

“From Tagore & Gandhi to 1984!” A Tale of Duplicity

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PART II

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Part I appeared in October 2009 issue. [Emphasis is ours. - Ed. SR]

THE REMARKABLE INNER COHERENCE that the Faith of Guru Nanak gave to the society constituted by his followers is sought to be lightly dismissed by the author. His explanation for the phenomena is simply that the external pressure did “**solidify the Sikhs into a compact nation**”. Competent observers have known that the Sikhs were already a well knit nation at the time of the ministry of the Fifth Guru. Amongst others, it is testified to by ‘Mohsin Fani’ and Emperor Jahangir. The external pressure, of which Tagore talks, came as a consequence of recognition of this fact and because of the fears it inspired in the ruling quarters. He also brushes aside the role of spiritual training of two centuries. **Sikhi was a promising movement leading one and all towards exciting new spiritual and worldly goals.** It evolved a brand new and remarkably sensitive human. All those whose innate nature was stirred by higher spiritual ideals flocked to it enthusiastically. Turning its back on worldly responsibility and action here has never been its inclination. Yet it has held fast to the many faceted splendours of the spirit and has always maintained right relationship between the physical and the supra-physical. It was this balance which allowed it to release immense vitality, all embracing creativity in the lives of the people who came under its influence. **For the first time in many centuries, it demonstrated to the world that Godward turned mind and soul is beyond caste and is filled with love for all creation.** To deny that it was not the basic concern of any of the Gurus is to be guilty of deliberate distortion.

The most generous view of the above appreciation is that, in spite of his thorough familiarity with the teachings of Gita, Tagore did not comprehend the original Sikh concept of *miri-piri*, and was genuinely misled into making a wrong assessment. For those not willing to stretch generosity to the limit of gullibility, it is obvious that the motive for the wrong assessment is to be read in the context of the broad undertaking - the deeper import of Tagore’s article, and of concepts evolved by him.

The history of Buddhism in India should have sufficed to make Tagore aware of the truth of the Sikh doctrine: that evil has to be resisted, and that it is the duty of the God-oriented persons to resist it. Buddhism did not resist; and it was violently wiped out, mainly by just a few thousand armed followers of Adi Shankracharya. Thus was lost the greatest opportunity of by-passing the medieval ages. Had Buddhism defended itself, India, and perhaps most of the world, would have descended straight into the modern age at least two thousand years earlier. The consequence of not defending people’s culture by the people who own it up should also have been apparent to Tagore who had the Buddhist example in India before him. The ochre robes were erased from this land by a handful of sword and staff wielding hordes of a young militant. Tagore’s most prominent, self-ordained pacifist acolyte Gandhi would, according to Wavel, find bloodbath justified as an alternative to accommodating Muslims as equal partners in political power in united India. Finding no pacifist answer to

Hitler's violence, Gandhi recommended England to surrender and was so frustrated that he contemplated suicide. In its four confrontations with China and Pakistan since 1947, no follower of Gandhi, Aurobindo or Tagore recommended non-violent resistance even for the sake of form. To this extent is ineffectiveness the peaceful pursuits in the face of deliberate violence. Tagore went on to hold that pacifism was the ideal human conduct under all circumstances. It is inconceivable that he did not realise the philosophically untenable nature of pacifism or that violence, under certain circumstances, was a more compassionate action than non-violence. This proposition has been quite clear to prophets, incarnations, the Ten Gurus and the Khalsa. Its validity is axiomatic to common man.

Some later-day Bengali historians of the Sikhs followed a lead or two given by Tagore and looked upon the Guru's act as 'Transformation of Sikhism.' Tagore's assessment influenced M. K. Gandhi who, throwing all propriety and good sense to the winds, went to the extent of calling Guru Gobind Singh a "misguided patriot." It was but a small step from Tagore to Bengali historians to M. K. Gandhi, and thereafter to Arnold Toynbee. He too felt that Sikhi stood spiritually dwarfed because of having taken measures to defend itself. He forgot that Jesus had asked his followers to 'sell their cloaks and to purchase swords'. Ignoring the overturning of the moneychangers' tables must have come easily to a person who even failed to appreciate that Jesus accepted crucifixion for social and spiritual causes. **Most of the key phrases used by Toynbee are lifted straight from Tagore.** He writes this in a chapter in which he has discussed 'Kabirism and Sikhism', consciously bracketing the two together. Had he convincingly shown that since no self defence was organised by Kabirpanthis, and consequently they were able to make it to the pinnacle of spiritual glory, he would have been taken seriously. The fact, however, is that Kabirism, which did not take up the sword, made no spiritual or material progress, and is hardly heard of as a living force in history. Like a small stream in the middle of the Sahara, it has almost vanished from history without leaving a trace. **It had nothing to show for not taking a vow to resist tyranny and injustice.** The same would be true of several scores of sects which made a short appearance within the pale of Hinduism, did not defend themselves, or their spiritual heritage according to the requirement of the age, became redundant and having nothing to justify their existence, vanished into the darkness of the past leaving a few imperceptible footprints on the sands of time.

Arnold Toynbee, at least, could have been misled. Maybe, at the back of his mind was the history of Papacy which he has discussed in his monumental *Study of History*. It could have been possible for him to generalise against violence on examining the conduct of Popes generally from the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries. Much can also be said to show how that is irrelevant to the basic moral proposition embodied in the concept of *mir-piri* and, in a large measure, to even the history of the Church. Personal ambitions and failings of Popes and Emperors also introduced distortions which may be the relevant causes of the seamier side noticed by Toynbee. He has himself referred to such factors, as "the hardness of men's hearts and the perversity of their ambitions". In that context, his drawing attention to, another variable, namely, the "dangerous game of fighting force with force", which is justifiable within limits which may be divined by intuition but which are perhaps impossible to define — " may not be as relevant as he thinks it is. **He also ignored the spiritual training (the defining of limits') of two centuries which preceded the creation of the Khalsa.** One is still left wondering whether the Church would have at all survived had Hildebrand (Later Gregory VII), on being appointed guardian, not taken militant measures to protect the Papal treasury and the Pope's person.

Surely, Tagore must have also understood that the dynamic impact that Sikhi had on history is primarily due to its exposition of the concept of *miri-piri*. This particularly involved resistance against injustice and oppression. If God is Just and is Truth, as no doubt S/He is, how can a believer remain indifferent to strife involving truth and justice? The ultimate aim of a spiritually awake Sikh has been laid down to see the establishment of a just order, free of coercion. Those eminently Christian powers that fought the two world wars will testify to this truth in spite of doubt and confusion possessing some enlightened individuals.

It is not surprising, in view of the predetermined character of the writing and the general peevishness of disposition exhibited by Tagore towards the Sikh Panth in general, that he rarely has a word of praise for the Tenth Guru. The only good thing about the Guru, according to him, is: **'at blow from Guru Govind the already weakened caste system tumbled down to the earth'**. It is possible that this is a left-handed compliment designed as a reminder to the Hindu orthodoxy that the Guru created a new society totally outside the Hindu caste system. Message to the Hindu masses was clear. It was that the Khalsa Panth, associated by him particularly with Guru Gobind Singh, was not to be the model for the new society sought to be built up in decolonised India. Hindudom never forgave Sikhism for the revolutionary denunciation of every decadent principle of the old culture.

For the same reason, the 'People's Republic led by the Khalsa' is looked down upon. The Hindu ideal polity was much different. Consequently, Ranjit Singh comes in for a lot of unfair and even mean criticism. He "firmly tied the Sikhs together by stratagem, force and policy" and "merely stands as an example of restless cunning and sleepless perseverance in self-aggrandisement". His striving "enabled Jat peasants to grow great." That appears to be Ranjit Singh's greatest crime! He reversed the caste order. Fear of the Jat peasantry coming to political power was not displayed by Tagore for the first time. Hill Rajas, the contemporaries of the Guru, were his worthy predecessors. Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi were their worthy successors! Many heinous crimes have been justified by the modern Indian state on the pretext of preventing Jats from garnering political influence in the Punjab. Tagore further castigates Ranjit Singh: "there was no limit to his greed and no restraint on his voluptuous sensuality." His legacy was "disunion, mutual distress, lawlessness".

All evidence is to the contrary. The Punjab stood united for the first time in many centuries. Recognition of Ranjit Singh's efforts - and later those of the Panj Kaunsali (Council of Five elected democratically) to unite all Indians and to expel the foreign occupiers - 'to throw the English leopard into the sea' - as Ranjit Singh put it in a letter to the Muslim King of Hyderabad, to the Maratha potentates and the only Hindu King (the 'incarnation of Vishnu') of Nepal. **This is a chapter which deserved mention in golden letters in the history of this country.** Just before the commencement of the Anglo-Sikh Wars, the British Governor General and Commander-in-Chief had agreed that the Sikh democratic example was 'too dangerous' for the existence of foreign occupiers and must be eliminated. This became the final cause of the immoral annexation of the Punjab, the territory belonging to an ally that the British Indian Empire had solemnly promised to protect during the minority of Dalip Singh. This all too significant predicament of the East India Company arouses no curiosity in Tagore. It means nothing to him that these were the first rays of the sun of democracy in the sub-continent. He 'knows' that Ranjit Singh was a 'despot'.

Peace prevailed in the Sikh Commonwealth, and all enlightened travellers have testified to it. **For the first time in a millennium, the Sikhs and Hindus along with the Muslims had an equally effective share in the governance of this part of the country.** Even a cursory investigation would have revealed to Tagore that the Sikh Commonwealth was the most just state India had ever seen. It reawakened the Indian mind to free activity for the first time in centuries. The Muslims were more satisfied then, than Sikhs, Christians and Muslims are now in the modern, secular, democratic India.

The Sikhs can be proud that jumping straight from the medieval Mughal torture dens on to the throne of the Punjab as conquerors, they did not contemplate revenge even for a moment. **This reflects the true grandeur of Sikhism and the greatness of Ranjit Singh's character. This remarkably responsible behaviour was most becoming of a people spiritually trained by the Ten Masters for over two centuries.** Toynbee has referred to the universal reaction in other similar cases. Considering the character of Egyptian insurrection against the Ptolemaic regime, of Jewish insurrection against the Seleucid, the Roman policy of Hellenization and several dozen other such cases the world over, Toynbee observes: "When we come to examine how these victims of injustice reacted to their fate, we shall not be surprised to find that one of their reactions was an explosion of savagery which surpassed in violence the cold-blooded cruelty of their oppressors and exploiters".(p.433) **The chivalrous behaviour of the Khalsa in protecting the women of the vanquished and never resorting to killing beyond the field of battle, is indeed remarkable. Echoes of this exceptional Sikh behaviour can still be heard at the battle fields of 1971 war for Bangladesh.**

When the hour of the sword came for Ranjit Singh's Sikh Commonwealth, Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus stood united against the British to defend it. The fight that they gave was remarkable in many ways (the British lived through 'a night on which the fate of India trembled in a balance' observed one Governor General, and "another such victory will shake the British Empire to its very foundations", said the other Governor General at the end of war with the Punjab). **By many well-informed historians Ranjit Singh is hailed as the most humane potentate in the history of the East. Lord Acton praised him as a sovereign who never took life.** He was completely free of cruelty, even in relation to animals and wild beasts. He designated his Empire as 'Peoples' Commonwealth led by the Khalsa' (**Sarkar Khalsa Jio**). His qualities of the head and heart are almost universally admired. **Ignoring all this, Tagore chooses to dig the dirt of attributed personal failings.** Personal morality is not relevant to an assessment of the ruler's governance. Particularly the sexual morality, after all, is no more than the self-imposed limitation and social conduct assumed by the individual in the interest of regulating social life rationally and temperately. It may not be proper to condemn an individual for personal conduct, particularly if it has not attracted wide social disapproval.

Tagore's worst was yet to come. Basing himself on the above subjective analysis, he glides effortlessly to the pre-determined conclusions. The Sikh movement had to be pushed out of the reckoning, and he thought he had presented enough material for doing so. He knew that the audience addressed by him would easily gloss over all irrationalities and some 'terminological in-exactitudes' with some gross distortions thrown in for the desired effect. It was all in the cause of Hindu Dharma. Those with sectarian devotions have often resorted to gross distortion and outright lies to promote their favourite version of the 'truth.'

Tagore comes to the conclusion that the Sikhs "sank down for ever". The emphasis is on 'for ever'. This has come at a time when the Sikhs were putting up one of the stiffest battles

against the British occupiers of India. The Singh Sabha Movement, with substantial political content and great expectations in that field, had just put the Sikh house in order. Guran Ditta Kumar and Taraknath had brought home the first rumblings of Ghadar Rebellion. From the Maratha Lodge at Calcutta, the place identified by the Criminal Investigation Department as the meeting place of revolutionaries, and a place where both these persons connected with the Ghadar used to stay. The first tidings must have been broadcast to the anyone who mattered in Calcutta - and India. The effect of periodicals *Sansar*, *Free Hindustan*, *Swadesh Sewak* and *Vande Mataram* on the Sikhs in Canada and America was known to the British Indian Government. Ghadar activists like Bhag Singh, a veteran of Tenth Bengal Lancer Regiment, had burnt his 'honourable discharge' certificate in 1909 as that reminded him of British slavery. Bhai Bhagwan Singh, connected with militant activity in the Punjab in 1907, had been arrested twice in Hong Kong for spreading disaffection amongst the Sikh troops stationed there. Babbar Akalis were poised to jump on the stage of history in a decade or so. **The Kuka Sikhs had been ascending the gallows in the cause of freedom every now and then since 1850.** Ever since the birth of their faith, the Sikhs have never stopped making history. The time at which Tagore's article appeared, revolutionaries had come to have a hold on the imagination of young Bengalis also. The inspiration for Tagore's present article was clearly the dread, the strong apprehension that the Sikhs, who had beaten the English in every battle of the Anglo-Sikh Wars, were preparing to intervene in history of the British colonialism in a big way; Tagore's objective clearly was to prevent such an intervention.

Most perfidious was Tagore's assertion that "there is no force of progress amongst the Sikhs - they have not added any new wealth to the world's stock of knowledge, faith or action".

Let us test the veracity of his statement at random, by recalling the Sikh contribution to world of faith and action. He missed the originality of Sikh mysticism which, for the first time, emphasised the human form as vehicle of God's Will and rescued human personality from the ideal of complete annihilation or final dissipation of it, as hitherto believed to be the basis of *mukti* or *nirvana*. The God of *Sikhi* has chosen to reveal Himself on His own volition and takes interest in the development of history through the Godward inclined men and women. The ideal person of *Sikhi* is one who is earnestly seeking universal welfare as the vehicle for God's Will.

Sikhi for ever put an end to the concept of a 'sectarian God' by promoting the doctrine of 'essentially unknowable nature of Ultimate Reality'. A people who believe this do not go about waging wars of religion (as are taking place even in the twenty-first century) for they accept that all faiths are equally valid. Had Jews, Muslims and Christians believed that, there would have been no Crusades, and nothing of much that can be seen looming on the not too distant horizon today. *Sikhi* goes one step beyond the monotheism of these two most monotheistic of faiths by asserting the totally unequivocal Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man. **It takes the world miles ahead of the illogical 'Jew and Gentile, Christian and Heathen, Muslim and Kafir' syndromes. It widens the boundaries of faiths and creates ample meeting grounds. Most remarkable of all, it eliminates the desirability of conversion. Thus ridding religion of so much of the irreligious, faith-based acrimony. When there is only one God, the fountainhead of all creation, of all faiths, of all actions, of all history and of all nations, whom do you convert to what, and what for?** Its implication legitimately extended to abandoning belief in 'God's own chosen people'. In spite of its philosophical soundness, this doctrine has not

as yet found universal acceptance amongst even monotheistic faiths. With *Sikhi* it is five centuries old already. The qualitative change in peoples' psyche in consequence of the world having become a Global Village, and the tremendous advance in rationality refreshingly bathed in the new dawn of the twenty-first century, has not brought people nearer to accepting it. **Christianity and Islam are not prepared to see the futility of conversion even today when interfaith dialogue is so intense.** Religious wars, in continuation of the Crusades are being waged in several theatres. Under alien influence, even Hinduism of late has been seeking conversions and re-conversions although it has been doctrinally opposed to both.

Yet this is the original, integral part of the Sikh faith and has been consistently believed in and practised ever since its inception. It is considered remarkable that during the the Sikh rule in about a dozen Sikh states, together adding up to an empire bigger than that of Ashoka, there were never any forcible conversions or even conversions by inducement or fraud, as are being resorted to even today by the Roman Catholics. This was in spite of the background of gruesome medieval persecutions in which, at least three times, it was officially declared that the Sikhs had been completely wiped out, 'the name of a Sicque was not heard of in the Mughal dominion'. The Sikhs are so totally devoid of religion based hatred that during the last disturbed decade, although literally at thousands of places, Hindu mobs killed individual Sikhs, at no place was ever a single Hindu killed by a Sikh mob. **Every Sikh considers this to be the glory of Sikhism.** So it is. Where else has Tagore noticed all this? Why did these not appear to him to be the profoundest contributions, holding immense potential for world peace and harmony?

Had Tagore delved deep into Sikh doctrines, he would have noticed that Sikhi for the first time accepted that the human female is capable of highest spiritual experience and has the innate capacity to give guidance in the field of religion. Guru Amardas appointed women to manage religious institutions and they continue to head seminaries and Gurdwaras even today. The Sikh belief that addresses God also as a female is still to be appreciated.

Since he was working for a sectarian purpose and for a desired effect, Tagore did not notice the equally benign concept of *miri-piri* which is another Sikh gift to the world social and political order. It did away with asceticism and monasticism for ever and went ahead to promote the fixation of social, spiritual and mundane responsibility on each and every believer of any faith. **The remarkable vision of the Guru which made him embrace martyrdom for the freedom of faith went totally unnoticed by Tagore.** Its implication, that the Order of the Khalsa is the defender of freedom of worship of all people everywhere, was also lost on him. The astonishingly original nature of the Order of the Khalsa has been highlighted even by Toynbee. If we probe further into the political field, we will find a dozen fresh concepts which owe their origin to the teachings of the Gurus.



(End of Part II)