

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

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PART I

Editor's Preface

To Sikhs across India, Rabindranath Tagore is best known for his evocative, epic poetry, celebrating (a) “Bandi Bir” (Baba Banda Singh Bahadur)’s valour, and (b) the martyrdom of Bhai Taru Singh, both episodes relating to the first quarter of 18th century. Indeed the latter poem is so embedded in the Bengali psyche that a well known present day scholar recently felt outraged at a Sikh youth shaving his kesh in a Bhowanipore, Kolkata saloon, a viciously un-Sikh-like practice rampant in Punjab.

The essential Tagore is also known the world over as the legendary poet of the Orient who won, for Asia, its first Nobel Prize in 1911. However, history was not Tagore's forte. So when his historical essay, comparing Guru Gobind Singhji with Shivaji appeared, over a hundred years ago, it was obvious that he had been ‘influenced’ by Sir Jadunath Sarkar whose bias was unconcealed. Tagore's conclusion that Guru Gobind Singh departed from the ‘peaceloving philosophy’ of Guru Nanak is evidently as facile as it is meretricious.

We publish the essay by Sr. Gurtej Singh without prejudice.

- Ed. SR.

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ALMOST A CENTURY AGO, Ramananda Chatterjee's prestigious monthly *The Modern Review*, [Calcutta, April 1911] published an essay (starting page 334) entitled, “**The Rise and Fall of the Sikh Power.**” Ostensibly, it had been written long before by Rabinderanath Tagore (May 7, 1861-August 7, 1941) in *Bangla*, and translated into English by the noted historian Sir Jadunath Sarkar. A cursory reading of it will convince anyone that it is an extremely bizarre piece of history. The following aspects of that article are noteworthy:

- 1) Regardless of the title, the essay is actually a studied comparison of Tagore's understanding of both the Sikh and the Maratha situations.
- 2) The ‘Fall’ is taken to be a fact, in relation to the Sikhs, even before setting out to examine the key issues. If language and approach are an indication, it is this proposition which the author appears to have set out to *establish*, and not merely to *examine*. The aim clearly is to establish the superior nature of Maratha ethos and to support the imaginary ‘phenomenal Rise’ of those people.
- 3) It is significant that Tagore (to whom no significant work of history is attributed) chose to express an opinion on the subject of history. The irreverent would prefer to believe that Jadunath Sarkar wrote - and the poet translated it into *Bangla*, and then owned responsibility for writing it. Sir Jadunath Sarkar's deep-rooted bias against the Sikhs is a fact that would lend credence to this theory. Jadunathbabu would not lend his name to the motivated and prompted production as it is sufficient to discredit a historian having even an elementary acquaintance with the Sikh and Maratha history.
- 4) Though the essay is so obviously defective that it does not deserve even the passing attention of a student of Sikh history, yet - ostensibly - one of the well established

historians chose to translate it for the English reading public. He also gives his comments in conformity with the author's theme to lend it a respectability of sorts. His support to the distorting of Sikh history was considered valuable. Later, this historian was dubbed as a 'Knight of the British Empire' for his services.

- 5) Tagore appears to have owned 'the project' with a definite aim to promote a skewed view of Sikh culture and history. He chose to use, somewhat superficial knowledge of Sikh history for the ultimate purpose. Yet its influence on later Hindu (particularly) Bengali leaders and political leaders of India (in particular, M. K. Gandhi) was significant. Almost all his concepts of Sikh history were accepted by them as axiomatic, and can be detected in the mental make up of those who ordered the attack on the Darbar Sahib in 1984. Gandhi would, henceforth, accept Rabindranath Tagore as his 'divine teacher' ("*Gurudev*").
- 6) Incredible as it may seem, it was Tagore who, for the first time, felt that abolition of 'personal' Guruship in Sikhism was a 'retrogressive step'. It involved the bestowing of Guruship on the '*Guru Granth* and the Khalsa Panth' through its true democratic representatives, the 'Five Beloved Ones'. Most scholars have commented favourably on this unique happening in the history of world faiths. It is the culmination of transferring divinity to people - a proposition which Guru Nanak had initiated during his lifetime. Though many historians coming after Tagore accepted just a few of his formulations, they felt compelled to ignore this one, in particular.
- 7) The Sikh people, after having been reawakened by the new religious ferment of the Singh Sabha, were on the verge of initiating militant activity. In the same year, Tagore composed his '*Jana Gana*' (now the national anthem of India) to welcome King George V on the occasion of his visit to India. In this song, throwing all self-respect and national pride to the winds, he eulogises the head of the Colonial power as the '**god of India's destiny**'. Within less than two years, Tagore was selected for the Nobel Prize for Literature. **These circumstances are extremely significant and have to be treated as interconnected. It gave a measure of prestige to his formulations against militancy which must be appreciated in the background of the well known English dread of Western style militant movement in India.**

From the above, it is possible to suggest that the project undertaken by Tagore was perhaps suggested to him by the circumstances then prevailing in India. It is more likely that the inspiration came from some organisation or authority, or maybe, a multiplicity of authorities, which accepted him as an ideologue or hoped to be able to project him as one. The distinction about to be bestowed on him in the near future was perhaps a part of the calculation.

There is scope for the existence of a perspective in which Rabindranath Tagore was a part of the myth built up to serve the design of a Colonial power. It was hoping to enjoy perfect peace during the remaining period of its stay in India. Although a colonial power, it entertained the dream of exiting at will with a large measure of subject support it hoped to depart honourably. Responsible de-colonisation required the projection of India as a country fit for freedom. To keep the coming 'freedom struggle' within defined and safe limits, it was necessary to project a self-restrained intellectual overflowing with enthusiasm for colonial masters as the ideologue of the New Dawn. The spinning of the myth around Tagore was calculated to serve both purposes equally well. In a special way, Tagore was idolized as a representative of the Hindu thought. This was necessary since the bulk of the Indian

population subscribed to that faith and their attitude to the rapidly developing political scenario was of the greatest importance. It would determine the character and direction of the coming 'stage-managed' India's struggle for freedom.

Before the advent of the twentieth century, two aspects of the colonial rule had become very clear: **firstly**, that the British imperialism had already started on a course which would fructify in its being extinguished on some not-very-distant date. The process of decolonisation had come out of the domain of mere pious assertions and had entered the 'melting pot' stage. **Secondly**, since it was certain that the British rule would wither away and the process would finally conform to democratic norms prevalent in England. It was apparent that the Hindus had the immense advantage of numbers which would eventually decide who would enjoy political power after the British had wound up their affairs in India. This necessitated the development of a 'role model society' which would make it possible for the much fragmented Hindu people to put up a semblance of a struggle for freedom and a united front for capturing power when the opportunity came.

Any person who has studied the behaviour of Indians under the imperial Mughals and the British powers, would find very few honourable persons who had consciously maintained their dignity and had not succumbed to the temptation of 'harvesting' slavery for base material advantage. Looking back, it is again possible that the Sikhs, Rajputs and Marathas were the only people who could be developed into role models for the future Indian society. Between the Marathas and Rajputs, there was nothing much to choose. It was easy to reject the Rajputs who, with few exceptions, had cooperated fully with Mughal imperialism deemed particularly despicable by the Hindu psyche overloaded with hatred of Muslims. Geographically, they were a people on the periphery. Such regions were distrusted by imperial powers and had traditionally enjoyed a degree of autonomy conferred upon them by strategic location, and by the inhospitable, barren terrain in the case of Rajputs. Both Marathas and Rajputs supported a culture based on deeply ingrained inequality, and had nothing but a plethora of meaningless ritualism to uphold in the name of religion. Further, both of them had held out much promise in history and both had never delivered. Both the political societies had parochial, feudalistic, racial undertones and connotations. Both had most of their history behind them and it did not seem to square up with the spirit of the New Age, which was thrusting itself with considerable force on the slowly awakening sub-continent. Spirit of equality, freedom, universal approach, the single-mindedness to oppose oppression everywhere, involving the willingness to make sacrifices for the wellbeing of the common man, the tendency to build a just society based on fairness and scientific temperament were some of the requirements of the future. But these had never been manifested in either of the two political societies before us.

Most of the desirable traits and concepts required as 'building blocks' of the new society were present in abundance in *Sikhi* (the Sikh faith) and the Sikh movement. It was capable of becoming the nucleus of a vibrant potent nation without the necessity to weave myths around it for respectable presentation. For perceptible reasons, (which need not be discussed here again), it was thought undesirable to project Sikhs and *Sikhi* as model for the free Indian society after decolonisation. The main consideration must have been that though *Sikhi* preserved all that was best in the religious traditions the Indian sub-continent, it nevertheless sought to build a society outside the Vedic social sphere and - notably - outside the Hindu system of caste. Secondly, it repudiated the religious authority of the Vedas and claimed to be a sovereign dispensation. ***Sikhi* embodied the 'revealed' explanation of the sacred and the profane, of the relationship between the two states.**

It was organised around a Revealed Text embodying the expression of spiritual truth exclusively relevant to the new tradition. Obviously, it could not be ignored for these reasons. That would leave it in the reckoning for a real invigorating and transforming renaissance when, and if, it came.

This could upset many an applecart. The larger design that Hindudom had reserved for itself was to revert to the concepts prevalent in remote antiquity. So Sikhi had to be considered and condemned as unsuitable for new India. In a significant comment on the innate nature of those deeply engrossed in the mundane world, the fifth Nanak says, the 'donkey loves to roll in the dust, and is ever enthusiastic about washing off the sandalwood paste if applied to it.' **So Sikhi had to be written off from the minds of the Bengalis of the age who were increasingly succumbing to the charms of Japuji, the transforming recitation of scripture at the Amritsar and the indomitable spirit of the Khalsa.**

The project was to depict *Sikhi* as an 'inadequate religion' unable to sustain a new society, and another society was to be projected as one quite qualified to lead India into the future. For this it was necessary to divest, at least on paper, the Sikh society of known traits and to thrust these attributes elsewhere where they did not exist. Clearly, any historian would be reluctant to make a statement against the existing and well known facts. In these circumstances, a poet with the proverbial poetic licence, was selected for the job. With just a little more than usual degree of credulity, the task could be accomplished by mere assertion; regardless of facts. Aided by the general intellectual apathy of the Sikhs, this was achieved ever so smoothly. Ignoring the strongly manifested spiritual message of *Sikhi*, of which resistance to tyranny was one integral part, he asserted that Sikhi had no universal appeal and was the religion of mere soldiers. According to such a distorted vision, initially, 'the Sikh faith was 'rooted in Hinduism', but somewhere down the line it disassociated from it and its spirituality, and suffered further diminution by embracing political concerns'. Consequently, 'it dwarfed itself and became alienated from its past. A long unbroken tradition of spiritual and social striving was necessary for a society to be projected as a model.' Tagore found this wanting in the Sikh society where it existed in abundance and discovered it, in ample measure, amongst the Marathas - who had none of it.

Tagore made a distinction between the prophetic vision of Guru Nanak and that of the later Gurus, particularly that of Guru Gobind Singh. Of Nanak he admitted that his "heart had gained emancipation from the bondage of such a narrow Pauranic religion." It is implied that he released a "force that was making for liberty", and he initiated "spiritual unity" of the Sikh people, which was presumably nurtured by the succeeding eight Gurus. **He completely ignored the basic Sikh doctrine of unity of Godhead and Guruship.** There was no Guru who was anyone other than Nanak. The absolute uniformity of thought was the condition of succession. The truth revealed to the first Guru by God, the original and the ultimate Guru was the insurance against distortion by any human agency. In matter of every minute detail actions of the succeeding Gurus had to conform to written pronouncements of the realised truth made by Guru Nanak.

The author stuck to drawing distinction between the Gurus in spite of recognising the universal import of Guru Gobind Singh's message. Preaching of religion, "the great truth proclaimed by Nanak" is projected to be his sole aim.

Contrary to all known facts, it is implied by the Poet that Guru Nanak 'did not mean to found a religion or a society based on the truth revealed by him.' Nanak's own utterances,

and his act of appointing a successor, are ignored. The existence of a coherent, perceptible spiritual society during the time of Nanak himself is testified to by contemporaries including Guru Angad and Guru Amar Das. Bhai Gurdas, a near contemporary, holds the same views. Tagore found it necessary to doubt the continuity of the Sikh spiritual tradition which, on the contrary, is remarkably coherent. **This he achieved by projecting the prophetic visions of Gurus Nanak and Gobind Singh to be distinct.** Tagore was not the first one to do that. To a great extent, this was the stance of Aurangzeb as reflected in his own recorded utterances about the Guru and the Khalsa. This interpretation is totally contrary to the established Sikh belief preached in *Guru Granth Sahib*, or the utterances of the succeeding Gurus, and the instructions given to his successor by Guru Nanak. It is contrary to facts of authentic Sikh history depicted in some versions of the '*Gurbilas*' and '*Panth Prakash*'. Independent observation, all Sikh literature and all expositions of *Gurbani* support the proposition that all **Ten Gurus were one in spirit and preached the same doctrine.** Without doubt it was the same sovereign, independent doctrine that all the Gurus preached.

No matter how contrary to facts his assertions were, Tagore insisted upon using them to heap adverse criticism on Guru Gobind Singh. The Tenth Guru was the target. It is he who is supposed to have "checked the work of preaching the religion — and made it his life's mission to form the Sikhs into a strong body". It is disapproved of with harsh words: "this is not the work of a religious teacher". Incredible as it may seem, Tagore presumed to know more about the God-ordained mission than the prophet of the faith and the illustrious successor of nine Guru-prophets knew. According to Tagore, under the Tenth Guru the "chief aim was changed, to the public defence of their own community from destruction and oppression". Tagore failed to understand that the Guru simply re-affirmed - and acted upon - the universal principles for all societies of which 'resistance to tyranny' was the cardinal aspect. Tagore's implication is that the societies which do not defend themselves, and get destroyed as a result of lack of effort, of necessity uphold 'a higher form of religion' worthy of emulation!

In an incredibly harsh language, Tagore asserts that the Tenth Guru had "an intense longing to be liberated from earthly enemies", and a "blind desire to serve the temporary need of the sect." He forgets that the Guru had no such desire, and that he was a Teacher charged with the task of teaching the eternally valid *righteous path*. **He is also the one who made manifest the Order of the Khalsa that has universal import.** Tagore asserts that he imparted "martial qualities" to the Sikhs and, consequently, "here their progress ended"! Since he "left the seat of the preaching Guru vacant" and caused the great truth to be "confined in a book." **Tagore was apparently unaware that the holy Word was always hailed as the 'Guru' since the time of Guru Nanak, and that the Scripture had been compiled by the Fifth Guru,** Guru Gobind Singh simply accorded formal recognition to the already prevalent doctrine by declaring - in the very last days of his Guruship - that henceforth the Granth would reign eternally as the Guru. Maligning the most altruistic people in all history, Tagore continues, "-- the Sikhs very rapidly became greedy and uncontrollable". The remarkable restraint, the religious and defensive tradition exhibiting wonderful discipline, and the festival of altruistic activity exhibited by the Sikhs, particularly during seventy years after the creation of the Khalsa, has been universally recognised, but Tagore would not recognize this linkage.

There were occasions, (like the attack on Kasur), when five Sikh Misls would march to battle just to rescue a single (Hindu) girl from the clutches of depraved

rulers. The rescue of twenty-two thousand Maratha women, after the Battle of Panipat in 1761 CE, from the hordes of the victorious Ahmed Shah Abdali, is a chivalrous act which has no parallel in history. Unfortunately, it was not Tagore's brief to study facts.

The creation of the Khalsa, hailed by the world at large, too is misunderstood by him: "thus he called in the human energy of the Sikhs from all other sides, and made it flow in a particular direction only". Even Arnold Toynbee, who mostly laps up what was served to him by Tagore, had to admit that **the Order of the Khalsa was the result of the most creative act in history, having a parallel only in the Communist Party of Lenin that came some two centuries later.** The other example given by him does not withstand closer scrutiny, as brought out by Sirdar Kapur Singh. This is what J. D. Cunningham (*History of the Sikhs*) had said of Guru Gobind Singh, in relation to creation of the Khalsa: **"he effectively roused the dormant energies of a vanquished people, and filled them with a lofty, although fitful longing for a social freedom and national ascendancy, the proper adjuncts of that purity of worship which had been preached by Nanak. Gobind (Singh) saw what was yet vital, and he illuminated it with Promethean fire. A living spirit possesses the whole Sikh people, and the impress of Gobind (Singh) has not only elevated and altered the constitution of their minds but has operated materially and given amplitude to their physical frames. The features and external form of a whole people have been modified."**

There was a tremendous spurt in spiritual activity immediately after the creation of the Khalsa. For the first time, India saw the spectacle of ordinary religious people owning up their beliefs - to the extent of becoming martyrs for the Faith. For the first time in history, the word '*martyr*' was Indianised. It was at least a seven-decade long festive celebration of the highest spiritual elevation of the human spirit. It was one long 'victory march' of the ethically developed human being. Every Sikh man and woman of the age was a fine example of the spiritual heights obtainable by a God-oriented individual. Bota Singh and Taru Singh were made of common clay, but the life sprinkled into their head was not vanquished by 'fearful odds' in the battlefield, or in the medieval Mughal torture houses - where severance of head was routinely accepted as an alternative to abandoning commitment to serve higher spiritual forces, the ultimate Truth. These are the pages of Sikh history of which every religious person, regardless of belonging to any other religion or denomination, can be truly proud.

Tagore failed to appreciate that the life-affirming Sikh movement, true to Indian tradition, began as a profound spiritual thought expressed through Sikh religion. **Till today, it has retained that characteristic. It helped in unshackling the Soul of Man, and brought within his reach limitless possibilities for self-realisation and the realisation of highest spiritual truths.** Fighting for righteousness and opposing oppression was just one of the avenues of spiritual advancement open to an enlightened people. This was the injunction of Guru Nanak who preached: 'it is the privilege of the brave to die fighting for a cause approved of by God.'

That was the beginning of the Sikh doctrine of *Miri-Piri* (essential unity of the mundane and spiritual) and struggle for a cause in furtherance of values which are attributes of God. According to Bhai Gurdas and Bhai Mani Singh, Adit Soini, a Khatri belonging to the fighting classes, was advised by Guru Arjun **to entertain no hatred, but to 'wield the sword for the cause of Dharma for the love of the people, and in order to remove oppression on the helpless'**. To a professional soldier the same Guru had said, 'remain steadfast in

your duty to fight (for righteousness) but entertain no violence in your heart'. Can anyone hold that this preaching is, in any manner, different from the essence of Srimad Bhagwat Gita? The above statements of the 'non-fighting' Gurus lay down the conditions under which wielding the sword has always been sanctioned as a part of the Sikh spiritual training and achievement of *summum bonum*. Guru Gobind Singh introduced no new doctrine, and in no way deviated from the spiritual purpose of his Guruship. All the Sikh Gurus scrupulously avoided taking up the sword for worldly gains, even though prophets of the Old Testament, companions of Jesus, Prophet Muhammad, and avatars like Rama and Krishna, had done it much before them.

Tagore forgot that all battles of the Guru were fought in self-defence, never in aggression. **The doctrine of the use of force for defence, and for a righteous cause, was basic to Sikh belief from the time of Guru Nanak, and has to be considered a higher stage of spiritual development.** The right of self-defence is recognised by all jurisprudence, ancient, medieval and modern. To believe that it constitutes a fall to any degree is to betray gross ignorance of human affairs. Had Tagore been more perceptive he could have arrived at a proposition contrary to the one he asserted. He could have recalled the plight of millions of Hindus who did not resist and were reduced to abject slavery. They led the lives of a subject people for more than a thousand years. The Noble Buddha's followers were eliminated from India thanks to the perversion that *ahimsa* (non-violence) was *paramdharam* (the paramount religion). In disregard of the universal nature of the Guru's struggle, Tagore states: that "the wars waged by Guru Govind were merely wars of the Sikh sect. He did not extend his aim beyond his own followers". The aim of Guru Gobind Singh had always been the elimination of **oppression in any form on any human being anywhere**. This was the reason why the Guru could elicit willing support from Muslim saints, and even Mughal soldiers like General Sayid Khan. Tagore's 'poetic licence' served him well.

(End of Part I)
[To be concluded]