

**THE TAGORE-GANDHI CONTROVERSY
REVISITED - I**

-Or, Further, In Search of Development - I

We wish to pick up the threads of a dialogue started sometime earlier¹ which, unfortunately, found few takers (or, shall we say, no takers?). In its essentials, the paper we refer to attempts to point out the salient features of the Gandhi-Tagore ideological controversy² and correlates it with the condition of the Indian mind today as it gropes its way 'in search of development'.

We would like to divide our discussion in the following manner in this paper as a prelude to the ones to follow :

- A) The Tagore-Gandhi Controversy;
- B) Mutual Appraisals and tributes;
- C) Conclusions

Further papers will tackle the modern implications of this controversy and its importance for the future (Part II), outline the germinations of the national debate already initiated (Part III) and present our take off from there (Part IV).

A. THE TAGORE-GANDHI CONTROVERSY

We feel it essential to highlight some features of this controversy before going into their implications. This is to serve two purposes : as a foundation for the discussion to follow and to excite further enquiry along these lines in the minds of the reader. This essay will not necessarily attempt to discuss every feature of their controversy nor even analyse every feature that we ourselves mention. In fact it may discuss few of them. There is, however, little need to offer an apology for this because although we wish to highlight some features of this controversy, we reserve the right (we think justifiably) not to comment on them. Often, just a juxtaposition of thought makes standpoints stand out in bold relief, making further comment redundant. Nor do we envisage a critical-comparative point-by-point study as the scope of the present exercise. This does not mean we do not wish it done : in fact we could not wish less. This is precisely the reason

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why we have juxtaposed the two contrary thoughts and leave that as a future exercise, if at all necessary. In the meanwhile we would rather go on from here to trace the worth of these contrary viewpoints in our present day search for development. We may, therefore, be pardoned if we comment on only those aspects of the controversy which we believe are material to such an exercise.

Further, we do believe that though controversy is often inevitable, nay integral, to the vitality of debate, it is erroneous to consider it sufficient to nurture this vitality. Often our errors in this respect are less those of omission and more ones of commission. We tend to over-feed ourselves on controversies elsewhere, as also in our philosophising, and this, by sheer force of habit, we tend to employ in all appraisal. For what can better arrest attention than to present a controversial argument? Has it not been said 'When a thing ceases to be a subject of controversy, it ceases to be a subject of interest'³? And if one were to ask: 'What is controversial about Philosophy?'; One may simply answer, : 'What is not?' Of course one worthy suggestion to avoid the enormous wastage of intellectual effort that is involved in the perennial disputes of what text or thinker really meant, what is to begin afresh by asking new questions which disrupts the closed circle of accepted knowledge and opens up a new vista of thought⁴. For, "Genius shows itself not so much in the discovery of new answers as in the discovery of new questions. It influences its age not by solving its problems but by opening eyes to previously unconsidered problems".⁵ But, this, by itself, is no guarantee that it would not form the nidus for a fresh crop (and waste?) of intellectual interpretarial gymnastics. And a fresh controversy. Be that as it may, the point here is that controversy, as such, is like a rudderless boat. It needs to be constantly guided by constructiveness, otherwise it must sink and take with it all those on board. And the survivor list can be pretty small. What makes good sensational stories may fail as torch-bearer for conceptualization of basic principles or policies needed in national reconstruction unless guided necessarily in this manner. And to arrest attention is not necessarily to launch on construction. It can often be a means to skilfully obliterate its awareness.

With this prelude, let us now come to the controversy proper.

(i) Foreign Clothing

Tagore did not approve of the Gandhian movement of burning foreign clothes. Writing his two articles 'The Call of Truth' (*The Modern Review*, Oct. 1921; pp 41-73 in TGC) and 'The Cult of the Charkha' (*The Modern Review*, Sept. 1925; pp 83-106 in TGC) he thought it another

instance of a magical formula that considered something impure just because it was foreign, the burning of which would give India instant Swaraj. Tagore believed nothing great could be got cheaply and we only cheated ourselves when we tried to acquire things that were precious with a price that was inadequate. And "... the foundation of Swaraj cannot be based on any external conformity, but only on the internal union of hearts"⁶ (p. 96). He exhorted Gandhi's followers to stop obeying orders blindly for he felt it would be better if the clothes were given away to the poor to whom they belonged rather than "heaped up before the very eyes of our motherland shivering and ashamed in her nakedness", (p 66), (for) the clothes to be burnt are not mine, but belong to those who most sorely need them. If those who are going naked should have given us the mandate to burn ... the crime of incendiarism would not lie at our door. But how can we expiate the sin of the forcible destruction of clothes which might have gone to women whose nakedness is actually keeping them prisoners, unable to stir out of the privacy of their homes?" (p.68). The question of using or refusing cloth of a particular manufacture belonged mainly to economic science and should be discussed in the language of economics. This movement according to him was based on a confusion between economics and ethics : "... if there be anything wrong in wearing a particular kind of cloth, that would be an offence against economics, or hygiene, or aesthetics, but certainly not against morality" (p.67).

To this, Gandhi replied by his piece in *Young India* entitled 'The Great Sentinel' (13 Oct. 1921; pp 74-82 in *TGC*). He agreed that passing mania, slave mentality and blind acceptance even out of love would be an extremely sorry state to be in : "... I would feel extremely sorry to discover that the country has unthinkingly and blindly followed all I had said or done. I am quite conscious of the fact that blind surrender to love is often more mischievous than a forced surrender to the lash of the tyrant. There is hope for the slave of the brute, none for that of love. Love is needed to strengthen the weak, love becomes tyrannical when it extracts obedience from the unbeliever" (pp. 74-75). He then built his thesis by explaining the meaning of the collective burning of foreign cloth. It was a manifestation of a responsibility upto now unacknowledged, the expiation of and purification from a sin that the nation has consciously or unconsciously acquiesced in : "I venture to suggest to the Poet that the clothes I ask him to burn must be and are his. If they had to his knowledge belonged to the poor or the ill-clad, he would long ago have restored to the poor that was theirs. In burning *my* foreign clothes I burn my shame, I must refuse to insult the naked by giving them clothes they do not need instead of giving

them work which they sorely need" (p. 79). And, "On the knowledge of my sin bursting upon me, I must consign the foreign garments to the flames and thus purify myself" (p. 79). Further, answering the question of the distinction between economics and ethics, he said, "I must confess that I do not draw a sharp or any distinction between economics and ethics. Economics that hurt the moral well being of an individual or a nation are immoral and therefore sinful. Thus the economics that permit one nation to prey upon another are immoral". (pp. 78-79).

(ii) **Foreign Language and Non-cooperation with the British**

In March and May 1921, Tagore wrote in *Letters to a Friend* that Gandhi in his blind zeal for crying down modern education was adopting a policy of Non-cooperation with the West which itself was a form of *himsa* (p. 18). He was especially critical of Gandhi's call to students to give up study in British Government run schools before they had other schools to go to. He recounted an incident when a crowd of young students approached him during the Swadeshi movement in Bengal: "They said to me that if I would order them to leave their schools and colleges they would instantly oblige. I was emphatic in my refusal to do so, and they went away angry, doubting the sincerity of my love for my motherland. And yet long before this popular ebullition of excitement I myself had given a thousand rupees, when I had not five rupees to call my own, to open a Swadeshi store and courted banter and bankruptcy. The reason for my refusing to advise these students to leave their schools was because the anarchy of a mere emptiness never tempts one, even when it is resorted to as a temporary measure. I am frightened of an abstraction which is ready to ignore living reality" (pp. 20-21).

Non-cooperation went against the very grain of the sensitive Poet. He could foresee where such a policy would ultimately lead the people who practised it. For him it was political asceticism, barren like a desert, and as much against life as was the brute force of the raging sea: "Our students are bringing their offering of sacrifices to what? Not to a fuller education but to non-education. It has at its back a fierce joy of annihilation which at its best is asceticism, and at its worst is that orgy of frightfulness in which the human nature . . . finds a disinterested delight in an unmeaning devastation, as has been shown in the late war and on other occasions nearer to us. *No* in its passive moral form is asceticism and in its active moral form is violence. The desert is as much a form of *himsa* (negligence) as is the raging sea in storm; they both are against life" (pp. 19-20).

He called upon India to shun her negativistic knee-jerk responses and stand for co-operation of all people of the world. For, "The West has misunderstood the East which is at the root of the disharmony that prevails between them. But will it mend the matter if the East in her turn tries to misunderstand the

West? The present age has powerfully been possessed by the West; it has only become possible because to her is given some great mission for man. We from the East have to come to her to learn whatever she has to teach us; for by doing so we hasten the fulfilment 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, and the time will come when the West will find leisure to realise that she has a home of hers in the East where her food is her rest" (p. 23). It was in realizing the fundamental unity of the spirit of man that India had her message to give, not in decrying modern influence or preaching 'segregation from the rest of the world' or 'provincialism of vision'. Or more so an 'immoderate boastfulness' that asserted 'India is unique in every way', or worse still, 'a self-depreciation which has the sombre attitude of suicide' (p. 27). It was not by isolation of life or culture but by coming into, "Real touch with the West through the disinterested medium of intellectual cooperation, (that) we shall gain a true perspective of the human world, realize our own position in it, and have faith in the possibility of widening and deepening our connection with it" (p. 27). For Tagore firmly believed that from now onward, "any nation which takes an isolated view of its own country will run counter to the spirit of the New Age, and know no peace," (p. 70). And, "a perfect isolation of life and culture is not a thing of which any race can be proud. The dark stars are isolated, but stars that are luminous belong to the eternal chorus of lights" (p. 27); and, therefore, "response is the only true sign of life" (p. 72).

Gandhi in his reply entitled 'Evil Wrought by the English Medium' (*Young India*, 27 April, 1921), 'English Learning' (*Young India*, 1 June, 1921) which he continued as 'The Poet's Anxiety' (*Young India*, 1 June, 1921) answered most of the charges of the Poet. He felt the English language was mainly studied for commercial purposes, so-called political valve or as a passport to marriage. "Our boys think, and rightly in the present circumstances, that without English they cannot get Government service. Girls are taught English as a passport to marriage" (p. 34). He felt, "Of all the superstitions that affect India, none is so great as that a knowledge of the English language is necessary for imbibing ideas of liberty, and developing accuracy of thought" (pp. 24-25). He believed English education as administered had emasculated the English-educated Indian, while putting a severe strain on the Indian students' nervous energy, making them imitators (p. 23) : "I know husbands who are sorry that their wives cannot talk to them and their friends in English. I know families in which English is being made the mother-tongue. Hundreds of youths believe that without the knowledge of English, freedom of India is practically impossible. The cancer has so eaten into the society, that in many cases, the only meaning of education is a knowledge of English. All these are for me signs of our slavery and

degradation. It is unbearable for me that the vernaculars should be crushed and starved as they have been I would not have a single Indian to forget, neglect or be ashamed of his mother tongue, or to feel that he or she cannot think or express the best thoughts in his or her vernacular" (pp. 34-35). He sincerely believed that of all the defects of the British government the system of education they foisted on India was its most defective part : "It was conceived and born in error, for the English rulers honestly believed the indigenous system to be worse than useless. It has been nurtured in sin, for the tendency has been to dwarf the Indian body, mind and soul" (p. 25). He made bold to say, "Rammohan Roy would have been a greater reformer, and Lokmanya Tilak would have been a greater scholar, if they had not to start with the handicap of having to think in English and transmit their thoughts chiefly in English" (p. 24).

Answering Tagore's charge that Non-cooperation was a form of *himsa*, Gandhi said, "I respectfully warn him against mistaking its excrescences for the movement itself. It is wrong to judge Non-cooperation by the students' misconduct in London or Malegam's in India, as it would be to judge the Englishmen by the Dyers or the O'Dwyers" (p. 35). And while he was as great a believer in free air as a Poet, for, "I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed" (p. 34), he also warned, "I want the culture of all the lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any. I refuse to live in other people's houses as an interloper, a beggar or a slave" (p. 34). Dilating on his ideal of Non-cooperation, he said, "Non-cooperation is intended to pave the way to real, honourable and voluntary co-operation based on mutual respect and trust. The present struggle is being waged against compulsory co-operation, against one-sided combination, against the armed imposition of modern methods of exploitation masquerading under the name of civilisation"(p.37). He elaborated further : "This deliberate refusal to co-operate is like the necessary weeding process that a cultivator has to resort to before he sows. Weeding is as necessary to agriculture as sowing.... (In fact) Non-co-operation is intended to give the very meaning to patriotism that the Poet is yearning after" (pp.40-41). For, "An India awakened and free has a message of peace and goodwill to a groaning world" (p.41). He did agree that Non-co-operation may have come in advance of its time in which case India and the world have to wait, "but there is no choice for India save between violence and Non-co-operation" (p.37). And he believed, "In my humble opinion, rejection is as much an ideal as the acceptance of a thing. It is as necessary to reject untruth as it is to accept truth. All religions teach that two opposite forces act upon us and that the human endeavour consists in a series of eternal rejections and acceptances. Non-co-operation with evil is as much a duty as co-operation with good" (p.39). This Non-co-operation with the system of the British was in fact designed to supply India a platform, "from which she will preach the message of peace and good-will to a groaning world" (p.41). And

to achieve this it was not literary training that was of the essence. Since Tagore was concerned students had nowhere to go to study if they abandoned their schools and colleges, Gandhi countered, "I am firmly of the opinion that the Government schools have unmanned us, rendered us helpless and Godless. They have filled us with discontent, have made us despondent. They have made us what we were intended to become- Clerks and interpreters... if it was wrong to co-operate with the Government in keeping us slaves, we were 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" (p.38). In any case, he had already clarified earlier that he was never 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" (p.38).

(iii) The Charkha

Tagore, again, in his article 'The Call of Truth' (q.v.) and 'The Cult of the Charkha' (q.v.) was especially averse to Gandhi's claim that if everyone turned the charkha for half an hour a day, India could get Swaraj in a year's time. Tagore objected to this as a form of ritual "... if man (can) be stunted by big machines, the danger of his being stunted by small machines must not be lost sight of" (p.65). For, "... the performance of petty routine duties... imparts skills to the limbs of the man who is a bondsman, whose labour is drudgery; but it kills the mind of a man who is a doer, whose work is creation" (p.85). Further, "... the depths of my mind have not been moved by the Charkha agitation ... (and) there are others who are in the same plight as myself - though it is difficult to find them all out. For even where hands are reluctant to work the spindle, mouths are all the more busy spinning its praises ... I am afraid of a blind faith on a very large scale in the Charkha in the country which is so liable to succumb to the lure of short-cuts when pointed out by a personality about whose moral earnestness they can have no doubt" (pp. 87-88). And further, "By doing the same thing day after day, mechanical skill may be acquired; but the mind, like a mill-turning bullock, will be kept going round and round a narrow range of habit" (p. 91). And "... to call upon man to make the easiest of offerings to the smallest of gods is the greatest of insults to his manhood. To ask all the millions of our people to spin the Charkha is as bad as offering the tomato to Jagannath. I do hope and trust that there are not thirty-three crores of Gopees in India" (p. 95)⁷. And further still, "the Charkha is doing harm because of the undue prominence which it has thus usurped. ..." (p. 103).

Gandhi accepted the Poet's warning as a welcome and

wholesome reminder to eschew 'impatience' and 'imposition of authority', howsoever great, and to practice eternal 'watchfulness' for, "A reformer who is enraged because his message is not accepted must retire to the forest to learn how to watch, wait and pray" (p.74). But he as well cautioned the Poet from mistaking the surface dirt for the substance underneath. He denied any large scale blind obedience in the country to his ideas on the Charkha. Although he was not sure whether educated India had understood the truth underlying the Charkha, he urged atleast the Poet to go deeper and search if the Charkha had been accepted from blind faith or from reasoned necessity :

"I do indeed ask the Poet and the Sage to spin the wheel as a sacrament It is my conviction that India is a house on fire because its manhood is being daily scorched; it is dying of hunger because it has no work to buy food with Our cities are not India. India lives in her seven and a half lakhs of villages, and the cities live upon the villages . . . The city people are brokers and commission agents for the big houses of Europe, America and Japan. The cities have cooperated with the latter in the bleeding process that has gone on for the past two hundred years To a people famishing and idle, the only acceptable form in which God can dare appear is work and promise of food as wages. God created man to work for his food, and said that those who ate without work were thieves. Eighty percent of India are compulsory thieves half the year. Is it any wonder if India has become one vast prison? Hunger is the argument that is driving India to the spinning wheel 'Why should I who have no need to work for food spin?' May be the question asked. Because I am eating what does not belong to me . . . Trace the course of every pice that finds its way into your pocket, and you will realize the truth of what I write A plea for the spinning wheel is a plea for recognizing the dignity of labour . . . 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 . . . it is sinful for me to wear the latest finery of Regent Street, when I know that if I had but the things woven by the neighbouring spinners and weavers, that would have clothed me, and fed and clothed them . . . I must consign the foreign garments to the flames and thus purify myself, and thenceforth rest content with the rough Khadi made by my neighbours" (pp. 76-79). Further, he said, "the Poet lives for the morrow and would have us do likewise But I have had the pain of watching birds who, for want of strength, could not be coaxed even into a flutter of their wings I found it impossible to soothe the suffering patients with a song of Kabir. The hungry millions ask for one poem - invigorating food. They cannot be given it. They must earn it. And they can earn only by the sweat of their brow" (p. 81)⁸.

Gandhi clinched his argument in defence of the Charkha by stating elsewhere, "I have asked no one to abandon his calling, but on the contrary to adorn it by giving every day only thirty minutes to spinning as sacrifice for the whole nation. 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 resources. If the Poet span half an hour daily his poetry would gain in richness. For it would then represent the poor man's wants and woes in a more forcible manner than now" (pp. 110-111). Charkha thus becomes a symbol of care for the have-not, for the needs. And when we spin, we contemplate him, we meditate in a frame of mind that directs attention to his state. Gandhi further refutes the argument that the Charkha is used to bring about forced conformity, "a death like sameness . . . The truth is that the Charkha is intended to realize the essential and living oneness of interest among India's myriads" (p. 111). He further adds, "Swaraj has no meaning for the millions if they do not know how to employ their enforced idleness. The attainment of this Swaraj is possible within a short time, and it is so possible only by the revival of the spinning wheel" (pp. 77-78).

(iv) The Bihar Earthquake

In the *Harijan* issue of 16 February, 1934, Tagore wrote his article *The Bihar Earthquake* to which Gandhi wrote his rejoinder *Superstitions vs. Faith* (pp. 115-121). Tagore considered Gandhi's view that untouchability had brought down God's vengeance upon certain parts of Bihar in the form of an earthquake as 'unfortunate', 'unscientific' and "too readily accepted by a large section of countrymen" (p. 115): "If we associate ethical principles with cosmic phenomena, we shall have to admit that human nature is superior to Providence that preaches its lessons in good behaviour in orgies of the worst behaviour possible" (p. 116). This amounts to "making indiscriminate examples of casual victims . . . in order to impress others dwelling at a safe distance who possibly deserve severer condemnation" (p. 116). He felt the kind of argument that Gandhi used by exploiting an event of cosmic disturbance far better suited the psychology of his opponents than his own; and, "We, who are immensely grateful to Mahatmaji for inducing, by his wonderworking inspiration, freedom from fear and feebleness in the minds of his countrymen, feel profoundly hurt when any words 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" (p. 117).

Gandhi replied by saying that he long believed physical phenomena produce results both physical and spiritual; and, "The converse I hold to be equally true . . . We do not know all the laws of God nor their working . . . I believe literally that not a leaf moves but by His will. Every breath I take depends upon His sufferance . . . what appears to us as catastrophes are so only

because we do not know the universal laws sufficiently . . . (catastrophic) visitations . . . though they seem to have only physical origins are, for me, somehow connected with man's morals . . . My belief is a call to repentance and self-purification . . . even as I cannot help believing in God though I am unable to prove His existence to the sceptics, in like manner, I cannot prove the connection of the sin of untouchability with the Bihar visitation even though the connection is instinctively felt by me" (pp. 118-120). And the utilitarian then spoke and bared himself thus, "If my belief turns out to be ill-founded, it will still have done good to me and those who believe with me. For we shall have been spurred to more vigorous efforts towards self-purification . . ." (p.120). And answering Tagore's stinging comment that "our own sins and errors, however enormous, have not got enough force to drag down the structure of creation to ruins" (p. 117), he said, "On the contrary I have the faith that our own sins have more force to ruin that structure than any mere physical phenomenon" (p. 120). And he concluded, ". . . the connection between cosmic phenomena and human behaviour is a living faith that draws me nearer to my God, humbles me and makes me readier for facing Him". Gandhi, in arguing thus, is proved one who must maximise utility and make use of every circumstance to forward ends he considers desirable. And his conviction about his belief obliterates from consciousness any apparent factual inconsistencies that his system of faith has with a physical phenomena as ordinarily understood. Both, in their own way, are relevant and unimpeachable.

Tagore was essentially an analyst, a discerning viewer who could see through and beyond events. This was just an appropriate manifestation of that creativity which he channelized to such effective use in all his other writings. Gandhi was essentially a pragmatist, a doer, who needed the lowest common denominator in thought to put into action and thus galvanise a people. That the former should find faults with the latter's actions and convictions is but understandable. And appropriate. That the latter should forbear it with patience and understand the legitimacy of its thrust is again just appropriate. It speaks for his insight, his tolerance, and the tranquility of a self in perfect command of itself, convinced of the need to alter the environment it wishes to change. Tagore's reasoned questioning became absolutely essential both to submit this tranquility to critical scrutiny and add that dimension of thought which an excessive concentration with action may have unwittingly neglected.

B. MUTUAL APPRAISALS & TRIBUTES

Both Tagore and Gandhi, for all their committed espousal of dearly held opinions, shared the greatest regard for each other. Although they met only twice (in 1915, and again in 1920) they seemed to

communicate (by means of *Young India* and *Harijan* on the one hand, and *Modern Review*, *Letters and Visva-Bharati Quarterly* on the other), their intimate thoughts to each other, and for the benefit of a wider audience. The controversy raged essentially between 1919 and 1925, and again in 1934 following the Bihar Earthquake. Even in disagreement, Tagore said, "It is extremely distasteful to me to have to differ from Mahatma Gandhi in regard to any matter of principle or method. Not that, from a higher stand-point, there is anything wrong in so doing; but my heart shrinks from it" (p.105). He gently cautioned, "Nothing is more wonderful to me than Mahatmaji's great moral personality. In him divine providence has given us a burning thunder-bolt of shakti. May this shakti give power to India, -- not overwhelm her, -- that is my prayer!" (p. 105). And thus spoke Gandhi, "There is nothing of the Poet about me. I cannot aspire after his greatness. He is the undisputed master of it. The world today does not possess his equal as a Poet. My Mahatmaship has no relation to the Poet's undisputed position" (p. 108). And, "Gurudev and I early discovered certain differences of outlook between us. Our mutual affection has, however, never suffered by reason of our differences . . ." (p. 118). And he too gently cautions, "The Poet makes his *gopis* dance to the tune of his flute. I wander after my beloved Sita, the Charkha, and seek to deliver her from the ten-headed monster from Japan, Manchester, Paris etc. The Poet is an inventor, he creates, destroys and recreates. I am an explorer and having discovered a thing I must cling to it . . . The world easily finds an honourable place for the magician who produces new and dazzling things. I have to struggle laboriously to find a corner for my own worn out things" (p. 109). And he goes on to say, ". . . there is no competition between us . . . I may say in all humility that we complement each other's activity" (p. 109).

Gandhi also says earlier, "Why should mere disagreement with my views displease? If every disagreement were to displease, since no two men agree exactly on all points, life would be a bundle of unpleasant sensations and therefore a perfect nuisance. On the contrary the frank criticism pleases me. For our friendship becomes the richer for our disagreements. Friends to be friends are not called upon to agree even on most points. Only disagreement must have no sharpness, much less bitterness, about them. And I gratefully admit that there is none about the Poet's criticism" (p. 108). And further, "He has a perfect right to utter his protest when he believes that I was in error. My profound regard for him would make me listen to him more readily than to any other critic" (p.118). Tagore had already anticipated this emotion in Gandhi, while criticizing his stand on Charkha, when he said, "I feel sure that Mahatmaji himself will not fail to understand me, and keep for me the same forbearance which he has always had" (p. 106).

Even while accepting Tagore's stinging criticism of the fetish surrounding Charkha, Gandhi says, ". . . there is nothing in the Poet's argument which I cannot endorse and still maintain my position regarding the Charkha. The

many things about the Charkha which he has ridiculed I have never said (what Gandhi earlier referred to as table-talk). The merits I have claimed for the Charkha remain undamaged by the Poet's battery" (p. 114; parenthesis added).

Only once did Gandhi acknowledge being hurt during this controversy and he makes haste to offer explanation, "One thing, and one thing only, has hurt me, the Poet's belief, again picked up from table-talk, that I look upon Rammohan Roy as a 'Pigmy'! Well, I have never anywhere described that great reformer as a pigmy, much less regarded him as such. He is to me as great a giant as he is to the Poet . . . I do remember having said . . . that it was possible to attain highest culture without Western education. And when some one mentioned Rammohan Roy, I remember having said that he was a pigmy compared to the unknown authors, say of the Upanishads. This is altogether different from looking upon Rammohan Roy as a pigmy. I do not think meanly of Tennyson if I say that he was a pigmy before Milton or Shakespeare. I claim that I enhance the greatness of both" (pp. 114-115). And simultaneous with the explanation of his hurt is the remark, "If I adore the Poet as he knows I do, in spite of differences between us, I am not likely to disparage the greatness of a man who made the great reform movement of Bengal possible and of which the Poet is one of the finest fruits" (p. 115).

Tagore in his speech on Gandhi's birthday, 1937, delivered to the students of Shantiniketan, said, ". . . many wondered if India could ever rise again by the genius of her own people, -- until there came on the scene a truly great soul, a great leader of men, in line with the traditions of the great sages of old . . . Mahatma Gandhi. Today no one need despair of the future of this country, for the unconquerable spirit that creates has already been released" (p. 126). And later he says, ". . . though Christ declared that the meek shall inherit the earth, Christians now aver that victory is to the strong, the aggressive . . . It needed another prophet to vindicate the truth of this paradox and interpret 'meekness' as the positive force of love and righteousness, as Satyagraha . . . Gandhiji has made of this 'meekness' or *ahimsa*, the highest form of bravery, a perpetual challenge to the insolence of the strong" (p. 130).

Again writing in 1938 on Gandhi the Man, (published in the *Gandhi Memorial Peace Number (Visva-bharati)* in 1949 after Gandhi's death) Tagore revealed his genius by a caricature of Gandhi few may have ever equalled :

"An ascetic himself, he does not frown on the joy of others, but works for the enlivening of their existence day and night. He exalts poverty in his own life, but no man in India has striven more assiduously than he for the material welfare of his people. A reformer with the zeal of a revolutionary, he imposes severe restraints on the very passions he provokes. Something of an idolater and also an iconoclast, he leaves the old gods in their dusty niches of sanctity and simply lures the old

worship to better and more humane purposes. Professing his adherence to the caste system, he launches his firmest attack against it where it keeps its strongest guards, and yet he has hardly suffered from popular disapprobation as would have been the case with a lesser man who would have much less power to be effective in his efforts. He condemns sexual life as inconsistent with the moral progress of man, and has a horror of sex as great as that of the author of *The Kreutzer Sonata*, but unlike Tolstoy, he betrays no abhorrence of the sex that tempts his kind. In fact, his tenderness for woman is one of the noblest and most consistent traits of his character, and he counts among the women of his country some of his best and truest comrades in the great movement he is leading. He advises his followers to hate evil without hating the evil-doer. It sounds an impossible precept, but he has made it as true as it can be made in his own life. I had once occasion to be present at an interview he gave to a certain prominent politician who had been denounced by the official Congress Party as a deserter. Any other Congress leader would have assumed a repelling attitude, but Gandhi was all graciousness and listened to him with patience and sympathy, without once giving him occasion to feel small. Here, I said to myself, is a truly great man, for he is greater than the party he belongs to, greater even than the creed he professes" (pp. 132-134). He goes on to say further, "Great as he is as a politician, as an organizer, as a leader of men, as a moral reformer, he is greater than all these as a man, because none of these aspects and activities limits his humanity . . . an incorrigible idealist and given to referring all conduct to certain pet formulae of his own, he is essentially a lover of men and not of mere ideas . . . If he proposes an experiment for society, he must first subject himself to its ordeal. If he calls for a sacrifice, he must first pay its price himself . . . none of the reforms with which his name is associated was originally his in conception. They have almost all been proposed and preached by his predecessors or contemporaries . . . Nevertheless, it remains true, that they have never had the same energizing power in them as when he took them up; for now they are quickened by the great life-force of the complete man who is absolutely one with his ideas, whose visions perfectly blend with his whole being . . . Perhaps he will not succeed. Perhaps he will fail as the Buddha failed and as Christ failed to wean men from their iniquities but he will always be remembered as one who made his life a lesson for all yet to come" (pp. 134-136). And to this Gandhi had already said seven years earlier, in 1931, ". . . I owe much to one who by his poetic genius and singular purity of life has raised India in the estimation of the world" (p. 121). And three years later, "The Bard of Santiniketan is Gurudev for me as he is for the inmates of that great institution" (p. 118). And six years later still, in 1940, "Gurudev

himself is international because he is truly national. Therefore, all his creation is international and Visva-Bharati is the best of all" (pp. 138-139).

Kakasaheb Kalelkar's appraisal of both (in the *Preface to the TGC*) is worth quoting: "They were great friends, they adored each other, almost like lovers. But, their tempaments were different, their Sadhana of life was different. They attracted and influenced Indian humanity in different ways. They were, thus, one might say, poles apart in everything but the spirit. They knew they had to walk along their own different respective paths. But they also knew they were complementary to each other. Their paths were different but their souls were in unison" (p. vii).

Talking further of the response of the ashram inmates, he says, "We would love and revere the Poet, but we would follow the fighting Karmaveer" (p. viii), an eminently suitable position, for did they not know, "(in) openly opposing each other . . . it was the Poet who took the lead. There was no occasion when Gandhiji voiced his opposition to anything which the Poet said or did. . . . Gandhiji welcomed him as a Great Sentinel and came out by merely asserting his deepest thoughts. They were marked by directness of utterance and depth of conviction. Gandhiji never claimed to be a conversationalist. He contended himself with giving expression to his inmost feelings" (pp. viii-ix). Ofcourse "(some) could not understand the meaning of the controversy and felt bewildered and sided with either of them according to their own predilections... we... were deeply pained at the controversy but at the same time welcomed it as an element of great education for our people and our minds..."(p.ix).

C. CONCLUSIONS, AND A CURTAIN RAISER

When masters perform, often all one can do is stand up and applaud. But then to stand up should not become the means to stand aside. For the applause must ultimately die down, and we are left with the problem of what to do next with our hands.

Theirs was an awe inspiring presence, but that need not make it an ominous one. Where they were clear in exposition, and clearly understandable, no further comment need be made. But where they were not, and where it is necessary to clarify issues that can guide us in our search for development, the awe of a profound thinker need not intimidate an essential analysis. For though we grant that analysis often cannot capture the vibrance of an original thought, and to that extent must appear insipid, often our predilection for taste may mar our ability to ruminate and digest. Moreover, such an analysis should serve to conclude our discussion for the present and become a curtain-raiser for what must follow.

If the poet wove his thoughts with care, as befits a poet and creative writer of his stature, he was mostly content to rest at that. He appeared to invest most energies in this weaving, in the fluid charm of undulating thought and the crest and ebb of language, and considered that an end in itself. In fact one suspects he was often content to lose himself in the flow of his own thoughts. He never considered it necessary to generate a mass following to his ideas, though he did express it forcefully enough. Of course it is a moot point whether his expertise really lay there, and one may be granted the argument that it was not. For the writer, his writing is his creation, his off-spring, that he nurtures with great care and nurses like a child; and he is content to lay back and behold the creation that he invests all his energies in. He often has nothing further to offer, atleast of the same caliber and on his own (if he can avoid), and is not dissatisfied that this be so. For the work of creation having been accomplished, he expects the beholders to take on from where he leaves.

For Gandhi, on the other hand, words expressed both anguish that accompanied the trauma of experience and resolve that wells up as an unsurmountable force within to quell it. And though he too chose his words with care, there was no patterning of thought and filling up of interstices as comes naturally to a creative writer. He himself acknowledged that there was none of the poet in him. That his thoughts were no less inspired is not to be discounted, however.. Thought, for him, and its expression, had to be direct and straight from the heart, its worth lying in its simplicity and lack of embellishments. There must in fact not be any of the fluid grace of a delicate lattice here; what must manifest is the solid uncut edginess of a weather-beaten rock that must bear the burden of humanity's toils. This only befits a man of action, for, here every thought is a launching pad for the activity to follow, either for a mass-movement or for self-purification. Nothing more, nothing less. And to achieve this, he must avoid embellishments. For, if ornaments can enhance beauty, they can also serve as effective means to deny the underlying beauty of its legitimate status. They can skew perspectives. And sometimes lack of ornamentation bring out the core beauty in bold relief as much as ornamentation seek to dominate it and therefore undermine it. Here the boundaries between figure and ground can be dangerously blurred. Moreover, skilfully woven thought patterns do create an attractive picture that may serve to be falsely satisfying when they are meant to lead on to action. They may in fact be considered the end of endeavour and serve to adroitly avoid that commitment which should be to action that must follow and is really of the essence. For often when the mind gets so attached, it abdicates the power of leaving its

attachment to its creation when it should.

Thus, if one cannot but be enthralled by the fluid grace of a Tagore, Gandhi's staccato rapier-sharp broadsides must jolt us out of any accompanying stupor. And complacency. And aimless reveries. And vacuous castle-building. For often a litling melody can haunt the mind and endear itself so greatly that it becomes hypnotic to the limbs that must shake themselves free of the shackles that surreptitiously bind them in the meanwhile. Between the two of them, then, they encompass the whole panorama of that human potential which for its vitality must remain eternally vigilant, and ever active. An open-eyed reason combined with firm-footed resolve, then, is the message the two have bequeathed us as a beacon light for the grim tasks of nation-building lying ahead.

All developing societies, especially those which have been under foreign yoke, have to struggle with two opposite forces. On the one hand, they must search for their identity and seek to establish it. In so doing they strive to preserve whatever it is that they identify as their own, and that which is unique to them and they can pride over. In so doing there can be fanatical propagation of what are considered 'core' ideals, with repeated affirmations to uphold them. This of course is as much a manifestation of an insecurity struggling to establish its moorings as an acknowledgement that such expression is unavoidable, if not altogether legitimate. On the other hand, they must also assimilate the draughts of outside influences that impinge tantalizingly (or menacingly, according to some) on the consciousness. Here the difficulty is again with the individual afraid of being swept off his feet, since he has not established firm moorings. It then boils down to the search for the firm foundation of that national life which a people's consciousness should seek to articulate. In other words, that which is Swadeshi.

Now, it is true that the first of these activities is essentially narcissistic and therefore anathema to some, for it can easily transform itself into obscurantism, fundamentalism or fanaticism. The other, again, is essentially anarchical and on that count equally anathema to others, for it can easily transform itself into identity crisis, culture shock or aimless drift, and equally fanatical attempts to deny one's origins. Both these are realistic fears and must be respected. But that cannot be a justifiable reason to avoid passing through this self-scrutiny, or become the means to avoid it. For it is no use trying to wish it away, or negate its articulation. Neither need it help deny expression within ourselves of that which can disrupt the comfortable oasis of order we may have managed to build for ourselves amongst all the struggles and ruins of the less fortunate around. For the

oasis is really a mirage, and discomfort is inherent in any struggle to establish personal and social identity; and inevitable too. Some may appear to traverse these stages faster, others may get less disturbed by the concomitant self-scrutiny. But the journey must be undertaken, and the disturbance must be experienced. Part of the search for development must proceed in those privileged sections which have the power to deny this articulation. For they can contribute quite handsomely, if only they can be motivated to abandon the fears, mainly of whether such enquiries on their part will anarchize their smugness. It indeed can, and must, to the extent necessary. For it is only when smugness is anarchized that development flowers.

The Tagore-Gandhi controversy hints at some of the issues that must engage our attention here. To put them simply they are :

1. Nothing that is foreign can be totally identified with. The attempt itself is doomed to failure. But nothing that is foreign need be rejected purely because it is so. And nothing that belongs to self is to be accepted because it is so, either. All that is beneficial in the modern trend cannot but be assimilated by the prudent before it is forced on in circumstances that evoke cynicism, hurt and obscurantism. In this assimilation there can be either the open-minded welcome of a perceptive Tagore with faith in the vital spirit of man which cannot ever be stifled; or the guarded-calculated reserve of a down to earth Gandhi fully aware of the folly and foibles of an easily swayed laity. For, if one must caution against unhealthy isolation, the other must insist on assimilation on one's own terms, when one is ready to repay what one takes with decent interest⁹.

For example, if a foreign language is to be used, it cannot be at the cost of an Indian language. If a foreign cloth is to be used, it cannot similarly be at the cost of Indian cloth. But no language or cloth need be rejected just because it is foreign. In fact there is every need to both learn from an outside influence and to incorporate it into one's system. Any rejection, if at all, must be on the basis of a reasoned debate. Any influence also has to be similar. A simple rule to follow in this matter is to put oneself in the place of a nation and think what we ourselves feel about interaction with others. For example, just because we write and you read, are you destabilized? Can you not assimilate without losing your identity? Can you not decide what is proper and what improper in this influence? Should you not exert yourself to so decide? And should not whatever prevents you from assimilating that which is proper be got rid of? Should we, or rather can we, shut off our perspective apparatus to outside influences to preserve ourselves? And if we do so, what sort of an identity are we preserving?

Would it not be better to efface it to actualize that which is true and healthy, which can develop only after this occur?

As with individuals, so with a people. This should make each one of us understand why we adopt the varied stances toward outside influences that we do. For often our stances in the social field only mirror our ideas at the personal level.

2. The Charkha controversy must make us aware that there should be no blind following. Equally truly, not everything that arouses mass fervour need be shunned. For, if often it involves lack of reason, it can sometimes also articulate the genuine aspirations of a people. While no one need surrender his reason, it is at times necessary to curb its blind forays into purposeless opposition, or cynical blame-opportuning. It is also necessary to blunt such of its offensives as point out errors which can hurt the thrust of development. For, there is a proper time for criticism, as for evaluation. And although one may be tempted to think that a mass fervour that is easily blunted by criticism is not worth having at all, one must be aware that a strong gust of breeze only sways a tree but can uproot a sapling. If the accent is on growth, the sense of when and how can never be lost sight of.

Equally important is it for all followers of a wave, any wave, to be eternally vigilant of the traps and malevolence of its propounders, and more so their lieutenants. While often the primary source of all revolutions, as indeed of most endeavours, as unimpeachable, it is the second order propogators, or cronies, who hold the potential for mischief and misrepresentation. Their ability to identify with the original messiah must be under constant surveillance.

3. The controversy over the Bihar earthquake should make it clear that reason has achieved its epitome of success in the scientific attitude. This has not unreasonably possessed our age. It must subject our most cherished, most 'intuitively felt' of beliefs to a careful scrutiny, and lay bare the phoney and the unreasonable. It must make us aware where our beliefs are subterfuges for fears of the unknown, for the greater beliefs often hide the greater such fears. It must also unveil those fears that masquerade as dogma, as godliness, as superstition. For, all these can manifest as much in ideas of sect superiority as the mushrooming of God-man offering instant solutions and pontifs exorcising our catastrophies. Secondly, with all its defects and all its destabilizations, modern civilization has come to stay. It cannot be wished away, much less destroyed. Similarly no one can go back to the old in its physicality. What need be done is hold on to, or, rediscover, certain amongst the old that are worth holding on to, find

modern paradigms for their application, and reject the flotsam and jetsam of trivial ritualizations that obscures the truly pure from view. In this we must use our critical abilities to evaluate all spheres of our beliefs - our religions, our faiths, our ideologies, our superstitions, even our indigenisation. We may be shocked to find that all these will be found to have their points of relevance, as they have their points of relevance, as they have their points of irrelevance. Yes, *all* of them; and we include the superstitions here. Similarly all amongst us will have to closely study the modern paradigms of progress; which they need not be rejected, which made more relevant, and which rejected outright.

Our dress, our language, our work and our beliefs are the four areas represented by the Tagore-Gandhi controversy. Between them, they traverse the whole gamut of activities that can occupy the people of a nation. In each sphere, there are distinct points of worth, as well as intersecting issues of concern. As the issues are laid bare, man constructs himself.

To achieve this, open-ness must be our oars, reason our boat, dialogue our current, faith our pole-star and development our destination. The man who has preferred to drive such a boat for more than forty years now has managed to lead it far astream. Need he drop anchor now, atleast temporarily? *Can* he? Or need he keep headlong in pursuit of that he has learnt to cherish? Need he row against the currents? Again, *can* he? Are his oars working well? Is his boat in need of repairs, have all the holes been plugged? Are his own rowing hands steady enough? Is the star that he has identified really *the* pole-star? Has his intellect decided on the destination? Is he rowing in that direction? Is his vision faulty, does the foliage obscure the goal that lies at hand-shaking distance; does he really need the binoculars he is using?

These then would be the questions the Poet would want to ask of us today. And the Mahatma expect us to answer.

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REFERENCES AND NOTES

1. Cf. K. J. Shah's, "In Search of Development", *Indian Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. XI, No. 1, Jan - 1984, pp 5-13.
2. Cf. (1) above for a basic background of the issues involved and salient features of this controversy. Cf. also the book on which it is based : *Truth Called Them Differently (Tagore-Gandhi Controversy) - heresafter, TGC*: Compiled and Edited by R.K. Prabhu and Ravindra Kelekar, Navjivan, Ahmedabad, 1961.
3. William Hazlitt, 1830, quoted in *Controversy in Psychiatry* by J.P. Brady & H.K.H. Brodie (ed.), Saunders, Philadelphia, 1978, p xiii.
4. Cf. Daya Krishna's "Thinking Vs Thought", *JICPR*, Jan-April, 1988, pp 47-57 : 'How much misguided intellectual effort would have been saved if nobody had worried about what the Bible or the Koran or the Vedas really meant... The amount of effort that has been wasted on finding what Marx or Freud or Wittgenstein or Hegel really meant is truly astonishing' (p. 48).
5. Gilbert Ryle, *Collected Papers*, Vol. 2, p. 210.
6. All quotations in this section from TGC above; paranthesis, if any, added. The page number of TGC appears in paranthesis. Some of them are also in (1) above. TGC mentions the original source at the end of every chapter.
7. Tagore describes a humorous anecdote of his childhood servant, Gopee, who went to Puri on a pilgrimage and did not know which fruit to offer since the Lord could not eat any. So he offered him a tomato, which he disliked really, "never having reason to repent of such clever abnegation" (p. 95).
8. Tagore would reply to this thus, "In working for his livelihood he ought to have earned not only his daily bread, but also his eternal truth.... It has been said in the *Upanishads* that *Brahma* is reason, *Brahma* is Spirit, but *Anna* also is *Brahma*, which means that Food also represents an eternal truth, and therefore through it we may arrive at a great realization, if we travel along the true path" (p.98-99).
9. cf. his remark, "My Swaraj is to keep intact the genius of our civilization. I want to write many new things but they must all be written on the Indian slate. I would gladly borrow from the West when I can return the amount with decent interest". *Young India*, 26 June, 1924