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Gandhi and Tagore: Beyond Nationalism, Towards A World Federation

– by Dr. Christian Bartolf



Gandhi and Tagore contributed thoughtful reflections on the utopian concept of a world federation beyond nationalism. Gandhi derived his main inspiration for a cosmopolitan vista from Tagore. Let us recollect challenging messages that may guide us.

1. Tagore:

Rabindranath Tagore was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in the year 1913, “because of his profoundly sensitive, fresh and beautiful verse, by which, with consummate skill, he has made his poetic thought, expressed in his own English words, a part of the literature of the West”.

When he was 55 years old, Tagore – the poet – gave a series of lectures on, ‘The Cult of Nationalism’ during his tour of Japan, from May to September 1916; and again while lecturing in the United States, from September 1916 until January 1917. His views regarding Nationalism in India are thought-provoking:

“India has never had a real sense of nationalism. Even though from childhood I had been taught that idolatry of the Nation is almost better than reverence for God and humanity, I believe I have outgrown that teaching, and it is my conviction that my countrymen will truly gain their India by fighting against the education which teaches them that a country is greater than the ideals of humanity.”¹

“I am not against one nation in particular, but against the general idea of all nations. What is the Nation?”²

Then he explains at length why the mechanical organisation of national power is “supremely dangerous to humanity”, compromises the complete moral personality, and perpetuates slavery, with these concluding remarks:

“Nationalism is a great menace. It is the particular thing which for years has been at the bottom of India’s troubles. And inasmuch as we have been ruled and dominated by a nation that is strictly political in its attitude, we have tried to develop within ourselves, despite our inheritance from the past, a belief in our eventual political destiny.”³

Influenced by a long letter from Leo Tolstoy, which he received as a young man, the French writer Romain Rolland was against World War I (1914 to 1918) right from its inception. After the War, he drafted the following document dictated by his voice of conscience and moral responsibility, which became the nucleus for an International of Intellectuals against War, for which he was he was praised by Dr Albert Schweitzer for his ethics of “reverence for life”:

Rolland’s document “Declaration of Independence of the Spirit” was first published in French in L’Humanité (June 26, 1919); later, it was also published in English, as an open letter, in The Modern Review (Calcutta). Tagore replied to this Declaration which he endorsed together with many other European celebrities of his age, e.g. Jane Addams (USA), Henri Barbusse (France), Tolstoy’s secretary Pavel Birioukov (Russia), Benedetto Croce (Italy), Georges Duhamel (France), Albert Einstein (Germany), August Forel (Switzerland), Alfred Hermann Fried (Austria), Hermann Hesse (Germany), Selma Lagerloef (Sweden), Heinrich Mann (Germany), Frans Masereel (Belgium), Georg Friedrich Nicolai (Germany), Leonhard Ragaz (Switzerland), Bertrand Russell (England), Fritz von Unruh (Germany), Henry van de Velde (Belgium), Stefan Zweig (Austria), and also Upton Sinclair (USA).⁴

This Declaration of Independence of the Spirit stated:

“Toilers of the Spirit, companions, scattered all over the world, separated from one another for five years by armies, by censorship and hate of nations at war, we take this opportunity, when barriers are falling and frontiers are re-opening, of appealing to you to re-form your fraternal union, – but let it be a fresh union, firmer than the one which existed before.

The war has thrown our ranks into disarray. The majority of intellectuals have placed their science, their art and their mind at the service of States. We do not wish to accuse or reproach anybody. We know the weakness of individual souls and the elemental strength of great collective currents: the latter have in an instant swept away the former, as no provision had been made for resisting. Let this experience at least serve us for the future!

And first of all, let us take note of the disasters that have resulted from the almost total abdication of the intelligence of the world and its voluntary subjection to the forces let loose. To the pestilence which is corroding Europe in body and spirit, thinkers and artists have added an incalculable amount of poisoned hate; they have searched in the arsenal of their knowledge, their memory and their imagination for old and new reasons, historical, scientific, logical and poetic reasons, for hating; they have laboured to destroy love and understanding between men. And in so doing they have disfigured, dishonoured, debased and degraded Thought, whose ambassadors they were. They have made it an instrument of passions and (perhaps without knowing it) of the egotistic interests of a social or political clan, of a state, of a country or a class. And now from this savage struggle, from which all the warring nations, victorious and vanquished, are emerging bruised, impoverished and in their heart of hearts (though they do not admit it to themselves) ashamed and humiliated at their orgy of madness, Thought emerges fallen with them, compromised by their conflict.

Arise! Let us extricate the spirit from these compromises, these humiliating alliances, this secret slavery! The spirit is the servant of none. It is we who are servants of the spirit. We have no other master. We are born to bear its torch, to defend it, to rally round it all those who have strayed. Our part, our duty is to maintain a fixed point, to point out the polar star, amidst the whirl of passions in the night. Amongst these passions of pride and mutual destruction, we shall choose none; we shall reject all. We serve Truth alone which is free, with no frontiers, with no limits, with no prejudices of race or caste. Of course, we shall not dissociate ourselves from the interests of Humanity! We shall work for it, but for it as a whole. We do not recognise nations. We recognise the People – one and universal, – the People who suffer, who struggle, who fall and rise again, and who ever march forward

on the rough road, drenched with their sweat and their blood, – the People comprising all men, all equally our brothers. And it is to make them, like ourselves, aware of this fraternity, that we raise above their blind battles the Arch of Alliance, of the Free Spirit, one and manifold, eternal”.

Tagore reply to this Document is given below:

“When my mind was steeped in the gloom of the thought, that the lesson of the late war had been lost, and that people were trying to perpetuate their hatred and anger into the same organised menace for the world which threatened themselves with disaster, your letter came and cheered me with its message of hope. The truths, that save us, have always been uttered by the few and rejected by the many, and have triumphed through their failures. It is enough for me to know, that the higher conscience of Europe has been able to assert itself in one of her choicest spirits through the ugly clamours of passionate politics ; and I gladly hasten to accept your invitation to join the ranks of those freed souls, who, in Europe, have conceived the project of a Declaration of Independence of the Spirit. ...”⁵

At the end of his letter to Rolland, Tagore explicitly referred to his “book on “Nationalism” which contains my Japanese addresses and some more lectures on the same subject.”⁶

When Tagore delivered an address to the inmates of *Satyagraha Ashram*, Sabarmati, during his visit on December 4, 1922, in the absence of Gandhiji who had been clamped in jail earlier in the year, he spoke about “Who is a Mahatma?” and expressed the meaning of the term and title Mahatma according to Tagore himself. Below are some significant excerpts from Tagore’s address:

“What then is the true meaning of sacrifice? It means that for human beings, the life of the body is not the best life, but the life of the soul. The material world which we share with the animals, is not the only world. We have higher

needs, because we have a deeper and a higher life hidden within us. That hidden life is immortal. ...”⁸

“... What is the true meaning of the great word Mahatma? It implies the emancipated soul that realizes itself in all souls. It means the life that is no longer confined within itself, but finds its larger soul of Atman, of Spirit. Then, in such realization, it becomes Mahatma. For it includes all spirits in itself.”⁹

“... (This is the divinity of universal activity who is the great soul, who constantly dwells in the hearts of all peoples. They who know him with the heart and with the mind, which is sure in its perception, become immortal.)

The meaning is this. The great universal spirit, the Mahatma, whose activities are for the whole world, is not for any confinement, or limitation, but for the universe.”¹⁰

When Tagore was in Hamburg, Germany, he wrote in one of his letters on May 17, 1921, a summary in essence of his universal message of India still cherishing “in her heart the immortal *mantram* of Peace, of Goodness, of Unity”¹¹ which resonated all over the world, from Japan to the United States, from Iran to Germany:

“The message of the One in the All which had been proclaimed in the shade of India’s forest solitude is waiting to bring reconciliation to the men who are fighting in the dark, who have lost the recognition of their brotherhood.”¹²

“The mantram which gives our spiritual vision its right of entrance into the soul of all things, is the mantram of India, the mantram of Peace, of Goodness, of Unity [...] The distracted mind of the West is knocking at the gate of India for this. And is it to be met there with a hoarse shout of exclusion?”¹³

The friendship between Tagore and Gandhi¹⁴ dated back to as early as 1914 when Tagore gave a message to the “Souvenir of the Passive Resistance Movement in South Africa 1906 – 1914. Published by the Proprietors of

“Indian Opinion”, Phoenix, Natal (Golden Number of “Indian Opinion”), he “refers to the struggle in South Africa as the “steep ascent of manhood not through the bloody path of violence but that of dignified patience and heroic self-renunciation.” “The power our fellow-countrymen have shown in standing firm for their cause under severest trials, fighting unarmed against fearful odds, has given us [...] a firmer faith in the strength of the God that can defy sufferings and defeats at the hands of physical supremacy, that can make its gains of its losses.”¹⁵

In the year 1933, Tagore connected his concept of the “Supreme Man” with *Satyāgraha*:

“[...] Those who have in them the great capacity of feeling within themselves the one Spirit in all men, are the people to whom we give the name Mahātmā or Great Soul. It is they who can lay down their lives for the good of all men. It is they who can address the comprehensive spirit within and without them and say:

He is dearer than a son, dearer than wealth, dearer than all else is this spirit who is in our inmost heart.

The scientist condemns such statements. He says that we attribute humanity to God in calling Him our Beloved. I reply that it is not attributing but realizing humanity. It is by developing the sense of the dignity of his human truth that man has attained to his God.”¹⁶

2. Gandhi:

In 1940, Mahatma Gandhi made it clear: “Of course I would welcome a world federation of all the nations of the world.”¹⁷ In a letter to Maurice Frydman, he wrote in 1942 his political vision:

“If I can get freedom for India now through non-violent means, power of non-violence is firmly established, Empire idea dissolves and world State takes its place, in which all the States of the world are free and equal, no State has its military, there may be a world police to keep order in the absence of universal belief in non-violence.”¹⁸

His peace plan anticipated the end of the Second World War, embraced a plea for inclusion and emphasized India’s role to play in a world federation:

“The very first step to a world federation is to recognize the freedom of conquered and exploited nations. Thus, India and Africa have to be freed. The second step would be to announce to and assure the aggressor powers, in the present instance, the Axis powers, that immediately the war ends, they will be recognized as members of the world federation in the same sense as the Allies. This presupposes an agreement among the members of the world federation as to the irreducible fundamentals. If this is not forthcoming, the federation will fall to pieces under the slightest strain. Therefore it has to come about voluntarily. I suggest that non-violence is the basis of voluntariness. It is because of all the nations of the world India is the one nation which has a message, however limited and crude it may be, in that direction that it must have immediate freedom to enable it to play its part.”¹⁹

In his speech at the All India Congress Committee meeting in Bombay, August 1942, Gandhi described how he combined his cosmopolitan vista with his Indian independence campaign:

“My democracy means every man is his own master. I have read sufficient history and I did not see such an experiment on so large a scale for the establishment of democracy by non violence. Once you understand these things you will forget the differences between the Hindus and the Muslims.

We are aiming at a world federation in which India would be a leading unit. It can come only through non-violence. Disarmament is only possible if you use

*the matchless weapon of non violence. There are people who may call me a visionary but I tell you I am a real bania and my business is to obtain swaraj."*²⁰

In his interview with the journalist Ralph Coniston of the *Colliers Weekly*, April 1945, Gandhi was asked what kind of world organization would promote an enduring peace or preserve it: "Only an organization based predominantly on truth and non-violence." As a "practical idealist" he emphasized his perspective of a world federation "if it is built on an essentially non-violent basis."²¹

With reference to his speeches at the Asian Relations Conference in Delhi, April 1947, Gandhi elaborated his plea for a peaceful global democracy without the military system, without war:

"[...] a world federation is possible of realization and in that case it would not be necessary for countries to maintain armed forces. Some countries today describe themselves as democratic but of course one does not become a democrat by simply saying so. What is the need for an army where there is rule by the people? Where the army rules the people cannot rule. There can be no world federation of countries ruled by armies."²²

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– About the Author

Christian Bartolf is an eminent German Gandhian scholar, author and curator based in Berlin, Germany. He obtained a doctorate in 2021 and also two university diplomas in Educational and Political Sciences in 1987 from the Free University Berlin. Since 1993, he has been active as President of the Gandhi Information Centre, Berlin (with a focus on research and education for nonviolence). Since 2021, he has held about 100 invited talks at colleges and universities in India, with a highlight being his 25-day lecture tour in September/October 2022, during which he was hosted as guest speaker by a myriad spectrum of academic institutions across 9 states.