

Contemporary Socio-Political Concerns and Tagore-Gandhi Debate

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Abstract

Rabindranath Tagore and Mahatma Gandhi are such luminaries who have significantly contributed in the making of what India is today. They did not only write for the age in which they lived but have also carved the path for the days to come. Major discourses of that period that directly or indirectly affected the course of history form part of their oeuvre. Whereas one is foremost a poet and philosopher, the other is hailed as a political thinker. Moreover both of them had their own separate reasons to believe in their respective without ever showing any irreverence to the other. The present paper proposes to discuss the concepts enumerated by them.

Keywords: history of ideas, contemporary condition, nationalism, swaraj, civilization.

The past two centuries have witnessed a lot of upheavals not only in the arena of mundane politics but also in the world of ideas. Numerous revolutionary concepts emerged out of the innumerable schools of philosophy that tried to change the world. Although there have been many more than what we can really count at one place and in one go, the most important ones that literally changed the outlook of the world considerably and that still continue to do so, are the Marxist principles and the Darwinian theory. Interestingly enough, both of them came up in the first half of nineteenth century and countered many age-old concepts that have been significantly affecting the human consciousness for centuries. The eminently imminent class division in a society existed since the very day human society started evolving systems for itself but was 'never so well expressed' as it was done by Marx. Similarly the undeniable impact of religion on human behavior and thought process also received a lethal blow when Darwin propounded his theory on the evolution of human beings on this planet. Another major event that changed the whole perspective of human life was born out of the speedy

scientific and technological advancements that again redefined many established notions. The industrial revolution of late nineteenth century no doubt brought human life at a different pedestal; it made human life much more comfortable, gave birth to a powerful class of industrialists, empowered the middle class, triggered off the process of urbanization, forced people residing in villages and small towns to opt out of their traditional professions and introduced many such things that human society had never even imagined about. These changes have no doubt occurred chiefly in Europe but no country in the world can deny the effects of all of them and India was not only a 'no exception' to the whole affair but was a major respondent to it. What Rabindranath Tagore at the age of eighty, realizes and for no reasons hides his feelings as he begins his text entitled *Crisis in Civilization* by counting his indebtedness to what had taken shape in England in the last century:

As I look back on the vast stretch of years that lies behind me.... the type of learning that was served out to us was neither plentiful nor diverse, nor was the spirit of scientific enquiry very much in evidence. Thus their scope being strictly limited, the educated of those days had recourse to the English language and literature. Their days and nights were eloquent with the stately declamations of Burke, with Macaulay's long-rolling sentences; discussions centred upon Shakespeare's drama and Byron's poetry and above all upon the large-hearted liberalism of nineteenth-century politics.

(Tagore 11)

Why need Tagore point that out with so much of emphasis? Because he belongs to the generation of thinkers that actively participated in everything that was happening offshore and that had internalized the various twists and turns reflected in the Western worldview in the past few decades. Gandhi also had the same feeling when he clearly mentioned his gratitude towards John Ruskin's ideas contained in *Unto This Last*.

Now, coming down to the twentieth century, apart from the twin World Wars, the establishment of an international forum like the U.N.O. and the massive democratic reforms, the world witnessed two more significant events that considerably changed the course of life on earth: the first, that mostly took place in the first half of twentieth century, is the process that inaugurated the series of the liberation of colonies and the second, that took shape in the second half of twentieth century, is the Globalization. Interestingly enough, both of them had their seeds in the developments that took place mostly in nineteenth century and both of them banked upon the same conceptual frameworks emanating from the urgency to

create a world full of scientific outlook and rational thinking. Whereas the former is the end product of the ever increasing strength of the nationalism, the latter aims at loosening up the ends. Globalization has its own set aims that have been both targeted as well as advocated alike but one big realization that has been felt to be obvious now in the current unipolar world order is that it is inevitable.

The emergence of the concept of nation and nationalism is by far considered a recent phenomenon though its germs have also been traced in the antiquity. Examples of nation, both as an ‘imagined community’ and as a geo-political entity are innumerable in number that does not only provide scope for theoretical contestations but for political experimentations also. Basically a concept that aims at bringing together the people having similar cause, aspirations and sentiments, nation emerged as a powerfully charged positive concept that enabled people to come together against certain such odds that affected their lives; as a unit that helped unite people, otherwise of diverse backgrounds to fight against such odds together. In order to illustrate the point one can easily refer to the conditions prevailing in a country like India that consisted of hundreds of states in the pre-British phase but during the struggle against the imperial power, India stood together, from north to south and from east to west neglecting all its inherent differences based on caste, colour and language etc.. This process also tempts many noted political historians today to consider the emergence of India as a nation to be a priceless gift of imperialism. Nations in the name of religion, caste, class, community and so on is another by product of the same process that are born out of the insurgent politics and sectarianism and have caused socio-political upheavals the world over.

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore figure among such great thinkers and reformers of India who have written/spoken extensively on almost all the aspects of life in general and life in a nation in particular. Although they were writing in the beginning of the last century, they could easily foresee the future of the nation and that is why while talking about the contemporary struggles and issues related to them they were always conscious of identifying the dangers of all those formulations that might prove to be disastrous in the long run. We find them visualizing the changing world order; they were in their own ways trying to situate India in a global era. But it is also a well known fact that both of them had their own reservations especially regarding the role of religion and procedures to be followed for the implementation of various programmes that were run to achieve freedom. In the present paper I wish to problematize their respective views regarding nation, nationalism and civilization mainly expressed in Tagore’s *Nationalism* and Gandhi’s *Hind Swaraj*.

Tagore's *Nationalism* is a text based on the lectures that he delivered during his tour to Japan and the United States of America in the years 1916 and 1917. The text is introduced by E.P. Thompson and contains three chapters entitled 'Nationalism in Japan', 'Nationalism in the West' and 'Nationalism in India' with an Appendix that enlists the lectures delivered in the USA. Although all the three lectures anthologized here present his views on the aforementioned issues, his speech on India is the most direct and focused of them all. The very first sentence in that essay can confound any listener as a person, while talking about the problems of India in the colonial period, so confidently utters the following sentences with utmost ease:

Our real problem in India is not political. It is social. (Tagore 77)

But Tagore seems quite justified when he further takes up the question to another frontier and outlines the major differences in the situations prevailing in the West and in India. He points out that the inherited racial unity highly informed by 'a watchful attitude of animosity against others' and the limited natural resources in the West have resulted in creating structural imbalances and in making their character full of 'political and commercial aggressiveness'. In India, however, the biggest problem since antiquity has been the challenge of combating against the horrifying problems related to the racial conflicts. Precisely due to these reasons Tagore gives prominence to social problems over the political ones. But at the same time, he does not forget to mention that it is not a problem prevailing exclusively in India but in other nations, like the USA, too where they have been struggling against the problems related to incorporating the Blacks in the mainstream. In spite of all these racial differences, India has been nurturing all these strands together as he points out:

She (India) has tried to make adjustment of races, to acknowledge the real differences between them where these exist, and yet seek for some basis of unity. This basis has come through our saints, like Nanak, Kabir, Chaitanya and others, preaching one God to all races of India.

(Tagore 78)

It is really interesting to see Tagore talking about the changing world order way back in 1916-17. He quite confidently discusses the emerging trend of the unification of the world into one large unit and considers it to be a process that is anything but political and further envisages the role of India by saying that the world will be forced to learn the ways how India survives against all odds. He visualizes the role of India as a nation that will be considered a signpost as how to reconcile with the interests of people belonging to different sects because in the days to come, the whole world will witness the same anxiety that India has been facing

for centuries due to the diversity of race, religion and language etc. It is certainly Tagore's foresightedness that he could make the following announcement with a lot of ease:

What India has been, the whole world is now. The whole world is becoming one country through scientific facility. And the moment is arriving when you must also find a basis of unity which is not political....There is only one history—the history of man. All national histories are merely chapters in the larger one. And we are content in India to suffer for such a great cause. (Tagore 78)

We see that at many places, Tagore does not find himself at ease with the concept of nation for the reasons that could be easily made out from this lecture. The first reason why he does not attest of it is that it is basically a political concept that cannot but always be protective of the interests of one or some special tribes that would be in position of power and will control the affairs either by number or by arms. Such a position of Tagore on nationalism turned many of his well-wishers his staunch critics as Sisirkumar Ghose writes:

This gave him a chance to visit Japan where, in the beginning, he was lavishly feted. But as soon as he started to speak against the evil of Nationalism, the welcome changed to indifference. When he left the Japanese shores, there was only one person to see him off, his uneasy host. The American tour proved to be a grueling experience.

(Ghose 20)

Secondly, he finds it to be a thoroughly Western concept based on the principle of exclusion; it advocates the organization of people belonging to similar background, same heritage and same racial memories and aims at violently excluding all those who do not share all this. He, therefore, finds it to be utterly un-Indian in spirit and outrightly denounces it for the simple reason that it shows no reverence to the Indian past and rejects it as a fallacy. The third contention of Tagore against nationalism, which he believes to be an offshoot of the second, rests upon his understanding of the general human psychology. More like a poet of humanity than as a political philosopher, Tagore expresses his undaunted faith in the inherent goodness of the human self and believes that nationalism inserts mob psychology among human beings that further encourages them to think only of their own people. It ultimately makes human beings more and more parochial both in terms of geographical boundaries as well as socio-political and philosophical standards as he says:

We have seen in our everyday life even small organizations of business and profession produce callousness of feeling in men who are not naturally bad, and we can well imagine what a moral havoc it is causing in a world where whole peoples are furiously organizing themselves for gaining wealth and power....Nationalism is a great menace. It is the particular thing which for years has been at the bottom of India's troubles. (Tagore 86)

Gandhi, on the other hand, had a very different outlook on these categorizations. He does not consider nationalism 'a great menace' but an inadvertent reality that is necessary to free India from the yoke slavery. His book entitled *Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule* presented as a collection of a series of dialogues between the Reader and the Editor, is a full-throated debate on numerous issues related to both the freedom struggle of India and the socio-cultural conditions of the country. It contains twenty chapters on as diverse themes as partition of Bengal, Swaraj, Civilization, Railways, lawyers, doctors, passive resistance, education, machinery and so on. While trying to formulate a definition of Swaraj, Gandhi frankly accepts that his concept of Swaraj continues to evolve because, for him, Swaraj is much more than mere self-rule. He has no grudge in saying that the preparations for Swaraj are more important issues than achieving it because Gandhi first of all wants to train the common Indians about the meaning, necessity and utility of Swaraj. When the Reader restlessly defines the concept by saying that when we shall have our own flag, our own army and our own constitution that might depend much on the British codes, it could be concluded that India had achieved freedom, Gandhi points out the flaws in it:

In effect it means this: that we want English rule without the Englishman. You want the tiger's nature but not the tiger; that is to say, you would make India English. And when it becomes English, it will be called not Hindustan but *Englishtan*. This is not the Swaraj that I want.

(Gandhi 26)

Two major conclusions can easily be drawn from this statement of the Editor/Gandhi: one, he was not in a hurry to achieve Swaraj because he wanted to prepare the blueprint for the course of action in advance and two, he was not prepared to run the country on borrowed concepts. To Gandhi, freedom from the British meant much more than what could be perceived through naked eyes. He was quite aware of the innumerable social problems that India should focus upon once it achieved freedom; otherwise it might lead to a lot of confusion that might further take the country on a wrong route initiating an endless series of civil wars on the caste, creed and religious lines. He, therefore, was willing to wait, to make preparations, and to awaken the common public of India and teach them the lessons of unity,

freedom, civil rights and passive resistance. Gandhi wanted to locate the problems and deal with them or at least sensitize people on those lines. There were many leaders who had quite a number of time expressed their resentment against Gandhi's attitude towards delaying freedom by attaching too much attention to the issues which many of them considered to be the internal problems and therefore could be taken care of once the British left as Nehru expresses his indignation at Gandhi's decision of going on fast unto death in disapproval of the separate electorates in 1932:

And then I felt annoyed with him for choosing a side-issue for his final sacrifice—just a question of electorate. What would be the result on our freedom movement? Would not the larger issues fade into the background, for the time being at least?

(Nehru 370)

It is here where Gandhi's differences with Tagore could also be charted out. Whereas Tagore was opposed to any such efforts that would lead to the formation of a political unit including a nation, Gandhi banked upon the political unification of the country; whereas Tagore believed it to be an act of polluting the innocent human mind, Gandhi, apart from outlining the need for nation building, always considered political lessons to be an integral part of social life of a human being and no one can object to the fact that all his fasts and the movements run by him basically aimed at training the common man. Apart from anything else that Gandhi did, no one can deny the fact that he made the Indian freedom struggle a struggle of the common man. People living in the remotest corners of the country positively responded to his calls and the movement spread across the boundaries of urban centres. Raja Rao's famous novel *Kanthapura* presents a wonderful fictional account of the Gandhi era in Indian politics as how people joined hands to fight against the foreign rule. But beyond these differences, one can also witness the lines of agreement between the two. Just as Tagore finds it necessary to look at India in the perspective of the Indian past, similarly Gandhi also aims at reconstructing the future of the country as what India essentially stands for. Both the thinkers are one on the question as how should India evolve in future as both of them demonstrate a lot of confidence over the Indian knowledge systems and Indian civilization. Gandhi says in the chapter entitled 'What is True Civilization?':

Civilization is that mode of conduct which points out to the path of duty. Performance of duty and observance of morality are convertible terms. To observe morality is to attain mastery over our mind and our passions....If this definition be correct, then India, as so many writers have shown, has nothing to learn

from anybody else, and this is as it should be.

(Gandhi 53)

Moreover both of them believe that India must, before anything else, strive to fight against the social ills that have been killing it from inside. What ultimately could be concluded through this discussion is that their agenda is more or less the same but means to reach that end are different; Whereas Tagore intends to address the social problems without letting polity enter into it to further worsen the condition, Gandhi aims to resolve the social problems by way of making people more politically conscious. Just as Tagore attempted to preach the lessons pertaining to 'the harmony of completeness in humanity', Gandhi also, as M.V. Kamath summarily writes, tirelessly argued that 'the best and simplest means to self-realization or to being with God, was to serve God's creatures' (Kamath 110).

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