



Gandhi as Reflected in Tagore's Biographical Sketches

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The compilation and editing of my senior colleague, Prof. Sabyasachi Bhattacharya's work (1997) titled '*The Mahatma and the Poet : Letters and Debates between Gandhi and Tagore 1915-1941*', have given us a set of refreshing ideas on what the two, both born around the same time in 1860s had thought about the future of India. The work contains both public discussions and personal communications, starting with Gandhi's arrival in India in 1913. There, the narrative was periodized (1915-22, 1923-28, 1929-33 and 1934-41) to understand their different perceptions better, and in particular, Tagore's farsighted condemnation of state-sponsored 'Nationalism' in all forms. Tagore found the widely acclaimed 'non-cooperation' as a negative impulse that would in no way be able to rejuvenate our polity and its dwindling economy. It would instead contribute to our sense of intolerance that would ultimately destroy our democratic aspirations. Although both desired to see "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" as Bhattacharya put it, it was unacceptable for the followers of Gandhi to accept Tagore's criticism of 'Satyagraha' or 'Non-cooperation'.

The manner in which the agitation against the division of Bengal in and around 1905 became politically divisive, causing Tagore to stop participating in real-life political agitation, was at the back of his mind when Gandhi gave call to boycott all British institutions. Tagore thought that boycotting of schools by students

would lead to anarchy from where recovery would not be easy. For Tagore, non-cooperation was an unduly simplistic response to a complex problem of how to shun the alien rulers' governance. In response to this, of course, Gandhi is supposed to have stated: "I, therefore, think that the Poet has been unnecessarily alarmed at the negative aspect of Non-cooperation. We had lost the power of saying 'no'. It had become disloyal, almost sacrilegious to say 'no' to the Government. This deliberate refusal to cooperate is like the necessary weeding process that a cultivator has to resort before he sows. Weeding is as necessary to agriculture as sowing. Indeed, even whilst the crops are growing, the weeding fork, as every husbandman knows, is an instrument almost of daily use. The nation's Non-cooperation is an invitation to the Government to cooperate with it on its own terms as is every nation's right and every good government's duty. Non-cooperation is the nation's notice that it is no longer satisfied to be in tutelage."

In Gandhi's (1927) autobiography *'The Story of My Experiments with Truth'*, Ch 127 'Shantiniketan' – during the initial phase of his arrival and learning the intricacies of politics in India under G.K. Gokhale, when he was returning to Pune from Santiniketan after hearing about Gokhale's death, Gandhi described his conversation with Andrews: "Andrews accompanied me up to Burdwan. 'Do you think,' he asked me, 'that a time will come for *Satyagraha* in India? And if so, have you any idea when it will come?' # 'It is difficult to say,' said I. 'For one year I am to do nothing. For Gokhale took from me a promise that I should travel in India for gaining experience, and express no opinion on public questions until I have finished the period of probation. Even after the year is over, I will be in no hurry to speak and pronounce opinions. And so, I do not suppose there will be any occasion for *Satyagraha* for five years or so.'# I may note in this connection that Gokhale used to laugh at some of my ideas in *Hind Swaraj (Indian Home Rule)* and say: 'After you have stayed a year in India, your views will correct themselves.'" Thus, Tagore was not the only one who was skeptical of Gandhi's ideas.

Looking back at the effect of Non-Cooperation, Martin Luther King, Jr. (2001 : 129) had made an interesting comment in his autobiography (See Carson 2001) on the effect of this peaceful instrument that was ingeniously discovered by Gandhi: "Gandhi was able to mobilize and galvanize more people in his life time than any other people in the history of this world. And just with a little love and

understanding goodwill and refusal to cooperate with an evil law, he was able to break the backbone of the British empire. More than 390 million people achieved their freedom, and they achieved it non-violently.”

The symbolism in Gandhi's inimitable style of protestation, especially in the context of destroying the foreign clothes and in promoting the *Charkha*, or the Spinning Wheel, mainly to tell the world that economic domination imposed by the imperial powers would not be tolerated did not impress Tagore who thought that clothes be distributed among the needy instead, as the poor in the country lived in great misery. Tagore wrote a sarcastic essay in *Modern Review*, a Calcutta-based magazine of great repute, titled *The Cult of the Charkha*. There are often great misunderstandings and misreading in Tagore's texts which make us believe that he was perhaps against the Gandhian principles and methods. One such example could be seen in the following editorial comment on Tagore's 1916-novel, *Home and Alone (Ghare Baire)* by Alam and Chakravarty (2011: 612) where the background was set in the times of Swadeshi Movement dated 1905. He showed a triangular relationship there between “the intertwined lives of the visionary but politically ineffective landowner Nikhil, the flamboyant, militant nationalist Sandip, and Nikhil's wife Bimala, torn by her divided loyalties. The sophisticated, multivoiced narrative lays bare the troubled interface between the confines of home and the turbulent world outside. Georg Lukacs criticized the novel for presenting “a contemptible caricature of Gandhi,” forgetting that the narrative is set in a period that precedes Gandhi's rise. But Bertolt Brecht recognized this as a “wonderful book, strong and gentle,” about the limitations of nationalism (26 September 1920, *Diaries 1920– 1922*, 55).”

While the *Swadeshi* movement during Gandhi's *Satyagraha* period was aimed against the system imposed by the British, and not against all that was Western, Tagore rather believed in the power of the western thought and science, and that it had tremendous healing and emancipator influence. Celebration of the individual choice and freedom, on the other hand, was hallmark of Tagore's arguments on what kind of future the leadership of our times would like to achieve. That Tagore did not appreciate fasting as a method of protestation thought to be unique in the Gandhian era is also a well-known fact now, as Tagore thought this self-mortification as a purification would not lead us anywhere. Fasting for political

purposes was something that Tagore was skeptical about. He was also critical of Gandhi for what many believed was his irrational declaration that the Great Bihar Earthquake was God's punishment for our sin in upholding 'untouchability'. Krishna Kripalani (1980: 391-92) suggests that Tagore's 1932-play *Chandalika* that was built on top of a Buddhist legend, explored selfishness and vanity, and juxtaposed solipsism with selfless love, which was inspired by Mahatma Gandhi's long fast against the British government's decision to separate the "untouchables" of the country from the rest of the electorate through the Communal Award.

As is known, in March-April 1919, Gandhiji had launched a nationwide campaign of passive resistance to protest the repressive act designed by Sir Sydney Arthur Taylor Rowlatt, known as the 'Rowlatt Act' which was basically to take emergency measures of preventive indefinite detention, incarceration without trial and judicial review to curb a perceived threat from revolutionary nationalist organizations. The success of Gandhi's '*Hartal*' (or public strike) in Delhi on 30th March and in Punjab on 6th April of that year led to the massacre by the British of nearly 400 unarmed protesters and the wounding of another 2,000 in Amritsar's Jallianawala Bagh on 13th April 1919. British repression in the Punjab continued, even after Gandhi called off the campaign on 18 April 1919. When he failed to muster support from politicians, Tagore felt compelled to register a lone protest. On 31 May, he wrote a letter to Lord Chelmsford, the then Viceroy, rejecting his knighthood. The letter was published on 2 June, and it aroused the consciousness of the western world against the atrocious rule of the so-called civilized British government. In 1921, after much thought, Tagore decided to oppose Gandhi's Noncooperation Movement spearheaded against the British government, for which he faced strong criticism from all quarters, and even from Bengal.

Many view these incidents as Tagore's disrespect for the Gandhian ideas, methods and principles. However, if we look at the biographical sketches of Mohandas Gandhi in Tagore's writings that are spread in different essays and chapters, the impression would be otherwise. In his opening essay on মহাত্মা গান্ধী Tagore begins by making a comment on a new kind of tribe that emerged in the initial phase of political movements in our country – in the following words: “পোলিটেশিয়ান ব'লে একটা জাত আছে তাদের আদর্শ বড়ো আদর্শের সঙ্গে মেলে না। তারা অজস্র মিথ্যা বলতে পারে; তারা এত হিংস্র যে নিজেদের দেশকে স্বাভাবিক দেবার অস্থিলায় অন্য দেশ অধিকার করার লোভ ত্যাগ করতে পারে না।

পাশ্চাত্য দেশে দেখি, এক দিকে তারা দেশের জন্যে প্রাণ দিতে পেরেছে, অন্য দিকে আবার দেশের নাম করে দুর্নীতির প্রশয় দিয়েছে।” (“There is a caste called ‘the Politician’. Their aims never match with bigger ideals one may have. They can tell innumerable lies. They are so ferocious that they never hesitate to occupy another country in the garb of protecting their own. In the west, I have seen while they are able to dedicate their lives, they have also tolerated corruptions in the name of national interest.” – Translation: UNS).

In fact, Tagore opens the discussion on ‘Mahatma Gandhi’ by saying that “India has a complete geographical image and identity (ভারতবর্ষের একটি সম্পূর্ণ ভৌগোলিক মূর্তি আছে)। The ‘totality’ of India that begins from the east and spreads up to the west, or one that starts from the Himalayas in the north and reaches down to Kanyakumari in the south creates a picture that was attempted to be internalized as a whole even in ancient times, especially in the epic Mahabharata that tried collecting whatever lay scattered in so many parts and spread over such a long time. The other way of knowing this complete India lay in its tradition of ‘Pilgrimage’. Ordinary people tried covering the entire spread of the space by moving from one religious place to another, as if to bind the whole region by a network of ‘*bhakti*’ or devotion. In fact, India was so large an entity that it was not possible to internalize it as a whole.” What today’s surveys and cartographies could do to bring in a geographical idea of India was not easily available in earlier days. Tagore thought that in one sense that was good, because anything gained easily never leaves a great impression in our mind. So all the difficulties one had to bear in conducting a pilgrimage was rewarding because only in that way one could get to know the totality of India.

Then Tagore laments and says that we were so trapped in the regionalist trends and tendencies that it required someone like Mahatma Gandhi, along with Ranade, Surendranath (Banerjee) and (Gopalkrishna) Gokhale to appear in the public sphere to take our penance or to take India forward or to know her in a great fashion. He thinks that insertion or interpolation of the text of ‘*Gita*’ in the middle of Mahabharata and situating this philosophical theoretical text in the middle of a battleground believed that in a great argumentative country such as ours shows that “কুরুক্ষেত্রের কেন্দ্রস্থলে এই-যে খানিকটা দার্শনিক ভাবে আলোচনা, এটাকে কাব্যের দিক থেকে অসংগত বলা যেতে পারে; এমনও বলা যেতে পারে যে, মূল মহাভারতে এটা ছিল না। পরে যিনি বসিয়েছেন

তিনি জানতেন যে, উদার কাব্যপরিধির মধ্যে, ভারতের চিত্তভূমির মাঝখানে এই তত্ত্বকথার অবতারণা করার প্রয়োজন ছিল।” This interpolation acted as a binding force then.

But as time went by, our belief-system and culture became infested with divisionism and narrowness. We forgot to regard or accept great heroes with all their positive and negative features – something that our epics had taught us. In fact, that was also the reason that these texts assumed a crucial place in our religious practices. When the external force and alien culture tore our fabric of unity apart and penetrated into our homes, it was like a flood that would sweep us away. Our kingdoms and principalities tried putting up resistance in a piecemeal basis, resulting in hopeless defeats. We lived together but we could never get united in this country – “আমরা একত্র ছিলাম, অথচ এক হই নি।” It required many centuries to learn our lessons, and meanwhile, the battle-cry never subsided in Bengal, Maratha and Rajputana regions. “যত বড়ো দেশ ঠিক তত বড়ো ঐক্য হল না; দুর্ভাগ্যের ভিতর দিয়ে আমরা অভিজ্ঞতা লাভ করলেম বহু শতাব্দী পরে।” One after another came the Portuguese, the Dutch, the French and the British. We began to give away our own collections and riches to the foreign powers. And whatever little remained with us were grabbed by the band of greedy Mahanth and Pandas. Many decided to escape in the name of looking for their personal salvation as hermitages and *Sanyasis* who would never like to do anything for the common folk as the latter thought they were consuming the opium of this ordinary worldly life almost like ‘possessed’ or মোহগ্রস্ত people.

Meanwhile, there had begun in Europe a move to establish one’s own political and cultural identity, thanks to Mazzini and Garibaldi in Italy, who taught us what independence could achieve for a culture. Even in the American soil, the independence movement had its own achievements. Many have sacrificed their lives to bring in this liberty and to protest against the dividing tactics of the alien rulers: “বিভাগ সৃষ্টি করে পরস্পরকে যে অপমান করা হয়, সেটার বিরুদ্ধে পাশ্চাত্যে আজও বিদ্রোহ চলছে।” In India, we have learned the value of independence from the western contemporary history. This is where Mahatma Gandhi played an important role in binding the whole nation together. He was not among those who would think that one could achieve anything politically by appeasing the alien rulers or by falsely posing themselves against the external forces. It was in this context that Tagore made that comment on the ‘tribe’ of Politicians. The petty party politics, mixed

with the false claims of 'Patriotism' added to a blob of prevarication – all these were contributed by others in public life when Gandhi emerged as a leader with a great difference. Firstly, he was against the strategy of using 'untruth' for political gains. He thought Mahatma was adorable because he had the foresightedness and patience to experiment with Truth. When the history of the world is dominated by bloodshed in the countries and communities that sought independence, how freedom and liberty could be achieved by the masses without violence was a great experiment that defined Gandhi. He said: “পৃথিবীতে স্বাধীনতা এবং স্বাতন্ত্র্য লাভের ইতিহাস রক্তধারায় পঙ্কিল, অপহরণ ও দস্যুবৃত্তির দ্বারা কলঙ্কিত। কিন্তু পরস্পরকে হনন না করে, হত্যাকাণ্ডের আশ্রয় না নিয়েও যে স্বাধীনতা লাভ করা যেতে পারে, তিনি তার পথ দেখিয়েছেন।”

Tagore raised this issue of how politicians and statesmen were performing various sorts of vicious and sadistic activities in the name of national interest. He believed people do not even hesitate to plunder or kill and even employ their sciences to perpetrate violence. But the generals do not make a nation; it is the culture and tradition of the people that define them. One does not remember such politicians as much as those like the Mahatma who worked to uplift the downtrodden. Even in the so-called 'Holy war' (ধর্মযুদ্ধ) or 'Moral war' (নৈতিক যুদ্ধ) there is terrible 'cruelty' (নিষ্ঠুরতা). There is an education even in these experiments, based on which the Christian theology taught us to clothe the most deprived people, and feed the most hungry people (যে সকলের চেয়ে দরিদ্র তাকে বস্ত্র দিতে হবে, যে নিরন্ন তাকে অন্ন দিতে হবে). Tagore thought (and he said) that Mahatma-ji was able to meet up with a European sage, and a devout Christian, Leo Tolstoy from whom he had picked up this lesson of Non-violence. Tolstoy strove to explain to all who matter that the human rights must be protected at any cost (নিয়ত প্রচেষ্টা ছিল মানবের ন্যায় অধিকারকে বাধামুক্ত করা). Gandhiji did not have to learn about this doctrine from any missionary or religious practitioner but from a great author and a sensitive mind. Even from the medieval Muslim saints we had received this gift because Dadu, Kabir and Rajjab had propagated this idea that whatever is pure and free, and is the best gift of one's soul, that belongs to the entire mankind, and not to a close-door religious establishment (যা নির্মল, যা মুক্ত, যা আত্মার শ্রেষ্ঠ সামগ্রী, তা রুদ্ধদ্বার মন্দিরে কৃত্রিম অধিকারী-বিশেষের জন্যে পাহারা-দেওয়া নয়; তা নির্বিচারে সর্ব মানবেরই সম্পদ).

In every age that is what happens because those Noblemen or 'Mahatman' who are ready to learn from all religions, history of all regions and from ethics as the

best gifts of nature – and Mahatma Gandhi was no exception. Tagore, therefore, concluded in this biographical sketch by saying:

মহাত্মা নম্র অহিংসনীতি গ্রহণ করেছেন, আর চতুর্দিকে তাঁর জয় বিস্তীর্ণ হচ্ছে। তিনি যে নীতি তাঁর সমস্ত জীবন দিয়ে প্রমাণ করেছেন, সম্পূর্ণ পারি বা না পারি, সে নীতি আমাদের স্বীকার করতেই হবে। আমাদের অন্তরে ও আচরণে রিপু ও পাপের সংগ্রাম আছে, তা সত্ত্বেও পুণ্যের তপস্যার দীক্ষা নিতে হবে সত্যব্রত মহাত্মার নিকটে।... (শান্তিনিকেতন, ১৬ আশ্বিন ১৩৪৩)

(In rough translation, “Mahatma has adopted the gentle principle of Non-violence, and one can see that this has contributed to his all-around success everywhere. The principle which he has stuck to by devoting his whole life, we must accept it, whether we could take it and implement completely or not. In our own heart and in behavior, there is a constant battle of natural instincts and indulgence. And yet, we have to take the lesson of virtue by following the doctrine of Mahatma Gandhi.”)

In another sketch of Gandhi written and published in the October of 1937 (অগ্রহায়ণ ১৩৪৪), also called ‘গান্ধীজি’ Tagore comments that the whole Ashrama in Santiniketan would celebrate Gandhiji’s birthday when the stirrings it created did not allow to forget what it was the Ashrama was commemorating. There are those men who are rarely born and therefore, they do not belong to any particular time, and Gandhi was one such rare and eternal personality. If one wants to understand him only in the context of present age, he would have to be looked at in a diminutive manner. But that would force us to overlook his personality that have the traits of eternity. (ক্ষণজন্মা লোক যাঁরা তাঁরা শুধু বর্তমান কালের নন। বর্তমানের ভূমিকার মধ্যে ধরাতে গেলে তাঁদের অনেকখানি ছোটো করে আনতে হয়, এমনি করে বৃহৎকালের পরিপ্রেক্ষিতে যে শাস্বত মূর্তি প্রকাশ পায় তাকে খর্ব করি।)

We often look at great men or their greatness only in so much as he or she could meet our immediate demands and expectations (আশু ধয়োজন). But when we consider such people on a bigger canvas, the inner contradictions and indeterminacies they may have within themselves is wiped off by the divinity. What is accidental and temporary is never highlighted. In fact, that is the justification of seeing and celebrating our great living legends. He said that in the future times, there might not be the ‘national contradictions’ and the condition of strife that

existed then and perhaps the popular demands would have been met with. And yet, even after the liberty that India might achieve soon, it would be important to see as to which historical emergence and whose self-expression would survive in the national memory. We would not look at Gandhiji as an instrument of achievement of political sovereignty. We would rather try to appreciate the firm mental power of the man and his resolve that aroused the inner strength and consciousness of a whole nation. The huge boulder (জগদ্দল পাথর) that lay on our heart and mind has been knocked off by his astute move, and as if there has been a rejuvenation of our political selves. It was like gaining a new life for us all. All fear, hesitation, and attempts to seek benevolence of the rulers, and the lack of confidence are all vanished – as if, with his magic wand.

The whole nation had accepted subservience for long. It was an “accepted” truth, as if, that the foreign rulers were superior in knowledge, governance structure and physical prowess. But how their apparent shine could be dimmed by our inner strength, internal understanding, or by our own knowledge, tradition and dedication to service was demonstrated by Gandhi. The ordinary folk was as if mesmerized by the British who were considered superior in culture, education, knowledge and politics. A few political leaders like Lokamanya Tilak had attempted to prove this wrong by arousing the self-esteem among our people but success that Gandhiji had in making us arisen and awake in our daily lives and in our respective fields of work was unparalleled. He made us realize that we had ourselves written the destiny of our defeat by showing our weaknesses. The business empire of the British was built on our lack of courage and acumen, and we became a mere peg in their huge network of commerce and trade. Mahatma showed the ills of this “self-defeating” tendency (আত্মকৃত পরাভব).

All the recent move of the British rulers to come to terms with the political leadership in India resulted from the massive uprising that Gandhiji led in the most unconventional manner. It was due to his vision that we could now demand our rightful place on the world stage. Whether it was his sharp argumentative skills in the round table conferences here or in England, or his symbolic protestations by using ‘Spinning wheels’ (চরকা) or the indigenous cloth manufacturing (খদর), or in promoting the non-conventional energy sources, or alternative medicine – all these were strategies that unnerved the western powers with an evil eye

towards India (Tagore 1937, 1938). Tagore knew that there could be a scope for disagreement or debate on what Gandhi said or did in these matters, and that he himself had admitted his mistakes on so many occasions but what one must admire is his courage and conviction. In yet another essay penned by Tagore (1931a), he had commented on Mahatma's frequent use of 'Fasting' as a moral and political instrument in the following manner: তাঁর উপবাস, সে তো অনুষ্ঠান নয়, সে একটি বাণী, চরম ভাষার বাণী। ("His fast is not an event, it is a statement – in a language of the ultima!") His experience in visiting Gandhiji in Yerawada prison in Pune (in September 1932) to ensure that he agreed to break his fast to join back in normal life is worth reading in a long sketch Tagore had vividly presented elsewhere (Tagore, 1932b). The telegraphic messages exchanged by the two are also worth looking at (*Rabindra Rachanabali*, Vol. ; Pages 834-35).

The indefatigable spirit (অপরাজেয় সংকল্পশক্তি) must be a thing to admire. The way he was able to stay calm even in the wave of nation-wide maddening stirrings is a thing to admire. It is the foundation of his huge personal strength that one must admire, thought Tagore. Lastly, Gandhiji had also taught us not to blindly follow the old tradition where they hurt a large section of humanity or living world. His fight against the blind faith that had deprived a large section eternally assumed a different meaning in his life-time. This is because he knew that our real freedom would come when we would not be servile to our intolerant and negative traditions – “জাতিভেদ, ধর্মবিরোধ, মূঢ় সংস্কারের আবর্তে যত দিন আমরা চালিত হতে থাকব ততদিন কার সাধ্য আমাদের মুক্তি দেয়া” It would be more important to fight and win over our internal enemy, and not only wage a war against the external forces.

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