Gandhi and Tagore: Where the Twain Met

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The differences in opinion and attitude between Tagore and Gandhi are familiar to the students of modern Indian history. Tagore's famous letter to the Mahatma at the inception of the Non-cooperation Movement, condemning it as asceticism and 'orgy of frightfulness' 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 quoted often enough as clinching evidence of their very basic disagreement regarding the road to a better future for India.[1]

The poet was also sceptical concerning other features central to Gandhi's agenda, like the latter's prescription that everyone should spin as a part of their daily routine. Tagore failed to see what would be gained by people better suited for other work struggling to become clumsy spinners. Besides the two most eminent personalities of modern India projected two very different self-images. There was little obviously in common between the ascetic 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 a celebrant of life's many splendours.

Yet such genuine differences in opinion and world-view have deflected attention from the vast areas of agreement between the two. This is to be explained partly with reference to the fact that the poet, shrouded in an unfamiliar language and, until recently, very inadequate translations is virtually unknown to modern scholarship outside Bengal. Recent comments in the British literary journals, remarkable for their ignorant arrogance, are a measure of that unfamiliarity. To those who do not read Bengali, Tagore is exclusively a literary person or a mystic of sorts. The fact that some two-thirds of his writings are serious essays, mostly on political and socio-economic problems of India and the crisis of civilization has been more or less ignored in Tagore scholarship. No wonder then that two very

dramatic epistles cited above have received greater attention than a great deal of analytical writing which shows the continuity of thought and concern between two most striking individuals of recent times.

An obvious fact which one must emphasize in exploring these affinities is that their individuality notwithstanding, Tagore and Gandhi were both in many was typical products of nineteenth-century India. Central to the intellectual and moral concerns of that time was the attempt to grapple with the colonial experience. Self-conscious emotional and intellectual exercises to work out a modus vivendi in a situation perceived to be humiliating generated other related efforts: evaluating the west, introspection into the strength and weaknesses of the Indian tradition and its true character and agenda for reconstructing Indian society. The end results were of course not uniform, but there are identifiable regularities in the thought patterns of modern India's founding fathers. In the spectrum of ideas which constitute the Indian discourse 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 squarely 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 sudharaks, reformers and the traditionalists in western India. But even a superficial reading into the relevant literature would show that his concerns were not all that different from other social thinkers of his age. In short, the affinities between Tagore and Gandhi can be traced to a large extent to the shared concerns of the nineteenth-century Indian intelligentsia trying to work out world-views and agenda in the context of their colonial experience.

The purpose of this paper is, however, not to trace the sources of their thought. It is only a preliminary exercise aimed at identifying the similarities. Gandhi's first elaborate comment on the Indian problem, his Hind Swaraj,[2] identified one basic evil, modern civilization. It was a threat to all that was worthwhile in human values, not only in India but the world over. The British, as victims of this pandemic, were to be pitied, not hated. It was not any race or nation but modern civilization itself and the Indian infatuation with it that oppressed India. At the heart of that evil civilization was the perception of man as a creature of desires and capitalism had a vested interest in whetting these desires. Multiplication of wants hence become the sine qua non of the entire system which dehumanized man, legitimized violence against nature and deprived life fall meaning and purpose beyond

the endless fulfilment of desires. The end results of such soul-destroying pursuits were loss of all autonomy, mutual suspicion 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 dubious nature. Modern medicine produced patterns of dependence which were highly unnatural and modern transport, far from making life easier, actually helped spread disease. Wisdom had been reduced to knowledge in quest of power and morality, equated with enlightened self-interest, had become a form of prudence. The much-vaunted dynamism of the West was little more than mindless activism. Only on two points was Gandhi willing to concede some moral merit 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.[3]

Tagore, despite his great admiration for many features of western life, was quintessentially in agreement with Gandhi's judgement. Gandhi had described Indian infatuation with the west as moha, the high road to cultural suicide. The poet compared the western impact with disease. He did add byway of apology and explanation: 'Everything is for the good in its own place; but even what is good becomes dangerous rubbish in an inappropriate setting.'[4] He was, however, far from certain that everything was for the good in western civilization. His multi-faceted critique of the west focussed on certain basic themes which recur again and again in his writings. Gandhi wrote that money was their God. Tagore 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 surpasses all other forms of worship. Everything is therefore difficult to achieve or attain, everything is shrouded in complexity. This is the greatest weakness of western civilization.[5] He linked this apotheosis of money to another central feature of western civilization which he found even more disturbing. Gandhi had condemned its mindless activism. He saw in its excessive effort a sign of inherent weakness, an unnecessary over-expenditure of energy for which there was always a price to pay. In Europe there were already signs that nature was calling for repayment.[6] The excess of effort in every sphere of life had created patterns of elaboration and ever increasing excitement which relegated human beings to a position of insignificance.

The cruel pressure of competition reduces the workers to something worse than machinery. The grand show of civilization which we see from outside astounds us. The human sacrifice which goes on day and night under that facade remains hidden. But it is no secret of Providence: social earthquakes bear witness to the consequences from time to time. In Europe, powerful groups crush weak ones, big money starves out small money and at the end swallows it up like a pill.

This excess of activism generates a poison of discontent. The monstrous factories engulfed in black smoke deprive men of their life-protecting cover of solitude—of space, time and opportunity for restful thought. People become unused to their own company. Hence at every opportunity they try desperately to escape from themselves through drink and reckless quest for pleasure. The affluent hedonists are not much better off. They are fagged out by the endless pursuit of fresh excitement.

They whirl themselves around like dry leaves in a storm of parties, horse race, hunting and travel. In the midst of such whirlwind, they fail to see clearly either themselves or the world around them; everything appears obscure and indistinct. If the continuous cycle of pleasure stops for a moment, they find even that momentary encounter with self, the experience of unity with a wider world intolerable in the extreme.[7]

He was unequivocal 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'.[8]

In his statements on western civilization, Tagore frequently invoked the concept of relativistn which was a commonplace in the cultural discourses of nineteenth-century Bengal. A common theme in this discussion is that one can not judge one civilization from the point of view of another because each civilization had its characteristic proneness. Tagore, citing Guizot, noted the uniqueness of western civilization in its multiplicity of drives and the co-existence of often incompatible institutions and tendencies. Yet, in modern Europe, he identified one dominant concern which transcended all others—namely, an apotheosis of the nation state. Everything was permitted in its service and nothing was allowed to thwart its perceived interests. The end result of such obsessive preoccupation with national self-interest was conflict and eventually self-destruction. If Gandhi condemned the totality of modern civilization as evil, to Tagore its supreme evil consisted in nationalism, which separated man from man and led to destructive conflict.[9]

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.[10]

The nineteenth-century Indian discourse on the West was rarely, if ever, informed only by intellectual curiosity. It was inspired mainly by an urge to assess the comparative merits of Indian civilization, its differences with the dominant culture of the time and its relative superiority or inferiority. A quest for cultural self-assurance was often the unconscious motive. A more conscious purpose was to assess the impact of the west, increasingly seen as a threat to the Indian way of life with unfortunate implications for the country. Closely linked to such a perception was a recognition that there were things to learn from the west, and at another, less clearly stated level of understanding, the awareness that the clock of western influence could not be turned back altogether. There were consequent attempts to work out strategies of cultural survival. The agenda for the future — the programmes for national regeneration focussed, inter alia, on the question as to what one could adopt from the West. But nearly all such exercises started with an enquiry into the nature of Indian civilization and implicit or explicit comparisons with the west.

Gandhi's Hind Swaraj, an uncompromising critique of modern western civilization, was based on an equally strong faith in what he believed to be the values of Indian culture. There is no hint here of any need for self-assurance to overcompensate for any perceived inferiority. Some of his data derive no doubt from the Orientalist paradigm of self-sufficient village communities, which he idealized, but in essence he projects an emotional and ideological preference rooted, arguably, in his life experience of a traditional Indian home. I state this as an obiteror a hypothesis the validity of which would not be very difficult to establish. One could show that he shared his preference for the emotional ambience of Indian life conceptualized as a cultural value with much more westernized Indians, like R.C. Dutt for example. While the latter were more welcoming to Europe's influence, they too found western life lacking in terms of the quality of inter-human relationship. Underlying Gandhi's statements on the superior worth of India's civilization one can detect his attachment to a pattern of social interaction which did not privilege the individual or emphasize achievement over other objects of human aspiration.

The Indian civilization of his imagination was essentially rural in character in contrast to the city-based modern civilization of the West. Its survival over millenia despite numberless assaults was evidence 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 apparent 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 aberration, 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. 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. The British, to bolster up their power, rubbished Indian culture and Indians, infatuated with the West, believed their propaganda. Curing Indians of their moha was one essential element of Gandhi's agenda for reconstruction."[11]

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:

India has diluted the density of her material pleasures by distributing it among friends, relations and neighbours; and she has simplified the complexity of action and distributed it among various groups. As a result, there is always the space to cultivate one's essential humanity in one's pleasures, one's activity and one's meditations. The trader—he too listens attentively to the bards retelling stories from the ancient scriptures and performs his rituals; the craftsman also reads the Ramayana tunefully. To a large extent this expansion of one's leisure helps preserve the purity of one's home, one's mind and the society at large and saves them from the dense vapours of vice. . . . The forest fires of evil instinct set alight by mutual competition and the crowding in on one another are kept in check in India.'[12]

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:

There is no grandeur, no complexity there. One does not need a great deal of philosophy, science or sociology to live one's life at this far end of the

world and satisfy one's few modest wants. One requires only a few ancient rules which govern the family, the village and one's duties as a subject of the king. They blend very easily with people's lives to become a total vibrant reality.'[13]

The poet found the illiterate villagers and the insignificant village beautiful because their steady allegiance 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. He preferred it to the 'tremendous din of high civilization' which reached his ears from London and Paris.[14] Even in the life of urban India of his times he found a quality of contentment and happiness undiminished by the paucity 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.[15] 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. In his words, the debilitating and denationalizing impact of the West had not yet banished from Indian life 'the hard strength of poverty, the stilled emotion of silence, the chilling peace of dedication and the grand dignity of renunciation.' And if someday a storm raged one would see the blazing eyes of the ascetic burning bright undiminished by any external fury.[16]

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.[17]

Tagore discussed at great length and repeatedly the assimilative power of Indian civilization, the belief first projected by Orientalists that it represented a grand synthesis, a pattern of unity in diversity. It had not rejected any of the numerous cultures which had come to its shores. 'The Scythians, the Huns, the Pathans and the Mughals had all merged into one single body', he declared in one of his most famous poems.[18]

The main features of Gandhi's agenda for national reconstruction are well-known.[19] He saw the central problem of Indian life as not something of external origin, but a flaw in the Indian character—a pervasive lack of courage and a consequent tendency 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 infatuation 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 eschew ostentatious 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.

The similarity between Gandhi's programme and Tagore's ideas on the reconstruction of Indian society 1890s onwards is indeed striking.[20] 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. Howls of protest were heard when a respectable Indian was insulted, but no one paused to think that such humiliation was rendered possible by the loss of national self-respect. He welcomed the spirit of swadeshi, not because it would harrass the English or stimulate Indian industry, hut because it might teach us to give up our comforts and make a modest act of self-denial the basis of national unity. And 'the exit from the dark cave of self-interest' for the wider good of the people would give Indians the courage and self-respect they lacked so badly.

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. He decried 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 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 for which there is no exact equivalent in English, 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.

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.[21] 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 denunciation. As in 1905 so in 1921, he was revolted by the destructive acts which inevitably 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.

NOTES

1. Tagore to Gandhi, March 1921, Gandhi, Collected Works, XX (Navajivan Trust, Ahmedabad, 1966), 539, 540-1.
2. See Collected Works, vol. X.
3. See Bhikhu Parikh, Gandhi's Political Philosophy (Notre Dame, Indiana, 1989), 15-26.
4. Rabindranath Tagore, Atmashakti (Strength of One's Own), Rabindra-rachnabali, vol. 3 (2nd edition, 3rd reprint, Viswa-bharati, Calcutta, 1975), 555.
5. 'University Bill', Rabindra-rachanabali, vol. 3, 595-6.
6. Ibid., 596.
7. 'Nababarsha' (New Year) in Bharatvarsha, Rabindra-rachanabali, vol. 4, 372-3.
8. Tagore to Gandhi, March, 1921, see note 1.
9. 'Prachya o Pratichya' (The East and the West), in Samaj, R.abindra-rachanabali, vol. 12, 236-60.
10. See Parikh, op. cit., 60.
11. See Hind Swaraj and Parikh, op. cit., ch. 2.
12. See note 7.
13. Panchabhut (The Five Elements), in Rabindra-rachanabali, vol. 2, 571.
14. Ibid., 571, 572.
15. Panchabhut, 570; Samaj, 240.
16. Bharatvarsha, 368-9.
17. Atmashakti, 529ff.
18. See his poem, Bharat-tirtha.

19. See Parikh, op. cit., 52-62, 111-17; Gandhi, Constructive Programme Its Meaning and Place (Navajivan Press, Ahmedabad, 1945).
20. The following discussion is based mainly on Atmashakti, Panchabhul, Bharatvarsha cited above as also Raja Praja in Rabindra-rachanabali, vol. 10.
21. Tagore to Gandhi, March 1921, Collected Works, vol. xx, 539.