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SAGES: Imagining India

Exploratory Essay

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Gandhi, Tagore and Nationalism

In examining the subtle differences between Mohandas Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore and their views on nationalism it is apparent that Gandhi and Tagore did not always agree on how nationalism should have been practiced during India’s struggle for independence. Nationalism was a catalyst in the fight against the British, but the true sense of nationalism was felt differently for every person who experienced it. Nationalism was used in many ways to create the idea of unity in India and conversely, to create the idea of separation from Britain. However, two leading figures in India’s independence movement did not see nationalism at the same level. They each had their own idea of the importance of nationalism and the kind of nationalism that was needed at the time of the revolution. In more ways than not Gandhi and Tagore had the same moral values and ideas for India. Both deeply loved their country and wanted independence from the oppressing British, but how they perceived the nationalism that was spreading through India during the independence movement was conflicting. Gandhi believed that a strong sense of nationalism was essential and necessary for achieving peace, unity, and independence. Though, like Tagore, he was conscious of the destructive powers of nationalism. He also advocated an India free of British modernity. Tagore, on the other hand, was incredibly wary of nationalism, expressing that its consequences were not always good even if the intent was good at first. He also accepted aspects of modernity that Gandhi did not.

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, also known as Mahatma Gandhi, thought of nationalism as a means to peace and a way to unify the nation. Gandhi had very specific notions about how nationalism was supposed to be used and implemented. First and foremost he believed all people should follow *satyagraha* or the soul-force. This, he said, should guide everyone in all that they do. *Satyagraha* is essentially Gandhi’s moral rulebook, and from it stems his notion of nonviolence. Gandhi could not be a hypocrite and physically fight those who massacred and killed Indians; it was a matter of morality and principle that he was non-violent. As a principle Gandhi also stated that his problem was not with the British people itself, but the immoral standards that they upheld. Gandhi upheld his morals and virtues in all aspects of his life.

“Finally, Gandhi fulfills, perhaps more than any major political figure of this century, the relationship that is drawn between ideology and charismatic leadership.” (Gandhi: Ideology and Authority, pp. 378)

Gandhi, as well as Tagore, practiced and preached their ideas. This was a reason Gandhi was able to mobilize the masses, because of his ability to connect with them as well as portray an example of how they should act.

In addition, Gandhi was very adamant in his views against modernity. He wanted to preserve the tradition of India which was why he lived without luxury. He believed that modernity, or in his words “civilization”, was a corruption of tradition and that it was symbolic of the British way of life. If this modern materialism had corrupted the British, it could just as easily corrupt Indians. This is another reason Gandhi connected with the people, because of his blatant rejection of all things British or materialistic.

Of course, Gandhi was not free of criticism. People claim that there are contradicting and blatant problems with his main ideals. For example, his views on modernity and tradition can appear contradictory.

“…but it is also India where there are hundreds of child widows, where two-year old babies are married, where twelve-year old girls are mothers and housewives, where women practice polyandry, where the practice of Niyog obtains, where, in the name of religion, girls dedicate themselves to prostitution, and where, in the name of religion, sheep and goats are killed.” (Hind Swaraj, pp.70-71)

In this quote Gandhi is questioning himself, attempting to prove himself right in his idea that Indian tradition is moral and virtuous. All these terrible things that are inflicted on the people of India by their culture and society are not part of tradition, he says. Tradition is consistent with *satyagraha*, according to Gandhi, so these happenings are flaws of their society that must be changed, but that does not necessarily mean that change is equivalent to modernization. Gandhi believed nationalism should be consistent with *satyagraha* as well, and exemplified his thoughts in his non-violent actions.

Rabindranath Tagore, unlike Gandhi, believed nationalism was a dangerous driving force. In his novel, The Home and the World he shows his views on nationalism through his characters Sandip, Nikhil and Bimala. Tagore based Nikhil’s character on his own ideals and beliefs. Nikhil sees things in a different light than his opposing character Sandip, who is a radical nationalist fighting for Indian independence in the Swadeshi movement. Ultimately, he showed that although nationalism could be noble and virtuous, it was easily corrupted and could become radical and prejudice very quickly. Tagore equated independence with freedom and he believed that nationalism constricted freedom; especially freedom of thought. Because nationalism is such a strong force, those who are taken away by it do not even realize that they are not free to form their own opinions; they simply believe that the radical nationalist ideas are their own. This is essentially what happens to Bimala in Tagore’s novel until she finally realizes the danger of the kind of nationalism she is feeding and supporting. Of course, Gandhi does not support this radical nationalism either and is against “mobocracy”, but at the same time he believes that his virtuous nationalism can triumph over the wild and dangerous kind.

Tagore also believed that obsessive love for one’s country leads to ethnocentricism that encourages pretentiousness and the idea of being superior.

“It will, however, be difficult to explain to Bimala today that Sandip’s love of country is but a different phase of his covetous self-love.” (The Home and the World, pp. 43)

In this quote said by Nikhil, Tagore makes it clear that there are different ways in which people can love their country. Tagore believes that there can be virtuous nationalism, but that it is too easily corrupted by the more popular and exciting radical nationalism.

“What I really feel is this, that those who cannot find food for their enthusiasm in a knowledge of their country as it actually is, or those who cannot love men just because they are men – who needs must shout and deify their country in order to keep up their excitement – these love excitement more than their country.” (The Home and the World, pp.42)

Tagore believed it was too easy for men to fall into the trap of excitement and to get carried away with popular sentiments of violence, which at times are much easier to feel than those of non-violence.

Tagore, unlike Gandhi, did not oppose modernity. Instead he embraced it. He believed that traditionalism held India back and that there were aspects of western society that could help India in the long-run. This is a reason that Tagore had opposition. People often said that he was too closely associated with the British and that his plight was not the same as the majority of Indians because the British respected him and treated him as an equal. This problem was not the same for Gandhi. Although Gandhi had ties to the British, he was distinctly separate from them. He acted like a common man and rejected glorification, and for this reason could easily connect with the masses. Tagore discredited the claims against him by saying that the fight for independence was not against the British people and that he did not ask or really care for their respect. He also did not want glorification, like Gandhi. However Tagore seemed to be part of an elite class of intellectuals, so it was harder for him to connect with the masses. Towards the end of his life Tagore began to express his negative feelings towards the British more, because of their continued presence in India. He renounced his knighthood, gaining support from the people of India.

Underneath their ideas about nationalism both Gandhi and Tagore had underlying similarities. They both had a strong sense of responsibility to their nation, but acknowledged the fact that they both had a higher responsibility to justice. Though different in the way they thought of nationalism, both Tagore and Gandhi realized that unification was necessary. They did not want the people of their country to be ignorant and just blindly follow the fleeting passions of radicals. They wanted independence for India to be different than all the fights for independence across the world. Both Gandhi and Tagore had unique views on how to practice and implement nationalism. Gandhi believed that nationalism was a stepping stone to a larger kind of personal identity: internationalism. And Tagore believed that nationalism could not exist without corruption and to a certain extent radicalism. Their ideas revolutionized the revolution in India, but for India they *both* wanted the struggle for independence to be just as moral and *right* as the ultimate result.