Appendix – IX

THE CONGRESS

Rabindra Nath Tagor’s views on the crucial political jingoism in the heart of the great nationalist political organization namely the Indian National Congress during the late 1930s.

(This article by Tagore published in July 1939 in Modern Review is a critique of the developments that had overtaken the Congress; the original Bengali version, in the form of a letter to the poet Amiya Chakraborty was published in Pravasee)

I sit down to write to you in a perturbed state of mind.

There was a time, not so very long ago, when the mind of the great mass of our countrymen was desert-like, its unfertile expanse divided into isolated sections between which all commerce was obstructed, resulting for India, in a succession of poverty-sticken epochs. All of a sudden came the rise into power of the new Congress organisation, a wide-branching tree that held out large promise of future fruit. Surprising was the change it wrought in the mass mind, as it learnt to hope, forgot to fear, and ceased to shrink from the very idea of casting off its bonds. What had seemed a while ago to be beyond the bounds of the possible was no longer felt to be unattainable. The feebleness of spirit that dreaded to desire was at length cured. And this stupendous change was due to the unbounded faith in India’s destiny of one single man – a fact which already shows signs here and there, of fading from public recollection.

Of course I know that, however dependent the new Congress regime may be on the personality of its founder, and great though that personality undoubtedly is, it will nevertheless be necessary from time to enlarge its scope and improve its working. But too much of a hurry to disturb the adaptation to its preset circumstances which has grown with the growth of the Congress, may break up its very foundation. For it has to be admitted that no other genius seems to have arisen amongst us who is competent to bring about a radical change in it without damage to its organic cohesion. That is why I think that this vast field of endeavour, where the different forces of the country may meet and join hands, needs must continue to be developed, for the present, under the guidance of the Mahatma who gave it birth.
As you know, I have never been a blind follower of tradition, that is to say, I have not believed that our national welfare could be made secure by fixing once for all some principle or method that was once found to be good, nor do I now feel it to be true that however great the Congress organisation may have grown, its aims and objects should be stereotyped for all time, rather do I devoutly wish that such a calamity may not befall it. At the same time, whenever I realize the immense value of this organisation as created by a great-souled Master, I cannot but be perturbed at the possible consequences of piecemeal attacks on it from the outside. Such reforms as are found to be necessary must come from within itself.

Many of us still remember the original National Congress that started political agitation in India. It made no attempt to look into, to awaken, the mind of the people, its appealing glances were all directed to the authorities above. What it called freedom lay in the lap of dependence on others; this was the obsession it could not get rid of. I need hardly remind you that I have hesitated to cry shame on the poverty of spirit of the begging and praying Salvation Army into which that Congress had resolved itself.

We all know whose was the magic wand that touched into life the deadly torpor into which the country had fallen, making it conscious of its own powers, proclaiming non-violence to be the true creed of the brave. Of this new life which Mahatma gave to India, the stage of initiation is not yet passed, and further advance along its way should still be under the guidance of the Master. Like Nandi who stood guard at the entrance to Shiva's hermitage I must raise my warning finger for all that the Mahatma has to teach may not yet have reached us. When the rigour of Shiva's meditation was untimely broken, a raging conflagration was the only result.

So far, for one side of the question. The other side also deserves anxious consideration. When the powers of the Congress had but begun to unfold, it had little to fear from within. Now it is at the height of its prestige; it has gained world-wide recognition; the doors of Government at which its predecessors of old had vainly knocked, are now hospitably open to it, even ready to show it honour. But Manu, the ancient law-giver has warned us to beware of honour. For where power rises into
eminence, toxins are created that eventually destroy it, -be it Imperialism or Fascism, have they not been generating the seeds of their own downfall? It may likewise be that the heat created by the growing power of the Congress is rising to an unhealthy temperature. The higher command who are at its helm are apt in moments of crisis, to lose their head, and cannot hold to a straight course. Have we not seen lapses in regarded to the vital matters of mutual courtesy and forbearance of constitutional procedure which had hitherto been sources of its strength, -lapses at the bottom of which lies pride of power?

The Christian scriptures have warned us how difficult it is for bloated prosperity to pass through the narrow gate of the Kingdom of Heaven. Freedom can be own only by putting forth the best in man, that is what I understand the teaching of the Mahatma to be. But those who have come together to control the field of our high endeavour- are their minds broadly tolerant, unswayed by personal bias? When they create ruptures by wounding one another is that for the sake of pure principle-is there no trace in it of the heat that is born of love power, pride of power? The cult of shakti that is gradually growing up within the Congress fold shows itself in its true colours when Mahatmaji’s followers find it in their hearts to proclaim him as the equal of Hitler and Mussolini. Can it be at all possible for those whose reverence goes out to these gatherers of victims for human sacrifice, properly to maintain the purity of the citadel of Truth build by the selfless ascetic whom they would follow? I have the highest respect for Jawaharlal, who is always ready to lead an assault against abuse of power by wealth or blind faith, or imperialistic politics. Of him I ask whether the keepers of the Congress stronghold have not on occasions shown dangerous signs of the intoxication of personal power? I have my own doubts, but at the same time I do not hide from myself the fact that my knowledge of political happenings is very insufficient. .....

To me it is evident that Mahatmaji, having mapped out a particular line along which he advises the country to travel on its way to freedom, is naturally on the alert to see that no disturbing factor be allowed to bring about a deviation from it. Having successfully steered the ship of Congress so far, his reluctance to let it be taken out of its appointed course cannot reasonably be construed as a desire to wield dictatorial power.
Men of genius would be unable to fulfill their destiny unless they had unbounded confidence in themselves, a confidence which they are wont to fortify by their faith in divine inspiration. In spite of occasional serious mistakes, Mahatmaji may claim to have had sufficient proof in his successes of his being on the right track and he is moreover, entitled to believe that none but himself can worthily complete the picture of national welfare which he has conceived and outlined. It may well be that he has many a further touch in mind with which it is to be perfected in due course. If these finishing touches are not given under his direction, with the patient attention and reverence due to the master from his followers, the picture as a whole may suffer. In these circumstances, say I, we need must rely for its completion on its creator, especially as it is still in the stage of unfinished growth.

Here I should confess that I do not always see eye to eye with Mahatmaji, by which I mean that had I been endowed with his force of character, my scheme of work would have been different. What that scheme is, I have indicated in some of my previous writings. But though I may have the imagination to conceive, I have not the power to carry out. Only a few men in the world have this power. And since our country has had the good fortune of giving birth to such a man, the way should be kept clear for his progress- I certainly would never think of impeding it. The time will doubtless come when Mahatmaji's errors and omissions will have to be made good; then will each one of us, according to his zeal and capacity have the opportunity of making his contribution. For the present, let the Congress proceed to the destination towards which it is heading. I will not say, like a blind follower, that there can be no other bourne beyond. Others there may be and are; but the time to take on other pilots will come when the first part of the journey is over.

I have referred to my own scheme. That was the outcome of my conviction that politics is but a part of the social system,- as is borne out by the history of every country. To be enamoured of some political system apart form its social foundation, will not do. Triumphal structures of different shapes and sizes raise their heads on the other side of the seas. We may be sure that none of them are built on foundations of sand. And when we set to work to imitate any super-structure that has
caught our fancy, we should not forget the necessity of fitting it to some adequate foundation in the depths of our own social mentality.

I have recently taken refuge on a scheduled hill-top, far from the scene of the recent political excitement, and after a long time I am getting the opportunity to survey both India and my own attitude with dispassion. I can see clearly that politics has to do with two different sets of forces, one may be called mechanical, the other spiritual. In these days of crisis Europe is pacing backwards and forwards between the two. Neither is easy to secure, or work with; both have their price, the proper application of both require long preparatory training. We who have been so long in subjection know what the impact of mechanised force is like, but we cannot even dream of bringing it under our own control. The utmost we can think of is to purchase the alliance of some other power by getting into its debt. But history has shown us that to cultivate this kind of unequal friendship is like digging a channel to give entry to the crocodile - resulting in a feast for the later at the expense of the digger.

There was a time when the issue of battle depended on personal bravery and physical strength. Now has come the day of weapons wrought by science which require a high degree of intellectual skill for their proper use. Any fight with those is unthinkable for us, with our untrained body and mind. This was realized form the very beginning of our political life, wherefore our former leaders were content with launching their fleet of petition, carrying paper-boats. But this reduced our politics to a mere game. Then arrived Mahatmaji with a solution for our utter lack of material equipment. Unflinching he came, with head held high, to prove that battle could be effectively waged against wrong without mechanical resources. He started experimental campaigns along different lines- and though in none of them can it be asserted that he has won through- he has extracted form his very defeats, lessons showing the way to ultimate victory. He has been busy ever since inculcating in the country the need of training in restraint and spiritual faith necessary to wield the weapons of non-violence.

It is comparatively easy to raise an army for violent warfare. A year’s drilling is sufficient to fit men to be sent to the seat of war, but to train the spirit in the
methods of non-violence takes more time. We have had enough of attempts to get

together a table of untrained enthusiasts. Such crowds may be used to break down the
work of rivals, but they cannot build up anything of value. They go to pieces when met
by determined counter-attack. Those nations of the world who are now in fighting trim,
rely for their strength of the education of masses of their people. The present age is the
age of the trained mind not of blustering muscle. And everywhere in the East to say
nothing of Japan, educational institutions have been made for the people at large. So long
as our masses remain bound to blind tradition it is hopeless for us to expect to make any
move forward. And so, after his discovery that an undisciplined mob is not a fit
instrument for non-violent work- Mahatma has cried a halt in his campaign of civil
disobedience, and turned his attention to mass education, so far, all is fairly clear.

But when I come to the contending political groups of the day with their
rival methods of political advancement, round which endless controversies are ragings, I
am beset with doubts and cannot see the issue clearly. My main difficulty in arriving at
any definite conclusion may be due to my very meager knowledge of what is actually
happening in the different political circles. I know that those who have the power can
make possible the seemingly impossible. Mahatma is one of those who have this power;
but it would be going too far to say that there is the only one, or that all he undertakes
must be successful. And if any other – powerful personality inspired with a different ideal
should arise- the later- in turn, will not stay his hands because of the doubts or protests of
others. It may even be that he will have to cut adrift from the main body and work alone
to form another organisation, of which it will take us time to appraise the proper value.
Should such a personality come forth from within the Congress, I would watch his
progress- and wish him success but from a distance. It would be beyond my capacity,
altogether out of my sphere of work to join hand with him in any way.

The responsibility would be so great, the effects so far-reaching, the
consequences so incalculable, that their burden could only be shouldered by one who has
the necessary degree of self-confidence.
Our scriptures tell us that the worship of *Ganesha*—the Lord of the Masses must come before all other worship. In the service of our country our first duty must be to work for the welfare of the mass of its people,—to make them healthy in body and mind, happy in spirit; to foster their self-respect, to bring beauty into their daily work— their daily life; to show them the way to strive together in mutual respect, for mutual welfare. So far as my limitations have permitted, I have been doing this for the last forty years or so. And when Mahatmaji’s call awakened he country, it was my fervent hope that he would rouse the powers of all sections of our people, in all their variety, to work in the different departments of national Endeavour. For it is my belief that a realisation of the country’s welfare means to believe in it, to know it in its fullness. Its true freedom would consist in gaining the fullest scope for its own obstructed powers.