to make a fetish of literary training. My experience has proved to my satisfaction that literary training by itself adds not an inch to one's moral height, and that character-building is independent of literary training. . . . A government builds its prestige upon the apparent voluntary association of the governed. And if it was wrong to cooperate with the Government in keeping slaves, we are bound to begin with those institutions in which our association appeared to be most voluntary. The youth of a nation are its hope. I hold that, as soon as we discovered that the system of Government was wholly or mainly evil, it became sinful for us to associate our children with it. . . . I want the cultures of all lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any. . . . It is as necessary to reject untruth as it is to accept truth."<sup>12</sup>

Tagore might dream of brilliant minds drawing nourishment from the East and the West, and afflorescing in a free atmosphere into good citizens of the world. But to Gandhi, the spokesman of starving millions, the primary and immediate concern was how to meet their basic needs and unite the people in a common purpose. As the first step towards solving these problems he asked his countrymen to take up the spinning wheel.

But it was the spinning wheel that provided another occasion for controversy between these two giants. The common Indian is very familiar with the spinning wheel, and Gandhi sought to use it both as a rallying symbol for the Indian masses, and as a challenge to the British rule and the age of machines it has introduced. To him the machine civilization was evil incarnate. So he could say, "I would not shed a tear if there were no railroads in India."<sup>13</sup> He was equally sincere when he said, "I feel that if India will discard 'modern civilization' she can only gain by doing so."<sup>14</sup>

The poet too hated machine-civilization as something soul-killing. But his rejection, in this case, was less complete and more realistic.<sup>15</sup> He could not totally deny the blessings and the beneficial possibilities of man's control over nature. What, actually, he sought was a proper blending of the soul

<sup>12</sup> *Young India*, 1-6-1921, pp. 170-73.

<sup>13</sup> *Peace Number*, p. 291.

<sup>14</sup> Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj* (Navajivan Press, Ahmedabad, 1958), p. 17.

<sup>15</sup> See Tagore's *A Visit to Japan and Letters from Russia*.

and the steel. Science and technology were to serve man and his spirit instead of dominating his relations, attitudes, and values. That is partly why he was flabbergasted when Gandhi called upon his countrymen to burn foreign clothes and to spin daily to achieve *Swaraj*. The whole thing appeared to Tagore as very irrational and aimed at the credulousness of his ignorant countrymen. He wrote in indignation: "To one and all he simply says, 'Spin and weave, spin and weave. . . .' Is this the call of the New Age, to new creation? . . . Consider the burning of cloth heaped up before the very eyes of our motherhood, shivering and ashamed in her nakedness. . . . The question of using or refusing cloth of a particular manufacture belongs mainly to economic science."<sup>16</sup> Further, Tagore was opposed to any kind of routine-bound regimentation, that made the same demand from all. He sincerely believed that he and many like him could spend an hour more fruitfully for civilization with a pen and paper than with a spinning wheel. So he observed: "But where, by means of failure to acknowledge the differences in man's temperament it is in the wrong place, there thread can only be spun at the cost of a great deal of mind itself. Mind is no less valuable than cotton threads."<sup>17</sup>

To his charges Gandhi thus replied: "To a people famishing and idle, the only acceptable form in which God can dare appear is work and promise of food as wages. . . . Hunger is the argument that is driving India to the spinning wheel. . . . *Swaraj* has no meaning for the millions if they do not know how to employ their enforced idleness. . . . I do want growth. I do want self-determination, I do want freedom, but I want all these for the soul. I doubt if the steel age is an advance upon the flint age. . . . It was our love of foreign cloth that ousted the wheel from its position of dignity. Therefore I consider it a sin to wear foreign cloth. I must confess that I do not draw a sharp distinction between economics and ethics. Economics that hurt the moral well-being of an individual or a nation are immoral and therefore sinful. . . . Our non-cooperation is neither with the English nor with the West. Our non-cooperation is with the system the English have established. . . . Our non-cooperation is a refusal to cooperate with the English administrators on their own terms. . . . The hungry millions ask for one poem—invigorating food."<sup>18</sup>

The poet returned to his attack on the *Charkha* again in September 1925. His attack, however, was more against the habit of uncritical obedience to authority and belief in short-cuts with the aid of magical symbols. He wrote: "This reliance on outward help is a symptom of slavishness, for no habit can more easily destroy all reliance on self. . . . And so it becomes necessary to restate afresh the old truth that the foundation of

<sup>16</sup> Tagore, "Call of Truth," *op. cit.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Gandhi, "The Great Sentinel," *Young India*, 13-10-1921, pp. 324-26.

*Swaraj* cannot be based on any external conformity, but only on the internal union of hearts. If a great union is to be achieved, its field must be great likewise. . . . Nothing great can be gotten cheap. We only cheat ourselves when we try to acquire things that are precious with a price that is inadequate. . . . The *Charkha* is doing harm because of the undue prominence it has thus usurped, whereby it only adds fuel to the smouldering weakness that is eating into our vitals."<sup>19</sup>

The Mahatma's answer was: "I have indeed asked the famishing man or woman, who is idle for want of any work whatsoever, to spin for a living and the half-starved farmer to spin during his leisure hours to supplement his slender sources. If the Poet spins half an hour daily his poetry would gain richness. For it would then represent the poor man's wants and woes in a more forcible manner than now. The Poet thinks that the *Charkha* is calculated to bring about a deathlike sameness in the nation and thus imagining he would shun it if he could. The truth is that the *Charkha* is intended to realize the essential and living oneness of interest among India's myriads. . . . Machinery has its place; it has come to stay. But it must not be allowed to displace the necessary human labour. . . . I would welcome every improvement in the cottage machine; but I know it is criminal to displace the hand labour by the introduction of power-driven spindles unless one is at the same time ready to give millions of farmers some other occupation in their homes."<sup>20</sup>

Tagore, who was unflinchingly opposed to fetish for any kind of authority, faith or symbol, again lashed out at Gandhi, when the latter asserted that the practice of untouchability was mainly responsible for the earthquake in Bihar, in January 1934. Few have written so effectively on the dignity, nay the divinity, of labour, and few have rebuked their countrymen so harshly for practicing untouchability.<sup>21</sup> Still, he would not accept from Gandhi that untouchability, which was most rigidly practiced in South India, was the cause of the destructive earthquake in Bihar. He wrote: "It has caused me painful surprise to find Mahatma Gandhi accusing those, who blindly follow their own social custom of untouchability, of having brought down God's vengeance upon certain parts of Bihar, evidently specially se-

<sup>19</sup> *The Modern Review*, September, 1925, pp. 263-270.

<sup>20</sup> *Young India*, 5-11-1925, pp. 376-377.

<sup>21</sup> In his poem *Apamanita*, i.e., the insulted, Tagore says:

"O my hapless country, those whom you have insulted,  
Their humiliation will drag you down to their level."

Again in his *Dhulamandir*, i.e., temple of dust, he says:

"He has gone where the tiller is ploughing the soil,  
And someone is breaking stones for the road, all the twelve months."

Again he writes in his *Ebar Firao Moré*, i.e., let me now return:  
Their heart wilted, withered and broken must be galvanized with new hope.  
Beckoning them we must exhort, "lift up your heads and stand united  
They before whom you quake in fear, quake more than you in guilt  
They will take to their heels the hour you are roused."

lected for His desolating displeasure. It is all the more unfortunate because this kind of unscientific view of things is too readily accepted by a large section of our countrymen. . . . We, who are immensely grateful to Mahatmaji for inducing, by his wonderful inspiration, freedom from fear and feebleness in the minds of his countrymen, feel profoundly hurt when any word from his mouth may emphasize the elements of unreason in those very minds—unreason, which is a fundamental source of all blind powers that drive us against freedom and self-respect.”<sup>22</sup>

Though Gandhi “instinctively felt that the earthquake was a visitation for the sin of untouchability,” the actual social purpose of his assertion was made clear, when he said, “If my belief turns out to be ill-founded it will still have done good to me and those who believe with me.”<sup>23</sup> Possibly, it was to emphasize the sin of untouchability that he said on another occasion: “If Indians have become the pariah of the Empire it is retributive justice, meted out to us by a just God.”<sup>24</sup> Obviously, while Tagore was interested in providing rational and convincing explanations, Gandhi was primarily concerned with achieving the desired goal, social good.

Despite all their controversies, it was to Gandhi that Tagore turned when the *Visva-Bharati* was facing acute financial difficulty, towards the middle of the thirties. To the poet’s letter, dated 12 September 1935, seeking his help, Gandhi feelingly replied, on 13 October, assuring him of his fullest cooperation, and it was due to his efforts that a few rich people presented the poet with sixty thousand Rupees only, on 27 March 1936, when the latter, then well over seventy, was touring North India with his troupe, staging dance recitals, to collect money for his institution. Having solved his immediate financial problems, Gandhi requested Tagore not to go out again in his “begging missions” at that age. But he was disturbed to learn, in the beginning of 1937, that the poet was again preparing to set out for Ahmedabad to stage a couple of his dance-dramas. Gandhi, the ascetic-fighter could never understand an artist’s attachment to beauty and creativity.<sup>25</sup> So he gave a very polite expression to his displeasure in his letter, dated 19 February 1937, requesting the poet not to go out in his “begging missions” again. This touched the sensitive poet, who in his reply, dated 26 February, charged Gandhi for accusing him without understanding

<sup>22</sup> *Harijan*, 16-2-1934, p. 4.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Peace Number*, p. 290.

<sup>25</sup> Gandhi’s attitude can be understood from his letter to Tagore’s niece, Indira Devi Chowdhury, after his last visit to Santiniketan:

“I have a suspicion that perhaps there is more of music than warranted by life, . . . The music of life is in danger of being lost in the music of the voice.” Pyarelal, *The Santiniketan Pilgrimage* (Navajivan Press, Ahmedabad, 1958), p. 27.

<sup>26</sup> The poet’s son, Rathindranath Tagore, wrote to Andrews on 17-10-1937:

“Whenever we try to render one of his plays or operas he will begin composing new songs or write a new play, attend the rehearsals, and

the poet's mind.<sup>26</sup> The latter's reply to it, dated 2 March, seeking his Gurudeva's pardon, Tagore's letter inviting Gandhi to attend the opening ceremony of China Bhavan (centre for Chinese studies at Santiniketan), and his reply to it on 14 April, only bear proof of their deep love and respect for each other, which no misunderstanding or difference of opinion could really affect. Then, when early in 1939, a serious crisis appeared within the Indian National Congress after the election of Subhas Chandra Bose as its President at Tripuri (who was opposed by Gandhi's nominee, P. Sitaramaya), Tagore, then in his seventy-eighth year, boldly exerted himself in favour of the democratically elected president, and condemned the Pant Resolution,<sup>27</sup> that sought to compel the new president to choose his working committee with the consent of Gandhi himself. Tagore then wrote more than one letter to Gandhi to see that a showdown was avoided and justice was done.

Tagore could act like this because he was firmly convinced of their mutual attachment and understanding. When a year later, Gandhi came to Santiniketan to meet the ailing poet, a year before his death, the latter requested him to take care of his institution—his life's treasure—when he was dead and gone. And Gandhi, true to his word, came to Santiniketan in 1945, shortly after his release from jail, to aid and advise its inmates.

In fact, they had bouts of controversies over immediate issues and approach without experiencing any real difference. These controversies, though often quite serious, were primarily intellectual and stemmed from their own assessment of what was true and good. The basic unity of their thought and values enabled them to appreciate each other's purpose and personality, and gave even their heated dialogue a matchless dignity. It was because of this that Gandhi could say, replying to a question, during his last visit to Santiniketan in 1945: "I have found no real conflict between us. I started with a disposition to detect a conflict between Gurudeva and myself, but ended with the glorious discovery that there was none."<sup>28</sup>

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insist on accompanying the players. Is there anybody who can suppress the artist in him? It is no longer a question of money-raising, the artist in him is aroused and a passion, over which he has no control, leads him on . . . . There is nothing that keeps up his spirits (and his health) at Santiniketan as the atmosphere of art and music. Can we deprive him of his sustenance?"

<sup>27</sup> It is known by the name of the mover, Govind Ballabh Pant, who for many years after independence was the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh and then the Home Minister of the Government of India. He died in 1961.

<sup>28</sup> Pyarelal, *op. cit.*, p. 25.



## EXPLANATORY NOTES

1. Santiniketan. Originally, it was the name of the house the poet's father, Devendranath, built in late 19th century, about a mile from the town of Bolpur. The poet started his experimental school there in 1901, and the community that grew up there came to be known by that name. Today it is almost a separate township, with its own post-office, bank, etc.
2. Visva-Bharati. It means universal education, i.e., a real university. It was formally established at Santiniketan, on 23 December 1918, and teaching according to its courses began in July 1919. In 1921, Tagore formed a trust, and handed over the institution to the public, what had hitherto been his personal property. In 1951, it was recognised as a statutory university, under the direct supervision of the University Grants Commission, with Nehru as its first Chancellor.
3. Andrews, Charles F. He came to Delhi as a protestant missionary teacher in the beginning of this century. But, it was in London that he first met Tagore, when the latter was reading out the *Gitanjali* to his English friends. He felt attracted to serve Tagore and his cause, gave up his denominational affiliations in 1914, and joined Tagore at Santiniketan. Tagore immediately sent him to Gandhi in South Africa with certain messages. Since then, till his death in 1940, he remained one of the staunchest friends of both, and served India through his speeches and writings more than any other foreigner.