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Section I: Academic

Samaj and Swaraj: the relevance of Gandhi and Tagore for the twenty-first century

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Abstract:

The concepts of *samaj* and *swaraj* as theorised by Mohandas Gandhi (1869-1948) in the early part of the twentieth century presented a direct challenge to western notions of society and freedom, which are inherently based upon narrow political definitions relating to developments in European modernity. As such ideas surrounding freedom of the individual and society are inextricably linked to the modern nation state – an institution that embodies the rights of both the individual citizenry and the collective nation. Like Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), the great doyen of Bengali literature, engaged in broader questions of society and freedom. This essay will chart the source and developments of how Gandhi and Tagore arrived at their understandings of *samaj* and *swaraj*. The interaction between these two giants of Asia and the wider world spanned many decades from 1915-1941 and saw them debate issues relating to nationalism, the freedom struggle and global politics. In mapping their individual trajectories, the paper seeks to interrogate both the synergies and divergences between Gandhi and Tagore on the question of liberation and mutual cooperation. In exploring the basis of such dialogue, it is hoped to offer some reflections on the necessity of an-all-inclusive concept of society and liberty that is fit for the contemporary world.

Keywords: Gandhi; Tagore; Samaj; Swaraj; Indian nationalism, the state

Samaj and Swaraj: the relevance of Gandhi and Tagore for the twenty-first century

In autumn 1987, Margaret Thatcher as prime minister was interviewed by the British magazine, *Women's Own*, in which she asked ‘...who is society?’ Her answer was ‘There is no such thing! There are individual men and women and there are families and no government can do anything except through people and people look to themselves first’.¹ Some thirty years later, Donald Trump maintained that being leader of the ‘free’ world means not taking any responsibility

¹ *Women's Own*, 23 September 1987, pp. 29-30.

for anything you say or do.² This led Matt Bai, one political commentator, to term this age the ‘shameless’ society, ‘where accountability and apology are just white flags for the weak’.³ Bai’s observation is particularly apt as both Thatcher and Trump, albeit in different ways, epitomise a world characterised by lack of the collective. Individual will and effort is highly prized as the hallmark of progress and matters of conscience only apply to the individual self and immediate members of close family. There is no sense of shared obligation, responsibility, and cooperation at the community level. Paradoxically, the contemporary world exemplifies more integration and exchange than ever: more cultural, political, economic, and social connectivity and yet we are witnessing the exponential growth of economic nationalism parading as patriotism, protectionism demanding the erection of walls, closure of borders and an increasing narrowing gaze of what it means to belong in a nation or society. The notion of ‘othering’ is still a very real entity and demonstrates ongoing debates over what constitutes society, freedom, and the role of the individual within it. It also reveals how ideas of society and liberty are persistently presented as a natural evolution emanating from the west, the cradle of ‘civilisation’ that non-western societies were expected to follow.

The concepts of *samaj* and *swaraj* as theorised by Mohandas Gandhi (1869-1948) in the early part of the twentieth century presented a direct challenge to western notions of society and freedom, which are inherently based upon narrow political definitions relating to developments in European modernity. As such ideas surrounding freedom of the individual and society are inextricably linked to the modern nation state – an institution that embodies the rights of both the individual citizenry and the collective nation. Like Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), the great doyen of Bengali literature, engaged in broader questions of society and freedom. This essay will chart the source and developments of how Gandhi and Tagore arrived at their understandings of *samaj* and *swaraj*. Both were children of late colonial India. Tagore died at the age of 80, whilst Gandhi died aged 79. The interaction between these two giants of Asia and the wider world spanned many decades from 1915-1941 and saw them debate issues relating to nationalism, the freedom struggle, and global politics. In mapping their individual trajectories, the paper seeks to

² James Fallows, ‘2020 Time Capsule #3: “I Don’t Take Responsibility at All”’, *The Atlantic*, 13 March 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/notes/2020/03/2020-time-capsule-3-i-dont-take-responsibility-at-all/608005/>

³ Matt Bai, ‘Trump and the shameless society: Which came first?’ *Yahoo News*, 10 January 2019. <https://news.yahoo.com/trump-shameless-society-came-first-100033959.html>

interrogate both the synergies and divergences between Gandhi and Tagore on the question of liberation and cooperation. In exploring the basis of such dialogue, it is hoped to offer some reflections on the necessity of an-all-inclusive concept of society and liberty that is fit for the contemporary world.

Influences

“Be the change you want to see in the world”. This quotation is often attributed to Gandhi, but what Gandhi stated was,

We but mirror the world. All the tendencies present in the outer world are to be found in the world of our body. If we could change ourselves, the tendencies in the world would also change. As a man changes his own nature, so does the attitude of the world change towards him. This is the divine mystery supreme. A wonderful thing it is and the source of our happiness. We need not wait to see what others do.⁴

This shows that Gandhi was aware of the dynamic interaction between the self and wider society, but it also captures something of the “personal is political” concept which arose with the Women’s Liberation Movement of the 1960s and 1970s. The wider sense of thinking globally was shared to some extent by Tagore, and this is not surprising if we remember the transnational and global influences that Gandhi and Tagore drew upon to help formulate their ideas on society, the individual, freedom and to tease out the common purpose they enjoyed. There were clearly similarities between both thinkers but also some disjuncture in their intellectual outlook, ethical and political understandings.

For Gandhi, *samaj* and *swaraj* were ideas rooted in a Pan-Indian tradition that drew on a myriad of theological ideas from Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhist texts, but also drew inspiration from monotheistic traditions and conversations across three continents with contemporary fellow non-conformists. As such his concepts were pluralist, inclusive and the embodiment of a heterogeneous historical tradition. Tagore shared much of this thinking at the beginning of the twentieth century. It is worth briefly outlining some of the influences shaping both Gandhi and Tagore as they grew to intellectual maturity. Both came from areas that in their own ways were

⁴ *Indian Opinion*, 9 August 1913.

cosmopolitan regions. Gandhi's hometown of Porbandar was a port town with connections to the Arabian Sea and Indian Ocean, and so to Africa and the Arabian Peninsula and a site of pilgrimage, trade and migration. Tagore was born in Calcutta, a major city of trade, commercial enterprises, migration and movement of peoples, ideas and goods. Both studied law in London (though only Gandhi successfully completed while Tagore left before completion), and so both were part of wider transnational and global interactions and conversations. The historical period they were having these conversations was one of intense political fervour – with emerging and rising nationalism and a cultural re-awakening in colonial societies leading to a new politicisation of identities. The two figures themselves first met in Shantiniketan, and then between 1915 and 1941, Tagore and Gandhi exchanged a series of letters. Gandhi invited Tagore to open the annual Gujarati literary conference in 1920 and gave him the title of *Gurudev*, divine mentor. Meanwhile Tagore in return gave the name *Mahatma* to Gandhi when he returned to India in 1915.

Yet the two figures began to differ on the strategy and method with which to campaign for such ideas, and again here the different influences shaping them are worth recalling. The two came from quite separate backgrounds, with Tagore hailing from Calcutta, seat of the eighteenth-century East India Company, from an elite Bengali *bhadralok* background, and was part of the Bengal Renaissance. Gandhi was born into the Bania caste in a princely state in a small coastal town in Gujarat. Whereas Bengal as a region had been characterised by renaissance, a deep literary tradition and a “heretical spirit”, Gujarat, both under princely sovereign states and British influence, has the appearance of being traditional, conservative and epitomised by lack of intellectual inquiry.

Indeed, part of Gandhi's appeal came from being held as quintessentially Indian, authentic, and harking back to the golden age of a pre-modern, pre-historical era that was both mythical and mystical. Gandhi was at pains to re-define *swaraj* – the sovereignty of the self - in the early 1920s, to point to the need for a radical break with and not the mere replacement of British colonial rule for the rule of the brown sahibs.

Real Swaraj will come, not by the acquisition of authority by a few, but by the acquisition of the capacity by all to resist authority when it is abused.⁵

⁵ *Young India*, 29 January 1925, p. 41.

Swaraj for me means freedom for the meanest of our countrymen... I am not interested in freeing India merely from the English yoke. I am bent upon freeing India from any yoke whatsoever. I have no desire to exchange king log for king stork.⁶

For Gandhi self-rule meant a complete mental and psychological break with existing society. Writing in *Hind Swaraj* Gandhi wrote that “English rule without Englishman...you would make India English. And when it becomes English it will be called not Hindustan but Englishtan. This is not the Swaraj that I want.”⁷

Gandhi wrote *Hind Swaraj* in 1909 partly as a response to developments in India at the time and reflects debates on how to oppose the colonial state – was it through an endorsement of forceful tactics as inspired by the “extremist” wing of nationalism or by imitating the British system of parliamentary representation, as advocated by the “moderates”. Gandhi’s views were influenced by what he had seen in London and South Africa, where for him the ugliness of industrialisation resulted in people being exploited by machines. The squalor of Victorian cities, the slums of African townships and the poverty that blighted urban life convinced Gandhi that industrial development did not equate progress. These were not uncommon ideas in the wider world, amongst European non-conformists, where there was a long tradition of opposing industrial development and the commercialisation of society. Gandhi’s own views on the state and society had been profoundly influenced by two such individuals: the American Henry David Thoreau, and the Russian, Leo Tolstoy. Thoreau was an abolitionist, environmentalist and influenced by transcendentalism as a means of personal salvation and renowned for his espousal of simple living.⁸ He opposed slavery and the Mexican-American war. His conclusion was to refuse payment of taxes to what he labelled an unjust government. He was imprisoned for this but still refused to pay. His seminal 1849 essay *Civil Disobedience*, originally referred to as “Resistance to Civil Government”, is where he articulates vehement opposition to the American government and questions the necessity of a state. “That government is best which governs least” and in the final

⁶ *Young India*, 12 June 1924, p. 195.

⁷ M.K. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj, or Indian Home Rule* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Trust, 1938), p. 30.

⁸ Thoreau published *Walden (Life in the Woods)* in 1854. This is a manual on living in natural surroundings, spiritual discovery and self-reliance. For him personal self-introspection would be the path to true independence.

analysis insists, “‘That government is best which governs not at all’; and when men are prepared for it, that will be the kind of government which they will have”.⁹ His essay had a transformative impact on Gandhi who confessed to the journalist Webb Miller in 1931 that his inspiration for the name of his movement in the Salt campaign stemmed from Thoreau’s essay.¹⁰

Gandhi first came across Thoreau’s writings whilst in South Africa as he embarked upon the campaign against the 1906 Asiatic Registration Act. This was termed the “Black Act” by Gandhi, as it required all Indians and Chinese in Transvaal to register and produce on demand a valid certificate. Failure to comply would result in arrest and a fine, deportation or imprisonment. Reflecting on Thoreau in a letter dated 12 October 1929, Gandhi stated that “Civil Disobedience” had “left a deep impression” upon him.¹¹ He set about translating portions of the essay immediately publishing it in instalments in *Indian Opinion*. In introducing Thoreau to Indians of South Africa Gandhi argued for his greatness, which lay in the simple fact that Thoreau “taught nothing he was not prepared to practice in himself”, risking imprisonment “for the sake of his principles and suffering humanity”. As such the essay had “been sanctified by suffering. Moreover, it is written for all time. Its incisive logic is unanswerable.”¹² In an article titled “Duty of Disobeying Laws” in 1907, he credits Thoreau’s essay as “the chief cause of the abolition of slavery in America”, and wrote that “Both his example and writings are at present exactly applicable to Indians in the Transvaal”.¹³ Using the force of Thoreau’s ideas to the South African context Gandhi led a call to arms declaring in the Asiatic Registration Act, “British Indians have not only a law which has some evil in it... but it is evil legalised, or it represents friction with machinery provided for it. Resistance to such an evil is a divine duty...”¹⁴

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Quoted by George Hendrick, ‘The Influence of Thoreau’s “Civil Disobedience” on Gandhi’s Satyagraha’, *The New England Quarterly*, 29: 4 (1956), p. 463.

¹¹ Henry Salt, *Company I Have Kept* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1930), pp. 100-101.

¹² *Indian Opinion*, 26 October 1907.

¹³ *Indian Opinion*, 7 September 1907 and 14 September 1907.

¹⁴ *Indian Opinion*, 7 September 1907.

If Gandhi imbibed the art of non-cooperative resistance to unjust laws and an unjust state from an American rebel, Russian Christian anarchism would inspire non-violence and further crystallise his attitude towards the state and society. Leo Tolstoy, a giant of Russian and world literature and philosophy espoused the virtues of non-violent anarchism as a moral force that could replace all state power. In his 1900 essay he wrote,

The Anarchists are right in everything; in the negation of the existing order, and in the assertion that, without Authority, there could not be worse violence than that of Authority under existing conditions. They are mistaken only in thinking that Anarchy can be instituted by a revolution. But it will be instituted only by there being more and more people who do not require the protection of governmental power...There can be only one permanent revolution—a moral one: the regeneration of the inner man.¹⁵

Though influenced by the works of anarchists such as Kropotkin and Proudhon, Tolstoy eschewed their readiness to resort to violence and as evident from the above; his critique of the state rests on his belief in the inherent violence and authoritarianism endemic to it. He also chastised those who thought revolution was simply the replacement of one state by another, “in our world everybody thinks of changing humanity, and nobody thinks of changing himself”.¹⁶ From this it is easy to see how Gandhi could be drawn to Tolstoy’s vision of a non-state society achievable through of non-violence, but also the intonation of “be the change you want to be”.

Gandhi was so favourably disposed to Tolstoy’s thinking that in South Africa he would make a detailed study of much of his work, particularly, *The Kingdom of God is Within You*. A philosophical treatise, the book was first published in Germany in 1894 after being banned in Tsarist Russia but became a key text for Tolstoyan, nonviolent resistance, particularly appealing to Christian anarchist movements. For Gandhi it “left an abiding impression...Before the independent thinking, profound morality, and the truthfulness of this book...seemed to pale into insignificance.”¹⁷ Under Gandhi’s influence it would be transformed into a global text to challenge

¹⁵ Leo Tolstoy, ‘On Anarchy’ (1900), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/tolstoy/1900/on-anarchy.html>

¹⁶ Leo Tolstoy, ‘On Anarchy’ (1900), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/tolstoy/1900/on-anarchy.html>

¹⁷ M.K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography or the story of my experiments with the truth* (Ahmedabad: Navajiran Publishing House, 2002), p. 127.

oppression and economic exploitation. Following this logic Gandhi himself stated, “The best, quickest and most efficient way is to build up from the bottom . . . Every village has to become a self-sufficient republic. This does not require brave resolutions. It requires brave, corporate, intelligent work . . .”¹⁸ And this he began to elucidate in the pages of a key document where Thoreauvian and Tolstoyan influences could clearly be detected.

Gandhi, modernity and *samaj*

Gandhi’s ideal polity was one with minimum regulation from a central force and where individuals would exist as a harmonious entity to be guided by principles of truth alone. This is a state where “everyone is his own ruler... In the ideal state, therefore, there is no political power because there is no state.”¹⁹ And he reiterated this belief stating, “the ideally non-violent State will be an ordered anarchy. That State will be the best governed which is governed the least”.²⁰ Therefore, I suggest it is paramount for understanding Gandhi’s notion of *Samaj* and *swaraj* that his ideas are foregrounded in interactions with late nineteenth century non-conformist thinkers. This was a cosmopolitan conversation ranging across three continents and situates Gandhi quite firmly in a transnational network of ideas. The context of late nineteenth century industrial capitalism is crucial to understanding the roots of his ideas. They represent a response by a certain social milieu to the horrors of a world locked in conflict, with wars and the dehumanising impact of industrialisation and the commercialisation of Victorian society with its emphasis on consumerism and market values benefitting a wealthy elite at the expense of the majority.

Gandhi’s prescription for India was to avoid the forced industrial and urban developments pursued by the colonial state. Instead, he believed India’s future lay in its rural heartlands. He advocated self-sufficient village communities that were marked by interdependency and social cohesion. Gandhi viewed the state as an inherently violent institution that could not act as an enabling instrument of empowerment. Instead, he emphasised a decentralised village-oriented,

¹⁸ *Harijan*, 18 January 1922.

¹⁹ *Harijan*, 18 January 1922.

²⁰ *Harijan*, 21 July 1940, p. 209. M.K. Gandhi, *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (Dehli: Navajiran Press Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1958), vol. 79, p. 122. All citations are from this hard copy version and will subsequently be cited as Gandhi, *CWMG*.

agrarian economy and a simple life revolving around a cooperative socio-economic structure. Gandhi believed that in such a community, individuals would be responsible to govern themselves, as long they did not impose on the rights of other individuals. In this ideal state, "...there is no political power because there is no state."²¹ As here the integrated social ideal aims at "reform of the individual as the reform of society."²²

Village communities, which for Gandhi were "unconsciously governed by non-violence",²³ were the basic unit of social organisation but he also accepted the necessity for leadership in the form of panchayat - a council for each village comprised of five annually elected adults, male and female, possessing minimum prescribed qualifications. The Panchayat would act as the legislature, judiciary and executive combined to operate for its year of office....²⁴ For Gandhi the *Kisan* – peasantry – would be the backbone of village civic life.²⁵ Writing further, Gandhi envisaged a society of villagers avoiding disputes "...where there would be speedy justice without any expenditure. You will need neither the police nor the military..."²⁶ and he added, "If we would see our dream of Panchayat Raj, i.e., true democracy realized, we would regard the humblest and lowest Indian as being equally the ruler of India with the tallest in the land. ..."²⁷ The above would suggest that Gandhi was articulating ideas of representative democracy without reference to western political systems and as Ananya Vajpeyi argues, India's political modernity is unimaginable without Gandhi".²⁸

²¹ *Young India*, 26 December 1924.

²² Gandhi, *CWMG*, vol. 8, p. 3.

²³ *Harijan*, 4 August 1940.

²⁴ *Harijan*, 26 July 1942.

²⁵ *Harijan*, 7 December 1947.

²⁶ *Harijan*, 4 January 1948.

²⁷ *Harijan*, 10 January 1948.

²⁸ Vajpeyi, Ananya, *Righteous Republic: The Political Foundations of Modern India* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), p. 49.

Tagore

Tagore first met the author of *Hind Swaraj* in Santiniketan in rural Bengal on 6 March 1915, after extending him an invitation. Tagore, emanating from a long line of liberal and reform minded elite Bengali Brahmins, too believed in constructive programmes, social reform, and upliftment. Much of Tagore's work stemmed from his idea of bridging the cultural divide between east and west. He wanted to engage the west in an intellectual discourse to reduce antagonism between the colonisers and colonised, and to address the "narrow sentiment of nationality", counter posing instead the idea of The Universal. Tagore believed in the universal essence of humanity. This is not the same as cosmopolitanism (basically all peoples merging into the same culture), which he saw as a threat to variety. Tagore believed in culturalism which referred to the idea of the preservation of cultures and their intellectual engagement with one another.

These efforts are most strikingly revealed in Michael Collins's essay "The Politics of Friendship", in which he presents this policy through Tagore's friendship with three counterparts, the famous Irish poet W.B. Yeats, and the British missionaries Edward John Thompson and Charles Freer Andrews. Through these friendships Tagore attempted a cultural synthesis of two cultures in order to better understand one another. Collins quotes a letter from Tagore to C. F. Andrews dated January 1913:

[t]he problem of race conflict is the greatest of all that men have been called upon to solve... different races and nations of the Earth have come nearer each other than ever they did before. But we have not been ready to accept the responsibilities of this wider humanity. Men are still under the thralldom of the spirit of antagonism which has been associated with a narrow sentiment of nationality. . . I feel that the time has come, and after all kinds of patch-work of superficial experiments the spiritual nature of man is getting ready to take up the task and broaden the path of reconciliation of all different races and creeds.²⁹

Writing later that year, Tagore seemed to accept his new vocation: "the world is waiting for its poets and prophets [and] when the call of humanity is poignantly insistent then the higher nature

²⁹ Rabindranath Tagore to C.F. Andrews, in C.F. Andrews' notebook, *C.F. Andrews Papers*, Rabindra Bhavana, January 1913, quoted in Michael Collins, 'Rabindranath Tagore and the Politics of Friendship', *South Asia Journal: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 35:1 (2012), pp. 118-142 (p. 119).

of man cannot but respond”.³⁰ Tagore and Yeats were both nationalists in that they represented societies that were under imperial control. Both were poets interested in the relationship of spirituality, music, and poetry; both used landscape and nature in their poetic imagery. But their form of nationalism drew from “new” cosmopolitanism emphasising the global nature of nationalism that strives for a larger connectivity. Similar to Gandhi’s disdain for western nation states, Tagore cautioned against nationalist fervour of the nation state as an entity developed at the expense of society, which was based on fluidity, vibrant rich confluences which modern states eschewed in favour of rigidity and singular domination.

During his visit to Britain in 1912, Tagore had developed a relationship with Yeats, following a reading of Tagore’s partial translation of *Gitanjali*, at a dinner for the Indian bard hosted by Yeats. The young Irish poet was clearly infatuated with Tagore’s work, which he championed, and which arguably led to Tagore being awarded the 1913 Nobel Prize in Literature. Tagore saw in Yeats’s attention the friendship of one cultural elite with another, a relationship that could help both to learn and grow. Clearly, Tagore was patrician but the last two decades of his life hint at his receptiveness to democratic impulses of a rising and militant nationalist movement. Tagore was awarded a knighthood in 1915. Yet he famously returned the knighthood in disgust in 1919 following the Amritsar massacre, stating “a great crime has been done in the name of law in the Punjab”.³¹ In his letter to the Viceroy, Lord Chelmsford, Tagore castigated the British press for praising the “callousness” and “making fun of our sufferings,” and concluded he had no alternative but to give “voice to the protest of the millions of my countrymen, surprised into a dumb anguish of terror”.³² Towards the end of his life Tagore was moving in a Left direction that eclipsed Gandhi as he sent an address to the second All-India Progressive Writers conference in 1938, held at the Ashutosh Memorial Hall in Calcutta. Unable to attend due to illness, his speech endorsed the movement as he argued,

³⁰ Rabindranath Tagore, ‘Race Conflict’, 1913, in Sisir Kumar Das (ed.), *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, volume 2 (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1996), p. 363.

³¹ *Tribune*, Lahore, 16 April 1919.

³² Letter from Tagore to Viceroy Chelmsford, dated 30 May 1919 published in *The Statesman*, 3 June, 1919.

To live in seclusion has become second nature to me, but it is a fact that the writer who holds himself aloof from society cannot get to know mankind. Remaining aloof, the writer deprives himself of the experience which comes from mingling with numbers of people. To know and understand society, and to show the path to progress, it is essential that we keep our finger on the pulse of society and listen to the beating of its heart. This is only possible when our sympathies are with humanity, and when we share its sorrows...New writers must mix with men, and recognise that if they live in seclusion as I do they will not achieve their aims. I understand now that in living apart from society for so long I have committed a grave mistake...This understanding burns in my heart like a lamp, and no argument can extinguish it.³³

Thus, demonstrating the degree to which the great bard could ascertain his own shortcomings and identify with subaltern agency.

The early friendship with Yeats was significant as the European literary world was largely dismissive in early twentieth century of the non-western world, whose literary cannon was still held to be unworthy of great western scholarship. Either orientalist perceptions of exoticism or pejorative ideas dominated. So, D. H. Lawrence in 1916 could write that “The East is marvellously interesting, for tracing our steps back. But for going forward, it is nothing. All it can hope for is to be fertilised by Europe, so it can start on a new phase”.³⁴ Yeats represents the opposite view as he saw in Tagore a sagaciousness that was more spiritually complete as civilisation than Europe. Yeats helped to popularise this interpretation and as Collins suggests, Tagore then became an instrument by which European intellectuals could attempt some form of cultural recovery out of the bondage of imperial rivalries.³⁵ Yet Yeats had limited knowledge of Tagore’s context as Yeats have never visited India and his knowledge was shaped by encounters with Theosophy in the west and was

³³ Quoted in Ralph Russell, *The Pursuit of Urdu Literature* (London: Zed Books, 1992), p. 210.

³⁴ D.H. Lawrence to Lady Otteline Morrell, 24 May 1916, in James T. Boulton and George J. Zytaruk (eds.), *The Letters of D.H. Lawrence, Volume II, June 1913-October 1916* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 608.

³⁵ Michael Collins, ‘Rabindranath Tagore and the Politics of Friendship’, *South Asia Journal: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 35:1 (2012), p. 125.

thus limited.³⁶

C. F. Andrews, with his background firmly stamped with Christianity, wanted to affect a change in the moral basis of the colonial relationship by using the idea of attempting social reform in order to atone for imperial guilt. In 1904, he became the principle of St Stephens College, Delhi and had more immediate experience of the India from which Tagore was writing than Yeats. According to Collins, the relationship between Andrews and Tagore manifested itself as one of complete devotion by Andrews for Tagore. In 1912 Andrews declared he was glad “that my own country was doing homage at last to the genius of India, revealed through her greatest living poet”, and a year later noting that “Tagore’s giving of his heart in its simplicity to his fellow men in the West would begin to break down barriers.”³⁷ Andrews moved to Bengal, took on Bengali clothing and renounced his Anglian ministry in 1919 in an attempt to whitewash his association with Britain. He also helped Tagore with the translations of his work into English. For Andrews, Tagore represented an alternative vision of the messiah. Andrews came to worship Tagore as a Christ-like object of veneration. Ultimately, Andrews wanted to use Tagore’s work to re-balance the colonial relationship through a reconceptualization of Christianity that was reformed via eastern influences.

Edward John Thompson (father of the more famous son, the radical historian Edward Palmer Thompson) also had a background of Christianity and spent nearly his entire life in missions around India. In 1910 he moved to the West Bengal mission, where he stayed for over ten years. Like Andrews, he was also concerned with affecting a change in the moral basis of empire. Though instead of devotion and self-reform, he wanted to give “a fair hearing and honest criticism” to India and Tagore’s work. He therefore wanted to overcome the blind-hero worship of Tagore and delve into his complexities. Thompson’s intellectual relationship with Tagore began around 1914. As a proficient Bengali speaker, Tagore requested assistance with translations of his work as he held many to be of poor quality and the basis of decreasing popularity in Europe. Thompson wrote a critical biography of Tagore, aiming to judge his works by broader standards, to put him on a par with European poets. This tapped into an anxiety of Tagore’s as he feared that much of the complexities of his poetry, and the Bengali language, would be lost on European audiences.

³⁶ Collins, pp. 124-125.

³⁷ Quoted in Collins, pp. 126-127.

“Universal” standards, therefore, were not balanced in Tagore’s favour. This met with fury from Tagore, who in the same way Gandhi critiqued ideas of “Western” progress, parliaments, and civilisation in *Hind Swaraj*, saw Thompson’s standards as actually western but masquerading as Universal.

Michael Collins looks at Tagore’s liberalism and argues Tagore’s philosophy was centred on the praxis of individuality, and so falling into the trap of elitism and fear of demotic (colloquial) culture. It appears Tagore’s philosophy – unlike that of Gandhi’s - excluded collective and subaltern agency. This leads Collins to interpret Tagore as an elitist figure, unlike Gandhi, who is seen to champion mass involvement, and stresses that it was this avoidance of mass action that underwrote his conflict with Gandhi. Tagore emphasised the role of the “civilised” individual as the main agent of change. While cultivating friendships with elite characters trapped in imperial and orientalist paradigms like Yeats (with his interest in the exotic), Andrews (with his blind devotion to Tagore) and Thompson (with his imperial apologetics), did not attempt to encourage the involvement of the masses in the national movement.

In his friendship with Gandhi, Tagore parted company on a whole range of issues, including the strategy and tactics of the Non-Co-operation Movement that demonstrates a deep ideological gulf. Even at their initial meeting, Gandhi’s missionary zeal was on display. He began to lecture Tagore, who was eight years senior to him, about the shortcomings of behaviour he observed at Shantiniketan, and suggested that the ashram would improve if it adopted the austere principles of Gandhi’s project at Phoenix, Durban.³⁸ A decade later, in September 1925 Tagore wrote a scathing piece on Gandhi published in *Modern Review*, titled *The Cult of the Charkha*. The article criticised not just the Non-Cooperation Movement and the Charkha, but the ideas of patriotism and nationalism as well, which Gandhi stood up for. “As is livelihood for the individual, so is politics for a particular people — a field for the exercise of their business instincts of patriotism. All this time, just as business has implied antagonism so has politics been concerned with the self-interest of a pugnacious nationalism.” Tagore, who had been one of Gandhi’s early admirers, described Non-Co-operation as “political asceticism” adding, “It has at its back a fierce joy of annihilation, which at its best is asceticism, and at its worst that orgy of frightfulness in which human nature,

³⁸ M.K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography or the story of my experiments with the truth* (Ahmedabad: Navajiran Publishing House, 1959), p. 281.

losing faith in the basic reality of normal life, finds a disinterested delight in an unmeaning devastation”.³⁹ Tagore was vehemently opposed to notions of pious suffering, making a virtue out of misery as opposed to focussing on actual social and political emancipation.

Tagore was also highly critical of what he perceived as the “cult of the charkha”, whereas Gandhi saw this as providing useful work for India’s mass rural and urban populace. On the merit of khaddar and modernisation, for Gandhi Indian conditions negated the need for industrial modernisation. In letter to Saklatvala, the Indian Communist and first Indian Labour MP, Gandhi viewed the cities as “an excrescence...draining the life-blood of the villages. Khaddar is an attempt to revise and reverse the process and establish a better relationship between the cities and the villages.”⁴⁰ Gandhi believed spinning could deal with the problems of idleness and unemployment. It was useful work that also provided a service to the nation. Just as *khadi* was indigenous, spinning relates to Gandhi’s views on industrial development and his romanticised notion of some idyllic past that India should strive towards achieving. Tagore saw in this the levelling down of all into some pre-ordained uniformity that denied genuine creativity of thought, activity let alone any sense of individuality. He had a profound belief in principles of rationality and scientific education thinking. That is why he castigated the very principle of spinning as any meaningful part of achieving independence, “...instead of removing poverty or achieving Hindu-Muslim unity, or leading to *swaraj*, it was more likely to paralyse the reasoning power of the people and perpetuate their habit of reliance on the *guru* or some magical *mantram*”.⁴¹

The mantra lay in the inflexibility and total obedience Gandhi expected. Gandhi was authoritarian as acknowledged even by Nehru when he referred to Gandhi’s “Kingliness” that compelled a willing obeisance from others.⁴² Nehru’s further observation seems quite apt that Gandhi was consciously and deliberately meek and humble. Yet he was full of power and authority,

³⁹ Letter from Tagore to C.F. Andrews dated 2 March 1921, published in *Modern Review*, Calcutta: May 1921.

⁴⁰ Letter from Gandhi to Saklatvala, 17 March 1927, p. 23, quoted in *Is India Different? The Class Struggle in India* (London, Dorrit Press, 1927).

⁴¹ Tagore, *Modern Review*, Calcutta: September 1925.

⁴² Jawaharlal Nehru, *An Autobiography* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1961), p. 129.

and he knew it and at times he was imperious enough, issuing commands which had to be obeyed.⁴³ Gandhi's lack of tolerance and expectation of total acceptance of his particular method smacks of desire for blind obedience and elitism. An example of this came during the late 1930s when Gandhi was in battle with Subash Chandra Bose over the political direction of Congress. At Tripura Congress Seth Govinda Das demanded unquestioning obedience to the "Mahatma" as he favourably compared Gandhi to Mussolini, Hitler and Stalin. Tagore, though quite ill, rightly protested this crass tendency to admire fascists and totalitarian leaders.⁴⁴

Speaking of the giant thinkers of modern India, Jawaharlal Nehru remarked that "No two persons could probably differ so much as Gandhi and Tagore. The surprising thing is that both of these men with so much in common and drawing inspiration from the same wells of wisdom and thought and culture, should differ from each other so greatly!...I think of the richness of India's age-long cultural genius, which can throw up in the same generation two such master-types, typical of her in every way, yet representing different aspects of her many-sided personality."⁴⁵ Elsewhere Nehru insisted of the two figures that "they seemed to present different but harmonious aspects of India and to complement one another".⁴⁶ Similarly, Kripalani contrasts the irrevocable disagreement between Tolstoy and Lenin with the manner in which "Tagore and Gandhi have confirmed and upheld each other and represent a fundamental harmony in Indian civilization."⁴⁷ Writing from the Soviet Union in the 1920s, the Bolshevik Anatoly Lunacharsky described Gandhi as the so-called "Indian Tolstoy" and noted the "pantheistic mysticism" and "psychological insight" of Tagore, who was declared to be "an advocate of the Hindu *svaradzh*" ("swaraj") and placed in a similarly harmonious relationship to Gandhi.

[Tagore] is also an ennobled nationalist. In his works there are many points of continuity with Gandhi's, and, just as Gandhi was recently arrested by the English police and is

⁴³ Ibid, pp. 129-130.

⁴⁴ Sibnarayan Ray (ed.), *Gandhi, India and the World* (Bombay: Nachiketa Publications Ltd, 1970), p. 121.

⁴⁵ Nehru letter to Krishna Kripalani, in 1941, quoted in K. R. Kripalani, *Gandhi, Tagore and Nehru*, (Bombay, Hind Kitabs, 1949).

⁴⁶ Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1966), p. 361.

⁴⁷ K. R. Kripalani, *Gandhi, Tagore and Nehru* (Bombay, Hind Kitabs, 1949), p. 8.

currently in prison, the writer, having acquired a position of global significance, was also deprived of freedom in his time. But, Tagore, as a poet, is more wide-ranging and elegant than Gandhi. Although he is exceedingly popular even with everyday people, nevertheless his influence expands mainly among the Hindu intelligentsia [...]⁴⁸

Clearly both did emanate from the same well. Born in the aftermath of the brutal suppression of the 1857 rebellion, neither were admirers of empire and force. As Indians subjected to an English education system, Tagore and Gandhi appreciated the importance of vernacular languages for learning,⁴⁹ which is why writing in Bengali and Gujarati was essential to them. Both figures were suspicious of political schemes setting the agenda for framing debates and understanding of freedom, society and the individual. For too long these have been associated with European developments of historical evolution, where notions of the universal and modernity are reduced to western concepts. Today our world, now dominated by the power of global capital, is blighted by a renewed sense of rugged individualism, rooted in the concept of self with often a xenophobic rejection of the ‘outsider’. Triumphant neo-liberalism and laissez-faire economics renders the principles of the collective spirit of *samaj* and collective ideas of *swaraj* irrelevant and antiquated. However, the dialogue, deep engagement and openness that Gandhi and Tagore theorised and debated over a hundred years ago, along with the ideas of pluralism, syncretism and heterogeneity are desperately required for the twenty-first century.

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⁴⁸ Anatoly Lunacharsky, ‘The Indian Tolstoy [Indiiskii Tolstoi]’, *Krasnaia Niva*, 1, 1923, p. 30. Thanks to Nigel Foxcroft for help in translating this.

⁴⁹ See Bashabi Fraser, *Critical Lives: Rabindranath Tagore* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2019), pp. 213-215.

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