

TRUTH IS INVIOABLE?

## Gandhiji on Tagore Nittopriyo Ghose

A Bengali periodical, *Nillohit*, printed in a special Tagore number, July 2009-June 2010, a memoir by a man who knew much but wrote very little, Radharaman Mitra (1897-1992). More about him later, but for now, let us just mention that he was a mentor of Samar Sen (1916-1987) and contributed Rs 100 when Sen founded his paper, *Frontier*, in 1968. A translation of the brief memoir is given below.

The incident occurred in 1925. I don't remember the month. Perhaps in the beginning of the year, I was then residing at the Sabarmati Satyagrahasram of Mahatma Gandhi. I went there deciding to live there the rest of my life. There used to be prayers, both in the mornings and evenings. After prayers Mahatmaji used to speak a few words. The morning prayers used to be held very early and not many people could attend. But many people from outside thronged at the evening prayers. One evening there was a large crowd and there were many from outside. The prayer was over. Gandhiji had started his speech. I was somewhat absent-minded in the beginning. I was startled when I heard Gandhiji speaking at the top of his voice. Gandhiji was a man of quiet, calm nature. He used to speak very slowly. That day I saw him very excited. His voice was unnaturally shrill. With rapt attention I heard him saying, "Rabindranath is spoiling some rich men's children. He is teaching them dance, music and play-acting. What has he done for the country?" The people in the meeting were stunned.

A day or two later, as far as I remember, 'Bombay Chronicle', the daily newspaper of Bombay published a report by "Our Own Correspondent" quoting Gandhiji verbatim what he said about Rabindranath. The secretaries of Gandhiji showed him the report. Gandhiji said, "This correspondent must be from the other side of the river, Ahmedabad. Get hold of him and bring him here."

After two days the secretaries brought a Muslim gentleman aged about fifty and presented him before Gandhiji at the prayer meeting. Gandhiji showed him the report of the 'Bombay Chronicle' and asked him, "Have you written this report?" The Muslim gentleman said, "Yes, I've written this". Gandhiji got angry and asked him, "Did you tell me that you were a newspaper reporter?" He said, "No, I didn't. I didn't because this prayer meeting in your asram is open to all. As far as I know, there is no instruction here that a newspaper reporter will have to identify himself that he is a newspaper reporter." Gandhiji said, "You've done a great wrong thing. You should have identified yourself. And you have committed a greater wrong by publishing what you have heard here. You must write in your paper that it was not proper on your part and you must apologize in writing". The Muslim gentleman said, "I'll ask for apology a hundred times, I'll put my nose on the ground in front of everybody if you can prove that I've twisted a tiny bit of what you've said or I misquoted you". Gandhiji did not controvert any of his words but went on insisting a number of times that the reporter must write in his paper that he was sorry, that he had done a wrong thing and he must apologize. And the reporter was firm

on his stand. After an exchange of demands and retorts for a while, the gentleman got annoyed and left the meeting.

Silence hung over the meeting. The asramites were struck speechless. I could not resist myself and ran up to him. I asked him, "Bapuji, what have you done? The reporter was entirely right. You could show him no regulation that a newspaper reporter would have to declare in the prayer meeting that he was reporter. Neither could you tell him that his report was incorrect, that he had written what you had not said. But you told him umpteen times that he had committed a grave sin and that he would have to state in his own paper that he was sorry and apologize in writing."

After this I asked him, "Suppose he had identified himself as a newspaper reporter. What would you have done then?" Gandhiji replied without losing a second in his thought, "In that case I would not have said what I said about Rabindranath." I was dumbfounded. Gandhiji then went on explaining to me, "Truth is inviolable, but it has to be said keeping in view of the place, time and the person you are talking to". "The common people", I said, "in the society are selfish and opportunist and behave like that. But you are a high idealist whom everybody considers an avatar of Truth. Such conduct is not expected of you." I added, "I can cite one poor Brahmin of our country who used to speak the Truth at all times and all circumstances. He would not have taken into account the time or place or the person spoken to". "Who was he?", asked Gandhiji. I told him "Iswarchandra Vidyasagar". Gandhiji raised his hands folded over the head as a gesture of obeisance and said, "He was a god. I am a small man".

Radharaman Mitra did not elaborate further. The incident he narrated must have occurred in latter part of 1925 and not in the earlier part. Gandhiji was full of warmth towards Tagore in the middle of 1925. He was travelling extensively in Bengal in the earlier months and stayed at Santiniketan in June 1925. This was what he had written in *Nabajiban* on June 7, 1925.

'And is it one temptation that Bengal holds for me? There are many. How I can do without going to Santiniketan? I write these notes on a silence day. The inmates of Santiniketan fill me with peace supreme. The girls sing sweet songs. I have talked to the poet for hours on end to my heart's content. I have understood him better, rather I would say he has begun to understand me better... There are also devotees of the charkha in Santiniketan. Some ply it regularly and some occasionally. Most of them use khadi. I hope that in this world-famous institution charkha will find a better place'.

Gandhi was entirely mistaken. Tagore was never taken in by Gandhi's concept of Non-cooperation. Gandhi launched his Non-cooperation movement in 1921 when Tagore was abroad. Full of misgivings about the outcome of the movement and totally unconvinced of the principle of Non-cooperation, Tagore was writing letters to C F Andrews and three of these letters were carried by *The Modern Review* (MR), in May 1921. Gandhi tried to counter the arguments in *Young India* (YI) in June. Tagore fiercely attacked the movement in a public lecture and the lecture, "The Call of Truth", was carried by the MR. This was all in August of 1921 and in September Gandhi came to Calcutta to explain to Tagore the political and moral nature of his movement. Gandhi went back and the YI carried on 13 October 1921 his essay to defend himself trying in the process to appease Tagore by calling him *The Great Sentinel*. But that was all in 1921. Gandhi was in jail during 1922 and 1924 and Tagore refrained from any public polemics on the subject of the charkha. When Gandhi was released Tagore invited him

to Santiniketan and the pleasant visit did take place. But Gandhi failed to understand the civility shown to him by Tagore during discussions on the charkha and thought that he was able to convert Tagore to his ideas on Swaraj and charkha. Tagore's irony in his two essays *The Cult of the Charkha* and *Striving for Swaraj*, both published in the MR of September, 1925 stung Gandhi and he took time in meeting the criticism. The YI carried Gandhi's rejoinder, *The Poet and the Charkha* in November 1925 and *The Poet and the Wheel* in March 1926. Gandhi wrote that he was late to reply because of his other heavy engagements. It is possible that his outburst against Tagore, as described by Radharaman Mitra, occurred during this intervening period, October 1925 and March 1926.

A bit more about Radharaman. He had a good academic career but gave up his MA studies at the call of Gandhi's Non-cooperation and took up a teaching job at Etwa in the then united Provinces. He founded the Etwa District Congress Committee and came to be known as the Gandhi of Etwa. He was imprisoned for a year and after release joined Gandhi at Sabarmati. Disillusioned with Gandhi and his ideology, he left Sabarmati in 1926. He came back to Calcutta and joined a Calcutta Corporation School and founded the Calcutta Corporation Teachers Association. He was active as a trade union leader, organized several strikes. In 1929 he was implicated in the famous Meerut Conspiracy case by which the colonial government sought to crush the communist movement in India. He was incarcerated for four years. He made friends with communist leaders in the prison, studied Marx and was a life-long believer in Marxism but did not join India's Communist Party. Radharaman came to know Arunkumar Sen, a professor of history and a Left-leaning Ideologue. Soon Radharaman became a family friend of Arun who eventually turned into a Subhas Chandra Bose follower. He worked in the Calcutta Corporation Stores and became a CPI member in 1943. An associate of Dharani Goswami, a communist leader, he was involved with many CPI Front organizations. In 1952 he ceased to be an active political worker. He was possibly the only character whom Samar Sen, the son of Arun, mentioned with unreserved admiration in his memoir, *Babu Brittanta*. Radharaman today is principally known as the chronicler of the Calcutta roads and river banks, challenging famous linguists like Sunitikumar Chatterjee and Sukumar Sen for their what Radharaman thought,atrocious etymological derivation of the name of Calcutta. He never published any political writing. The *Nillohit* piece was a singular exception, retrieved from his papers.