

IN SEARCH OF DEVELOPMENT

Parasites have to pay for their ready-made victuals by losing the power of assimilating food in natural form.

— Rabindranath Tagore

Introduction

I should like to discuss some issues connected with development—modernization—in the context of the Tagore-Gandhi controversy which has been published by Navjivan as *Truth Called Them Differently** (I cannot too strongly recommend this book for a clear and concise introduction to the issues of modernization). I want to do this not because the controversy is historically important, not because the debate was conducted by two of the greatest Indians of modern times, not because the controversy was conducted without sparing the opponent and yet with the greatest mutual respect. The controversy was all this; what is more important, it has many of the most important characteristics that the controversy over this issue has even today. But what is most important, the almost total neglect of this controversy in contemporary discussions of development generally or in any discipline like Sociology, Economics, Politics, etc., glaringly and powerfully illustrates the modern Indian development that never took place.

The controversy—all of it—took place fifty to sixty years ago. It ranges over a number of topics of various levels of generality.

**Truth Called Them Differently* (Tagore—Gandhi Controversy), Compiled and Edited by R. K. Prabhu and Ravindra Kelekar, Navjivan Press, Ahmedabad, 1961. All the page references in this paper are to this book.

I shall briefly present some main arguments in an order that helps me to discuss them. In two later sections, I shall consider the bearing of the controversy on the issues of development today.

II

The Tagore-Gandhi Controversy

Let me begin with Tagore's side of the controversy :

Tagore speaks :

(1) Tagore did not approve of the Gandhian movement of burning garments made from foreign cloth. He thought that it would be better if the clothes were given away to the poor 'to whom they belonged'. Further, according to him, this movement was based on a confusion between economics and ethics—calling foreign cloth 'impure', etc. If there be anything wrong in wearing a particular kind of cloth, that would be an offence against economics, of hygiene, or aesthetics, but certainly not against morality. Therefore, to burn foreign cloth in response to the demand of the leader would be blind obedience—and that is a bad habit.

(2) Tagore was also against Gandhi's advice to students to abandon schools and colleges or the advice to students to give up the study of English. Tagore condemned this as Gandhi's zeal for crying down our modern education.

All these were forms of non-cooperation, and according to Tagore, non-cooperation is a principle of negation. In its passive form, it is asceticism, and in its active form it is violence. According to Tagore, this was negation without a positive content.

(3) Tagore was specially averse to the turning of the Charkha, and 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. (a) Tagore objected to this as a form of ritual—a certain

slavishness. (b) Further, if men can be stunted by big machines, the danger of being stunted by small machines should not be lost sight of. (c) He also thought that to ask millions to do this to get swaraj was to encourage weakness and greed—it was like offering tomato to Jagannath. (d) The advocacy of charkha may have been born out of love, but it goes against truth and reason.

(4) However, Tagore would not like to be misunderstood as standing up for the West as against the East :

- (a) I do not believe in the material civilization of the West just as I do not believe in the physical body to be the highest truth in man.
- (b) But the fact is that the West are waiting for the daybreak after the orgies of the night, and they have their expectation of light from the East. (p. 30)
- (c) In spite of the immense distraction of our latter day degeneracy, India still cherishes in her heart the immortal *mantram* of peace, goodness and unity. (p. 31). India has ever declared that unity is truth and separateness is māyā. This unity is not a zero, it is that which comprehends all.
- (d) The West has misunderstood the East which is at the root of the disharmony that prevails between them. But will it mend matters if the East in her turn tries to misunderstand the West ?
- (e) The present age has powerfully been possessed by the West, it has 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 the age.
- (f) Our present struggle to alienate our heart and mind from the West is an attempt at spiritual suicide. If we can come into real touch with the West through the disinterested medium of intellectual co-operation, we still gain a true perspective.

(g) I believe in the true meeting of the East and the West.

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...What is harmful to the world is harmful to all of us...Universal harmony has sent us its call today. Let our mind respond in its own language. For response is the only true sign of life.

(5) However Tagore makes it clear : " Parasites have to pay for their ready-made victuals by losing the power of assimilating food in natural form."

For my purposes Tagore's foregoing points are enough. Now we go on to a statement of Gandhi's reply.

Gandhi replies :

(1) Take the issue of burning of the foreign clothes :

" 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. I will not commit the sin of becoming their patron, but on learning that I had assisted in impoverishing them. I would give them a privileged position and give them neither crumbs nor cost-off clothing, but the best of my food and clothes and associate myself with them in work.

I must also confess that I do not draw a sharp distinction between economics and ethics. Economics that hurt the moral well-being of an individual or a nation are immoral and therefore sinful.... It is sinful to buy and use articles made by sweated labour. It is sinful to eat American wheat and let my neighbour starve for want of custom. (p. 29)

(2) (a) About the study of the English language he said that it was studied for commercial purposes or as a passport to marriage. Meaning of education has been reduced to knowledge of English; and vernaculars are crushed and starved. (p. 34).

(b) The educational system 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.

(c) Gandhi says that non-cooperation in its conception is not exclusive, narrow or negative... It is a protest against the unwitting and unwilling participation in evil. In Gandhi's opinion, rejection is as much an ideal as the acceptance of a thing. All religions teach that the human endeavours consists in a series of rejections and acceptances.

(3) Concerning Tagore's objections to the turning of the charkha, Gandhi says :

(a) 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 scorched; it is dying of hunger because it has no work to buy food with.

The city people are brokers and commission agents for the big houses of Europe, America and Japan.

(b) Considering the suggestions that charkha was cramping, Gandhi replies : " I do want growth. I do want self-determination, I do want freedom, but I want all these for the soul. I doubt if the steel age is an advance upon the flint age. I am indifferent. It is the evolution of the soul to which the intellect and all our faculties have to be devoted.

(c) There is no untruth in the claim about the character. Svaraj has no meaning for the millions if they do not know how to employ their enforced idleness. The attainment of this Svaraj is possible within a short time, and it is so possible only by the revival of the spinning wheel.

(4) (a) Like Tagore, Gandhi too does not want to be misunderstood. He is not against the English or the West. He is against the system of exploitation established by the English.

(b) True, India has a heritage which she should share, but before sharing it, she should possess that heritage. India must learn to live, before she can aspire to die for humanity.

(c) Non-co-operation or Svadeshi is not an exclusive doctrine. My modesty has prevented me from declaring from the housetop that the message of non-co-operation, non-violence and *Svadeshi* (italics mine) is a message to the world. According to Gandhi, the movement is altering the meaning of old terms—nationalism and patriotism and extending their scope.

(d) I am as great a believer in free air as the great poet. I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed.

(5) However, Gandhi must be firmly rooted in the soil of India.

I want the cultures 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.

Mine is not a religion of the prison house. It has room for the least among God's creation. But it is proof against insolence, pride of race, religion or colour.

(I have extensively quoted from the original in this account, because its richness, power and depth demand this.)

III

Then and now

(I wish I could present the following more clearly; however I hope that the reader will try to understand my meaning rather than the words). As I said at the beginning, the controversy took place fifty to sixty years ago. But it has not lost its point in the contemporary context and specially perhaps in the area of intellectual activity.

The present day controversy about development and modernization has the same features as the controversy over between Gandhi and Tagore. Even today, there is the same controversy about self-reliance and dependance; the controversy about keeping up with the west and the concomitant exploitation. On the face of it, the participants in the controversy are equally sincere, and have a concern for India. In any case, what use would it be to doubt this ? But somehow one misses in the present-day controversy something—the richness, the power and the depth. Does one feel this only because the personalities involved in the earlier controversy were so great, or is it because there is an important difference in the controversy then and now ? If it is the former, precious little can be done about it, because we cannot by order produce Gandhi and Tagore. But if it is the latter, then it is in need of examination and consideration.

I think that the difference is a matter of important difference in the controversy. What is the difference? In the case of Tagore and Gandhi, both of them thought that standing firm on the ground involved being attached to the centre—the Indian heritage. This did not mean acceptance of the Indian heritage—certainly not its institutions. Nor perhaps even its values. However, both felt certain that the aims were eternal and precise yet it did mean, that these will be seriously considered. Even if these had to be changed, they had to be changed, and not merely replaced. Both of them thought that this must be the case, because according to them this was the necessary condition of growth, without it there could only be change. Growth means change, but change does not necessarily mean growth; it may mean disruption and disintegration. However, in the modern controversy, this reference to the centre is forgotten. There is hardly a feel for it, much less is there a study of it. In so far as the centre is remembered, we pay only lip-service to it.

It is not necessary to undertake a historico-statistical study

to see this. A few broad strokes bring home the reality. As a first step, take the Tagore-Gandhi controversy itself. In our discussions of modernization, it hardly, if ever, find a place. And this is not an oversight. This is a part of the general situation—best illustrated from the educational field. Take e.g. the study of philosophy. We have been successively under the influence of Mac Taggart, Hegel and Bradley, Moore and Russell, Wittgenstein, Quine and Chomsky. But as far as one can see, no Indian name is likely to enter this list. Not only that. It would be all right if we had Russell etc., but we have all the riff and the raff—Tom, Dick and Harry. But has not Indian philosophy gained ground? We study Indian philosophy as the westerners do, with their approach.

What is true in the case of philosophy is true also of other subjects. What is true of academic life, is true of other aspects of life. As a result what we have is interloping and beggary : parasitism—just the things Tagore and Gandhi did not want. And there is therefore no development; though there has been a lot of change.

IV

Where do we go from here?

Perhaps so much damage has been done, that the questions about going anywhere is redundant. However, it is not impossible to try, especially in view of some work which is available. In fact it is necessary to mobilize what little such work is available.

However, the path is not without obstacles. The obstacles are from the established interests. One such interest is in favour of the status quo. Another interest is secularism. The former will have to be fought and the latter is a false bogey, is in no way a real objection. And finally, is this not Svadeshism ? It could be, but need it be? Not only can there be false Svadeshism, there can

also be a false anti-Svadeshism. Those interested in the genuine philosophical health in the country, cannot avoid the task of distinguishing true Svadeshism from false Svadeshism.

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