

# IDEOLOGICAL DIFFERENCES IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF A MYSTIC POET RABINDRANATH TAGORE AND SPIRITUAL EXISTENTIALIST MAHATMA GANDHI

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## Abstract:

*This paper entitled “Ideological Differences in the Philosophy of a Mystic poet Rabindranath Tagore and Spiritual Existentialist Mahatma Gandhi” throws light on controversies between them on major national issues such as non-cooperation movement, charkha movement and fasting unto death. The friendship between them rested on their mutual respect for each other. Rabindranath Tagore addressed Gandhi as Mahatma and Gandhi addressed Tagore as Gurudeo. The controversial issues of national importance between them were of immense value for the national freedom struggle. The common thread between them was their genuine concern for the welfare of the nation. They were the first in the history of Indian freedom struggle to have given a spiritual and moral basis to the political and literary movement of pre- independent and post- independent India.*

**Keywords:** truth, spiritualism, humanism, nationalism, culture, politics, ethics, freedom

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Rabindranath Tagore's love of God and Mahatma Gandhi's passion for truth, the former a mystic and the latter an existentialist; both restless for making the earth a heaven, where love emanates from every heart and the barriers of caste, creed and religion melts into everlasting spiritual bliss; is discernible from Rabindranath Tagore's *Gitanjali* and Mahatma Gandhi's autobiography, *My Experiment with Truth*. Rabindranath Tagore in his *Gitanjali* prays God to awaken the child in man, and Mahatma Gandhi in his autobiography persuades man to awaken the child in him, both of them do so with the ultimate aim of creating 'Ramrajya'.

As is evident from the letters exchanged by Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore, it is found, as early as February 1915, Rabindranath Tagore referring Gandhi as 'Mahatma' and Gandhi readily adopted the form of addressing Rabindranath Tagore as 'Gurudeo'. The Gurudeo and The Mahatma both of them the great spiritualists as they were, they as is evident from their correspondence to each other; made spiritualism the guiding principle in cultural, political and economic matters in their struggle for freedom.

Mahatma Gandhi was uncompromising when it was the question of purity of means. To him politics devoid of religion is immoral. He was idealistic in his approach; he was eminently pragmatic in the translation of his ideals into practice. Gandhian thoughts are ancient solutions to modern problems. In the introduction to his autobiography *The Story of My Experiment with Truth* he makes it clear that he had been striving and pining to achieve those thirty years – was self realisation, to see God face to face, to attain Moksha. (Introduction to *My Experiment with Truth* p-X) Rabindranath Tagore surrenders himself to the will of God,

“Thou hast made me endless such is thy pleasure. This frail vessel thou emptiest again and again, and fillest it ever with fresh life.”

The Gurudeo and the Mahatma were spiritual humanism personified. Their faith in the unity of man and nature was indomitable. Their every action was prompted by the ultimate goal of union with God. Mahatma Gandhi in the last paragraph of Introduction to *My Experiment with Truth* writes

“For it is an unbroken torture to me that I am still so far from Him, who, as I fully know that it is the evil passion within that keeps me so far from Him, and yet I cannot get away from them.”

Their intense yearning for union with God is reflected in their writings. The pangs of reparation and the obstacles in the way are poignantly described. Rabindranath Tagore in the 38<sup>th</sup> verse of *Gitanjali* finally longs for union with God,

“That I want thee, only thee let my heart repeat without end. All desires that distract me, day and night are false and empty to the core. As the night keeps hidden in its gloom the petition for light, even thus in the depth of my unconsciousness rings the cry- I want thee, only thee.”

The Mahatma's ventures in the political field were directed to attend self realisation. The Mahatma's and the poet's spirit of philosophy left an indelible mark on India's historical national life and the cultural and political India of nineteenth and twentieth century. Their nationalism was elevated to the high philosophical plane. Tagore's intelligence and Gandhi's quest of truth; through appeal to human heart rather than to brain gave rise to fundamental political questions leading to controversies in many political, social and economic matters, as is evident from the letter exchanged by them and their debates on major national issues.

Rabindranath Tagore's views on the Charkha movement was that it was simply another device for lulling the human mind into a sort of conformity against the colonial government, and is not the base for any real intellectual or spiritual rejuvenation as claimed by Gandhi. For Mahatma Gandhi Charkha was not merely a wooden tool but far more than that, for him Charkha was not only an important tool for political emancipation; but a divine weapon against atom bomb, a devils weapon. When in his autobiography he writes, “Certain things, as it were spontaneously presented themselves to me in the course of my experiments with truth.” He probably means that a wooden tool like charka has the potential if one engages oneself in spinning the cotton into thread on charkha, to divest oneself of all one's prejudices. For him even a broom used for sweeping can be a tool for attaining freedom. Far from being rational the Mahatma was guided by his inner voice in his indomitable search for truth.

Rabindranath Tagore's objection to the Charkha as he pointed out in the essay “Cult of the Charkha” (1925) was the economic efficacy of the charkha programme. He had written in 1921

“The question of using or refusing cloth of a particular manufacture belongs mainly to economic science, but a tendency was abroad to use the magical formula that foreign cloth is impure” and thus “economics is bundled out and a fictional moral dictum dragged in its place.” [*The Mahatma and The Poet* p-9-10]

Sabhyasachi Bhattacharya writes in his book *The Mahatma and The Poet* that the objection here is not to the substantive point about foreign cloth but to the terms of discourse, the use of a moral language in place of the economic. To this Gandhi's reply was that he had not drawn any distinction between economics and ethics. [*The Mahatma and The Poet* p-10] This terse reply of Mahatma Gandhi to the objection raised by Rabindranath Tagore was based probably on the premise that every pragmatic act has to be ethically viable. Gandhi's appeal is to the heart; Tagore's is to the intellect.

Mahatma Gandhi's idea of non-cooperation was diametrically opposite of what Tagore thought about non-cooperation. Rabindranath Tagore, being a poet, life for him is poetry, but for Mahatma Gandhi life is not the imaginative world of a poet in which everything that the poet imagines will follow the suit. Rabindranath Tagore calls the idea of non-cooperation a political asceticism. He was against calling upon the students to give up Government schools before they had other schools to go to. Mahatma Gandhi was firmly of opinion that the Government schools have unmanned us, rendered us helpless and Godless. They have made us clerks and interpreters. Non-cooperation movement was waged by Mahatma Gandhi against one sided combination, against the armed imposition of modern methods of exploitation. His was a protest against an unwitting and unwilling participation in evil. A poetic set up of mind fails to understand the intricacies of a move that aims at exploitation masquerading under the name of civilisation. For Rabindranath Tagore Mahatma Gandhi's movement of non-cooperation is like Buddha's Nirvana, the negative side of the truth whereas cooperation is akin to Brahma-Vidya Mukti, the positive side of the truth, though the ultimate aim of both of them was the freedom of the nation.

Rabindranath Tagore said that he was a poet not a fighter by nature so he does not approve of any destructive activity such as non-cooperation. Being a poet himself he feels that what the metre is to poetry, the idea of cooperation is to human being, for metre is not a mere system of enclosure for keeping ideas from running away in disorder, but for vitalising them, making them indivisible in a unity of creation. He wanted India to offer the great ideal to the world that will work toward harmony and cooperation between the different people of the world.

Mahatma Gandhi feels that Brahma Vidya's object of Mukti and Buddha's idea of Nirvana, the positive and negative side of the truth respectively are like the two sides of a coin. He believes that rejection is as much an ideal as the acceptance of a thing. It is as necessary to reject untruth as it to accept truth.

Mahatma Gandhi, a spiritual existentialist feels that cooperation is possible only with those people who respect the individuality and equal human rights of others; and as far as the Britishers are concerned they looked down upon Indians not as their equals but their servants. The relation between the Britishers and the Indians was that of the ruler and the ruled. Their every move was for subjugation of the Indians. He was of the opinion that Indians have every right to say no to the British Government. Non-cooperation for him is the deliberate refusal to cooperate; it is like the necessary weeding process that a cultivator has to resort before he sows.

Mahatma Gandhi was a shrewd politician, who understood the British Government's evil designs; he refused to fall in the trap of the Britishers. Rabindranath Tagore on the other hand was a mystic, whose emotional approach to the political problems deliberately created by

the alien rulers for the promotion of their motives was far from being influential.

In the matrix of the contemporary historical processes and events the philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore though thrived on occasional controversies on the important political issues, is undoubtedly enlightening to those who aspire for the greatest joy of emancipation.

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