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The Mahatma and The Gurudev: Convergence and divergence

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Abstract

Gandhi and Tagore were the two great luminaries of their time. Though both were contemporaries but they happened to meet each other when they had lived almost half their age. Both were great admirers and friends of each other at the same time opposed each other on several fundamental issues. But despite several debates on those issues, their relationship remained unaffected as they respected each other's views and cordially accepted the right to differ. Gandhi conferred the title of Gurudev on Tagore whereas Tagore called him Mahatma. (as early as 1915). The acquaintance between Gandhi and Tagore began in 1914-15 when Gandhi visited Shantiniketan along with his students of Phoenix school from South Africa. At that time Tagore was just 53 years old and had been awarded Nobel prize in Literature for his collection of poems "Gitanjali" (song offerings) whereas Gandhi was eight years younger than him and had acclaimed fame for his work in South Africa but was yet to have a foothold in India as a national leader. Gandhi stipulated Satyagraha, Charkha and Swadeshi as the mainstay of his freedom struggle. Tagore objected to each of them either through his letters to his friends, in articles or in periodicals. The debate between them was not restricted to political issues but also elevated to philosophical issues. Both were patriots, they loved their country and admired its cultural heritage. Both wanted freedom for their country from the British rule but their paths differed to some extent.

Keywords: Charkha, Swadeshi, Phoenix School, C.F. Andrews

Introduction

Gandhi and Tagore were the two great luminaries of their time. Though both were contemporaries but they happened to meet each other when they had lived almost half their age. Both were great admirers and friends of each other at the same time opposed each other on several fundamental issues. But despite several debates on those issues, their relationship remained unaffected as they respected each other's views and cordially accepted the right to differ. Gandhi conferred the title of Gurudev on Tagore whereas Tagore called him Mahatma. (As early as 1915) Gandhi belonged to the western part of India, Gujarat which was divided into several princely states with the trading community playing a pivotal role in the society of that period- mid to late nineteenth century whereas Tagore belonged to Bengal, the eastern part of the country which was steeped in literature, culture and heritage. Tagore was born in a period which saw a convergence of three movements in the sphere of literature, religion and politics in the life of Bengal and he played an inevitable role in each of these movements. Tagore was born and brought up in a Hindu family which was a blend of Bengali culture and western thought. The family was quite emancipated to imbibe modern ideas of the western culture which made them forward-looking and discard the age-old dogmas and irrational rituals of Hinduism. Tagore was the youngest of fourteen siblings. His father Debendranath Tagore, also called 'maharishi' for his simplicity and spirituality believed in monotheistic Hinduism. The children were nurtured in the moral and ethical fervor of their father hence went on to attain great success socially, culturally and professionally. Tagore's childhood was steeped in Bengali tradition and culture where most of his siblings were actively involved in poetry narration, music and theatre. Every day in the evening they had a get-together at home in which not only the members of the family participated in cultural and political discourse but dignitaries from outside too joined in. On the other hand, Gandhi had an ordinary, monotonous and uneventful childhood and adolescence. He belonged to a Santana Hindu Vaishnav family permeated in orthodox beliefs of right and wrong, vice and virtue which moulded the moral values of Gandhi which he retained all his life. Both went abroad for their career pursuits.

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Tagore was sent to London by his father to prepare and qualify for Indian Civil Services but he failed to adapt to the formal training of the college. On the other hand, Gandhi too was sent to London to study Law though he attained his degree unlike Tagore but having failed to practice law successfully in India he moved to South Africa.

The acquaintance between Gandhi and Tagore began in 1914-15 when Gandhi visited Shantiniketan along with his students of Phoenix school from South Africa. At that time Tagore was just 53 years old and had been awarded Nobel prize in Literature for his collection of poems "Gitanjali" (song offerings) whereas Gandhi was eight years younger than him and had acclaimed fame for his work in South Africa but was yet to have a foothold in India as a national leader. The two were not completely unknown to each other as in 1908 when Gandhi moved a resolution in the Calcutta session of Indian National Congress on behalf of hundred thousand Indians in South Africa, he met Tagore's elder brother Jyotirindranath there and later on one of his articles was translated and published in *Bharati* on the plight of Indians in South Africa, the journal with which Tagore was associated. Though there was no direct contact between the two one can feel the affinity in their philosophical approach by reading what Tagore wrote of the Indian struggle as early as 1908 in which he emphasizes following the path of Truth and that one should abstain from thinking that Dharma is meant only for the powerful and not for the powerless.

Tagore started knowing Gandhi through his role in South Africa. His friend C.F. Andrews and his colleague at Shantiniketan W.W. Pearson played an important role as both of them decided to go and support Gandhi's cause in South Africa in 1913 and apprised Tagore of all his activities from time to time. In January 1914, Andrew writes to Tagore about the commonality between the two: "... it is essentially yours and Mahatma's—a true independence, a reliance upon spiritual force, a fearless courage in the face of temporal power, and withal a deep and burning charity for all men," an apt analysis of the character of two noble souls. In 1914 when Gandhi decided to disband the Phoenix Ashram in South Africa he sent his students on the advice of Andrews to stay at Shantiniketan till the alternative arrangement was made. Tagore wrote to Gandhi "thank you for allowing your boys to become our boys as well and thus, form a living link in the Sadhana of both of our lives." Tagore's letter to Gandhi reflects his nobility and in fact, this 'living link' became the basis of their lifelong relationship. Gandhi visited Shantiniketan on 10th March 1915 where the two met for the first time. This day is celebrated as Gandhi Punyha Day to date to commemorate the self-help experiment initiated by Gandhi in Shantiniketan. Their friendship lasted lifelong despite their dissents and differences their admiration and respect for each other did not diminish. Both were patriots, they loved their country and admired its cultural heritage. Both wanted freedom for their country from the British rule but their paths differed to some extent.

Gandhi wanted to make Hindi a national language for all national proceedings and inter-provincial communication. He further emphasized that the masses need to be involved in the freedom struggle for which the Indian National Congress should be all the more inclusive. Its membership fee should be reduced and Hindi should be principally used in Congress as a mode of communication. Gandhi wrote to Tagore on this subject in 1918. Tagore agreed with Gandhi

on making Hindi a national language for interprovincial interaction but had apprehensions about introducing it in the Congress as the common mode of expression as there were members from the southern part of the country too for whom Hindi was still a foreign language. He too felt the need to elevate the freedom struggle to the national level and it is in this letter that he refers to Gandhi as the "Mahatma" and as a "great leader of men" and further asserts that he is sure that India would win freedom if it proves that Indians are morally superior to those who rule them by the force of might. Therefore, they both agreed on the malady but disagreed on the remedy. This letter was written by Tagore on April 12th 1919, just a day before the Jallianwala Bagh tragedy. The brutal dastardly incident of the Jallianwala Bagh tragedy left the Indians shaken and infuriated. Tagore too was enraged, on 30th May 1919, he wrote to the Viceroy renouncing his knighthood as a protest to the atrocious Punjab tragedy on behalf of all Indians. Gandhi too appreciated this act of Tagore. From 1915-1919 Gandhi led successful Satyagraha at Champaran, Ahmedabad and Kheda and by 1919 Gandhi became a National leader with the mass following and convinced the nation that non-violence was the only way to attain freedom. From 1919-20 he wrote several letters to Tagore inviting him to visit Ahmedabad, who came and presided over the Gujarat Literary Conference held on 2nd April 1920. Tagore was away when the Non-Cooperation movement came in its full swing but he expressed his inhibitions about passive resistance to be adopted as a strategy to fight the freedom struggle. He had doubts about passive resistance to be moral in itself as it could be used for truth and even against it. Any kind of power is irrational and if it gains strength and success it becomes a temptation. He knew Gandhi was trying to teach people to fight evil with good but such a fight was not meant for impulsive men who might get carried away by the spur of the moment. Evil results in negativity, prejudice and indiscriminate violence and insult to bitterness and revengefulness. Since the authorities had already started using force due to panic or anger it might result in resentment and reaction of some of the people or demoralizing of others. Tagore had written this just a day before the Amritsar tragedy. By this time Gandhi became the most popular and strongest political leader on the other hand Tagore had reached the apex of his intellectual glory. Gandhi stipulated Satyagrah, charkha and Swadeshi as the mainstay of his freedom struggle. Tagore objected to each of them either through his letters to his friends, in articles or in periodicals. The debate between them was not restricted to political issues but also elevated to philosophical issues. For example, Tagore asserted that *Mukti* or emancipation is the goal of Brahma-vidya while *Nirvana* of Buddhism. Since names symbolize attitudes of mind, *Mukti* has a positive connotation while *Nirvana* has a negative connotation of truth to which Gandhi objected that renunciation is as much an ideal as the acceptance of a thing. It is equally important to discard untruth as it is to accept the truth. All religions advocate that two contradicting forces act upon us and the human endeavour lies in the fact to consistently struggle between rejection and acceptance. He further affirms that Tagore unconsciously did injustice to Buddhism by declaring *Nirvana* as a negative state for *Mukti* or emancipation is equally a negative state. If one liberates or emancipates oneself from the bondage of the flesh then in a real sense he obtains eternal bliss (*ananda*).

From the poet of Asia Tagore was gradually proclaimed the poet of the world. Since he had become the face of his country, he was conscious that his nation should not deliver any feeble message which he would have to interpret to the world. He did not approve of non-cooperation as a venerable vision for India. He considered it as a “doctrine of negation and despair... separation (and) narrowness”. Gandhi assured Tagore that he need not have to be ashamed of his country for adopting the concept of non-cooperation. The concept might be ahead of time but India had no choice but to choose between violence and non-cooperation which is a rejection of the involuntary and forceful participation in evil. He further asserts that their non-cooperation is neither with the English nor with the West but with the system that English has adopted with the civilization in materialistic terms and its exploitation of the weak. Tagore was also against the boycott of government educational institutions by the students unless there was an alternative arrangement of schools. He could not justify the fact that the sacrifice of the students would ultimately lead to their non-education rather than fuller education. He felt that the boycott of schools and colleges would lead to mayhem and chaos due to the emptiness created amongst students even if it was a temporary phase. He refused to take the responsibility of propagating such a negative programme for which he was not convinced and which would uproot the students from their soil. He further found it ironical that on his visit to the west he would preach cooperation and collaboration between East and West cultures whereas the doctrine of non-cooperation would be practised in his county. He did not support the materialistic nature of Western civilization just as he did not consider the physical body to be the highest truth in man. But he also felt that the material necessities of life could not be ignored and rather than destroying the physical body one must endeavour to strike a balance, a” harmony between the physical and the spiritual nature of man, between the foundation and the superstructure, hence in the true meeting of the East and West. “Gandhi too believed in the free flow all cultures but he refused to be swiped by any of them. He refused to stay in anyone else’s house as an intruder, beggar or slave. He further emphasized that he would not want his countrymen to stress themselves in learning English merely for fake pride. In reply to Tagore’s concern for students for giving up government schools Gandhi reverts that these schools have left us weak, dependant and dejected without providing us with any solution to it. They have succeeded in their intention of making clerks and interpreters and that one should not have an obsession for literary training as it does not contribute to the moral height or character building of a person. Mahatma had won the heart of the millions with his love and compassion. He went to the huts of the destitute, felt their pains and problems and talked to them in their language, clad like one of them and stood for their cause. Thus he won the sovereignty of the nation and explained the real power of Truth to the Indians as well as to the world. Tagore too acknowledged Gandhi’s unbounded love for the masses and his path of Truth but he felt that the truth of intellect is equally important as the truth of love and the resources of an economist, a mechanic, an educationist and a statesman must be utilized equally in the building up of Swaraj. Gandhi should give a clarion call to all the minds of the country to come forward on the path of karma and thus awaken the whole country rather than asking them to restrict

to one field of ‘spin and weave’. He did not approve of the burning of cloth in heaps and asserted that which kind of cloth should be used and which manufacturer to be promoted should be the prerogative of the economists and not of the countrymen. To this Gandhi retorted strongly that economics which allows one nation to prey upon another is immoral and sinful. He further asserts that it is insensitive and sinful on his part to wear fine clothes of a foreign company rather than wear the clothes spun by a poor weaver in the vicinity and thus provide food and clothing to him too. Such economics which is insensitive to the destitute of the nation and adversely affects the moral wellbeing of an individual is immoral and hence sinful. At the mediation of their common friend, Charlie Andrews Gandhi meets Tagore at his house in Jorasanko and insists him to join him in his cause of Swaraj reminding him how from the beginning he wanted Indians to live with self-respect on their own feet rather than being a mere imitation of the Englishmen. Tagore was worried about the spreading nationalism in the world which had a selfish and shortsighted vision. He felt that India still needed to learn from the West and its science the art to collaborate amongst themselves. He did not agree with Gandhi that he had succeeded in establishing Hindu-Muslim unity. They were together only till their common fight against the British and explains how his non-violent followers had stolen cloth from the shops, lit a bonfire and howled around it like hooligans. He doubted if as emotional a people as Indians could be kept under control by preaching non-violent principles. Tagore asserted that only by teaching their children for two-three generations they could subside the Hindu-Muslim adversity. Further, when Gandhi invited him to take up the responsibility of the Indian schools taught by Indians He frankly informed Gandhi that he did not believe in his national education plan as the best of the minds would be involved in framing political ideologies and the rest of them would be involved in education which would end up in the mockery of the education system. Tagore emphasized that teachers from all over the world should be invited to teach in these Indian schools apart from the Indian teachers and also to learn from the rich cultural heritage of the country. A common consensus could not reach between Gandhi and Tagore though Gandhi insisted on Tagore to lead the bhadrak and the rest of the nation to spin the charkha and weave Tagore evaded and preferred restricting to his vocation. He felt that just as Hindu-Muslim unity was being exalted similarly the emphasis on spinning of charkha. He exclaimed that he was not influenced by the concept of charkha. He further complained that by giving the priority to the usage of charkha people were getting confounded and distracted from swaraj. This would lead to miserable inaction amongst the masses and the country would fail to attain swaraj by merely weaving khaddar or holding discourses. For Tagore, the key to swaraj was the practice of cooperative self-determination. Any village whose people would come together to earn their living, take care of their food, health and education would move a step forward towards Swaraj and would also illuminate the path for others in the direction of swaraj with their living growth and not by the mere use of charkha. Gandhi had tried to explain to Tagore that wherever people gathered to spin charkha they would also indulge in activities like anti-malaria campaigns, improve health and sanitation, conservation of cattle and settling village disputes too. Tagore believed in

the efficacy of ahimsa but only when it sprang from within, from the depth of heart and mind and not forced upon someone by an outside agency for some immediate success. Soon after, on 5th February 1922, the Chauri Chaura incident broke off in which 22 policemen were burnt alive by an uncontrollable mob. Tagore's apprehensions were turning out to be true. The Civil Disobedience movement was withdrawn immediately by Gandhi who was sentenced to six years. After three years of their parting ways, when Tagore was on a tour to China, Japan, United States and Argentina in 1924, he said in an interview at Argentina that "Gandhi is all Violence..." He exclaims on his return home that he faced the most painful breach of hope when he saw that masses refused to accept anything that was European charged and agitated at the call of Gandhi, this led to violence. When he met Gandhi he explicitly mentioned that it was inevitable 'to destroy all that was European-science, manners all that was bestowed by West."

In conclusion, I would reiterate that despite political differences between them and open criticism for each other the mutual respect and admiration between them did not wane till the end of their lives. When Gandhi was asked about Tagore's criticism of Charkha, he expressed his pleasure in his frank criticism and that their friendship became all the richer by their disagreements for each other. Gandhi straightaway discards Dame Rumour's statement as baseless that jealousy was the root cause of this criticism. His admiration for Gurudev is seen when he eulogizes him as the unsurpassable and undisputed master of poetry apart from being a great teacher. He could never aspire to reach his greatness and that it was his misfortune if Gurudev misunderstood him. He called him his candid friend and always looked up to him for his true opinion. In one of the letters written to Vidhushekhar Shastri, a leading faculty member at Visva-Bharati, Gandhi recollects how the title of 'Gurudev' came so spontaneously to him after meeting Tagore that he did not realize it unless he was told by Mahadev. Similarly, Tagore too often referred to him as a noble and true spirit who had made India his own in true sense to the extent of sacrificing his life for the nation for various social and national issues. Tagore admired Gandhi for his all-embracing humanism which was his greatest quality as he did not discriminate between rich and poor, high or low caste or any religious or political labels that men and women bore. Under the banner of Ahimsa, Gandhi consistently fought against exploitation and injustice of any kind and religious and racial fanaticism. Tagore had assured Gandhi in one of his letters that no matter how grievous differences arose between them their relationship based on mutual respect would remain uninjured always.

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