Was the caste system a backwards tradition from the past?

Gandhi dogmatically opposed modernity. He believed that scientific progress was a corruption of tradition and culture and that it led to materialism and the emergence of superficial ideals. He wanted India to be independent and self-sufficient, which is why he encouraged people to sew their own clothing. He believed that those who are self-sufficient do not indulge. Gandhi often used his divine beliefs as justification of his morals, something very traditional and culturally centered. He believed only some aspects of religion, such as the caste system, were wrong, but not religion itself. Gandhi did not believe in a timeline of progression in which the West was ahead of the East. A nation can be strong without having industrial and scientific advancements, and that it was Gandhi is aiming to prove with the Indian revolution. For Gandhi, history was not a representation of Truth. History was merely what happened. He defined as Truth as absolute, or unchanging. This means that it is completely unaffected by what happened in the past, therefore history is irrelevant.

Nehru, with a completely different perspective than Gandhi, was not opposed to modernity at all and even encouraged it. He believed the ideas of scientific progress allowed for achievements that would better social, political and economic aspects of India. He knew that industrialization was necessary for India, and that to flourish India needed to be interdependent with other nations. Unlike Gandhi, Nehru did not like involving God in his visions; he advocated secularism far more than Gandhi. He believed that religion was used as justification for practices that were backward and caused injustices, such as rigid social structures, and conflict among people. He thought that modernity was vital for India but excesses of the progress would lead to faults, such as imperialism and social, economic and political inequality. Nehru believed that history could be used to define Truth. He believed in the scientific method that questioned and tested everything. History provided “empirically verifiable truths” and it is the quality of science that strives to discover and apply these truths.

Ultimately, Nehru’s beliefs were based on his political virtues and Gandhi’s were based on his moral virtues. The difference being that Nehru’s ideals were more practical and applicable, and even though Gandhi’s ideals were for the betterment of society, they were too idealistic. Nehru reconciled Gandhi’s views of the ideal Truth with the reality of the state of the world. Together, the duo seemed unbeatable; Gandhi had the power to influence, inspire, and vitalize the population of India using his moral convictions and Nehru had the power to apply his political virtues to create a state based on the principles freedom and equality.

Gandhi, Tagore and Nationalism

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.

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.

Through these three characters Tagore shows how radical nationalism is irrational, violent, and hypocritical. He also shows how this radical nationalism overshadows and devours moral and virtuous nationalism.

When we are first introduced to Nikhil, his integrity and liberalism are definitely pronounced. Later you learn about Nikhil’s subtle fight for his country; how Nikhil does not believe that violence and prejudice is the way to eradicate the British. Tagore clearly believes that Nikhil’s actions show what true or righteous nationalism is. Nikhil is noble and has integrity in all that he does regardless of whether it benefits the British (according to Sandip) or benefits India.

The astounding thing about Tagore’s novel is the fact that it was written well before India gained its independence. It foreshadowed the violence and radicalism that caused so much tragedy in the 1940s before and after India gained independence. In the end it is clear that Tagore believes that there can be nationalism that is free from violence and prejudice, but that it can only exist if the radical nationalism does not. He believes that radical nationalism is too strong a force to be taken down by small means and that ultimately it can lead to nothing good.