

RABINDRANATH TAGORE

Key themes :

- Nationalism
- Cosmopolitanism
- Idea of man



IDEA OF MAN

- “In the history of Man there began from that day in many forms, in many ways and many languages the answers to the one fundamental question, ‘What am I?’ In the true answer to this question lies his joy, his glory. He has understood that he is not simple, but hides a mystery of depth within himself, and that he will finally know himself only when the veils of the mystery have been pierced. Through centuries he has persisted in his attempt.”

(Tagore, Rabindranath in *Man, The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, vol. 3.)

- Man and his creative unity and expression is at the centre of his thought about *Swaraj*, *Samaj*, *Swadeshi Samaj*, Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism. His understanding of Man had two dimensions— Futuristic as well as Social.

- The idea of man is illustrated in several lectures and essays like “Man”, “Supreme Man”, “The relation of Man”, “Man’s Universe” etc.
- Rabindranath Tagore takes into account the moral and spiritual aspects of human nature.
- Tagore talked about the duality in man’s nature. One is the animal aspect of man for which the mere fulfillment of his necessities constitute the happiness. Another aspect is of the Universal man who is concerned with neither happiness nor suffering but strives for something greater; in his words-‘magnificence’.

- Unlike animals, man cannot be conformed to his natural conditions. It is in the crossing of his natural conditions that lies his glory.
- “He is not exclusively an individual: he is also one in spirit with the Universal man, under whose inspiration the individual engages in expressing his ultimate truth through crossing nature’s limitations....”.
- Man is a finite and infinite being at the same time. He is finite in his immediate individuality and infinite in his union with the Universal spirit.

“From the time when Man became truly conscious of his own self he also became conscious of a mysterious spirit of unity which found its manifestations through him in his society. It is a subtle medium of relationship between individuals, which is not for any utilitarian purpose but for its own ultimate truth, not a sum of arithmetic but a value of life. Somehow Man has felt that this comprehensive spirit of unity has a divine character which could claim the sacrifice of all that is individual in him, that in it dwells his highest meaning transcending his limited self, representing his best freedom.” - Tagore

- He regards individuals as expression of the divine. By uniting with the divine he can evolve to the ‘supreme man’. He believed in the unity of men, despite the distinctions of time and place. It is the ability to feel the presence of one spirit in all men that makes one a great soul. The co-existence of finite and infinite man; personal and universal man characterizes the distinctive conception of man in Tagore’s writings.
- Tagore was trying to create a space for individual choice that stood apart from the imposed collectivities be it traditional Indian institutions like caste, religion and patriarchal families, or imperial subjecthood of colonial rule, or contemporary mass movements for nationalism .

GANDHI-TAGORE DEBATE



- Despite sharing mutual admiration, Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore differed on certain grounds that made them so distinct from each other. These were basically on some philosophical questions and the non-cooperation movement.

- Based on the personal letters and published essays of Gandhi and Tagore, Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, in his book, “The Mahatma and the Poet”, put a chronological account of Gandhi-Tagore debate on practical politics into four time periods-

Period 1915-1922

- Tagore was sceptical of the instrumental use of *Satygraha* in the Non-cooperation Movement by some of the followers of Gandhi to promote bigotry. Gandhi was aware of the misuse of his ideal of *Satygraha* in some instances by some people but regarded them not as his true followers. He also rejected that it happened in the Non-cooperation movement, particularly.
- Tagore did not support the boycotting of government schools since there was no alternative schooling available. Gandhi justified the boycott in saying that the education imparted there make them “helpless and godless.”

- Tagore was skeptical of the *charkha* and did not think that the mere burning of foreign clothes could solve India's problems. He also did not support the Gandhi's obsession of the sins and limitations of the western civilization; instead he emphasized on taking a broader view of humanity. Gandhi was consistent on his position and rejected Tagore's view on *charkha* and upheld his support for *khadi*.

Period 1923-1928

- The debate on *charkha* became more intense in this period. Tagore questioned the economic efficiency of the programme and criticized Gandhi of using moral language in the place of economic. Gandhi replied that he had drawn no distinction between the two.
- Gandhi was opposed to casteism and untouchability but he defended the *Varnashrama*. Tagore was a fierce critic of Gandhi's position on *Varnashrama* on both practical and moral grounds.

Period 1929-33

- This was a period when eradication of communalism became the common concern for both Gandhi and Tagore.
- Tagore's practical experience of Calcutta Riots in 1926 made him write fiercely against communalism. He went to the point of supporting “straightforward atheism” instead of delusive religiosity. Gandhi was equally against communalism but he could not be expected to employ this kind of approach in the case of atheism.

Period 1934-1941

- When Gandhi made a statement associating the Bihar earthquake of 1934 with “divine chastisement” -as the result of continuing caste oppression in the state, Tagore was shocked to see the irrationality in his argument. Tagore was aware of the effect Gandhi's statement may have on the common people who blindly followed him and asked him clarifications. But, Gandhi didn't change his take on that.

- Tagore and Gandhi had disagreement also on Shubhas Chandra Bose being eased out of Congress.
- Debate between Gandhi and Tagore on philosophical questions can be found in their ideas of *swaraj*, state, nationalism;etc.

Swaraj and State

- While Tagore had an individualistic notion of liberty, Gandhi's one is more collective.
- In Tagore's view, society was central to Indian context than the state. For, Gandhi, adopting this view was practically not possible.

Nationalism

- Tagore was very critical of the ethnic and chauvinistic forms of nationalism. Instead, he urged for the upholding of “universal human.”

- Gandhi, too, was aware of the limitations of nationalism. For him, in patriotism lies the path of attaining universal humanism. Evil was only the exclusive, selfish and narrowness of modern nations.

Science and Technology

- Morality was the lens through which Gandhi viewed the world. In advocating *charkha* and explaining the cause of Bihar earthquake he employs the moral language. On the other hand, Tagore was very critical of using moral language where economic is the appropriate one. Moreover he was more scientific in explaining natural phenomenon.

Education

- Both Tagore and Gandhi had run schools outside the state sponsored system. While both of them emphasized on the use of mother tongue, reflection of Indian life and culture and participatory schooling they were different in the matter of basic education scheme.

- While Tagore criticized the basic education scheme of Gandhi on the ground of overemphasizing material utility at the cost of the overall development of the pupil and limiting the poor students to a definite vocation; Gandhi thought it as a means of working independent of government support. He also regarded manual work as a means of intellectual training.
- In Jawaharlal Nehru's words- "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!"(Jawaharlal Nehru to K. Kripalani, 27 August,1941; as cited in *The Mahatma and the Poet* by Sabyasachi Bhattacharya)
- "The poet lives in a magnificent world of his own creation—his world of ideas. I am a slave of somebody else's creation—the spinning wheel.... But I may say in all humility that we complement each the other's activity". Gandhi

Resources

1. *Political Thought in Modern India*; edited by Thomas Pantham and Kenneth L Deutsch, Sage Publications, 2016
2. 'Creative Unity', 'Man', 'The Religion of Man' from *Rabindranath Tagore Selected Essays*, Rupa Publications, 2010
3. *The Mahatma and the Poet* by Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, National Book Trust, 1997
4. 'Tagore: Unlocking Cages 1861-1961' in Sunil Khilnani in *Incarnations India in 50 Lives*, Allen Lane, 2016
5. 'Two Roads to Decolonisation: Tagore and Gandh', Hiren Gohain, *Economic and Political Weekly*, July 30, 2011, pp. 23-26
6. *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, Vol.3, edited by Sisir Kumar Das, Sahitya Akademi, 1996