

ETHICS AND POLITICS IN MODERN INDIA: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF MAHATMA GANDHI AND RABINDRANATH TAGORE

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Abstract. The paper provides a comparative study of Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore in order to analyse the ethical basis of politics in the contemporary Indian society. It states that in their thinking, ethics are not a marginal morality issue but a constitutive problem that determines the legitimacy of political power, authority and responsibility. Describing politics as an ethical discipline based on the truth, non-violence and disciplined mass action, Gandhi tries to rebuild the political life ethically, at the inside level. Tagore, in his turn, gives a humanistic analysis of the politics in which he insists on moral autonomy, or the cultural freedom and moral risks involved in nationalism and the mass mobilisation. As one reads, Gandhi and Tagore in conversation, one can see two different discourses of politics which are moved by the call to ethical action as opposed to ethical restraint which is the other discourse. The paper argues that their tension has not been completely resolved suggesting that moral life is weak in political affairs as well as provide critical resources that enable the re- conceptualization of ethics, power and legitimacy in India today with reference to Indian democracy.

Keywords: Ethics and Politics, Mahatma Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore, Indian Political Thought, Nationalism, Moral Authority.

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1. Introduction: Ethics as a Political Problem in Modern India

The question of ethics and politics has taken up a high but controversial place in contemporary Indian politics. In contrast to mainstream Western tradition in which ethics is frequently subservient to political realism, or exists as a restricted domain of the moral life of the individual, Indian philosophers at the end of the colonial world period began to view ethics as part of political life as such. The experience of the colonial modernity, which is characterised by the violence of the state, material exploitation, and the dislocation of morality caused by the industrial civilisation led to an urgent crisis of political legitimacy. Here ethics took not the form of an abstract code of morality but rather of a practical and philosophical question: in what way should power be used, resisted or modified and yet never recreate the forms of domination it is set against?

On this moral-political landscape, Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore stand out as a special case. They both were very incisive on the contemporary civilisation and its political institutions, but they brought out a very different response to the ethical issues of politics. He also tried to transform the very nature of politics as an ethical activity which he believed should be morally inseparable of means and ends and on which he based political struggle on the standards of self-control, non-violence, and truth (Gandhi, 2010). Tagore on the other hand took a long-term view on politics and focused on the moral superiority of individual conscience, cultural liberation and humanistic universalism over mass political mobilisation and nationalism (Tagore, 1917, 1931).

The available literature has generally studied Gandhi and Tagore separately or with nationalism versus anti-nationalism as the major guideline to their involvement. Such readings are important in showing a couple of significant points of their disagreement, yet they also run the risk of presenting a problem of their common concern which is the question of the ethical boundaries of political authority. Both philosophers had found that contemporary politics is subject to moral decay be it by way of violence, coercion, or the instrumentalization of human beings and both attempted to spell out ethical resources that could counter this tendency. Intellectual interaction between them, as Mukherji (2015) claims, was not a confrontation of personalities rather a life-long debate on truth, conscience, and responsibility in the political sphere. Nevertheless, in spite of this realisation, the systems of comparative analyses that methodically investigate their conceptions of politics, as ethical views, are quite primitive.

The theme of ethics discussed in this paper does not present it as a normative addition to politics, but as an arena of criticism with which one re-conceptualises politics itself. It

builds the arguments that Gandhi and Tagore put forward two different ethical grammars of politics in the contemporary India. Ethical politics described by Gandhi are based on the change of the political agent and the society as a whole through the recovering moral discipline and therefore, the mass action becomes morally responsible (Haksar, 2017; Skaria, 2011). In its turn, the ethical criticism by Tagore works through the issues of culture, aesthetics, and education and warns of the ethical threat of nationalism and the loss of human plurality in terms of its political abstraction (Collins, 2012; Chakrabarty, 2025).

The methodology of the study is a comparative and interpretive approach, which is based on close reading of the primary texts of Gandhi and Tagore and further supported by the high-impact secondary writing on the issue of contemporary thought in Indian politics. Instead of evaluating whether one of the thinkers can provide a better paradigm, the paper aims at elucidating how their various orientations to ethics can help shed light into perennial conflicts between morality, power and mass living. The fact that the Gandhi and Tagore have been placed in the same ethical problematic lends the paper to a better comprehension of contemporary Indian political thought and highlights the topicality of ethical critique in addressing the contemporary political emergencies of polarisation, instrumental politics and moral fatigue.

2. Conceptual Framework: Ethics and Politics in Indian Intellectual Traditions

Indian intellectual traditions of ethics have seldom been a primary or an external code of norm used in a national political life. Instead, it has traditionally been perceived as inherent to the authority, opposition, and mutual coexistence practises. Dharmas, duty, moderation and self-control are some concepts that defined political action not only in its effectiveness or sovereignty but in its righteousness and control of power. Such a connexion of ethics to political life was acute especially during colonial modernity, when alien institutions of the modern state had to face old moral vocabularies and created a profound ethical sovereign crisis (Chakrabarty & Pandey, 2023).

This crisis was aggravated by the colonial rule which made violence, bureaucratic abstraction and instrumental rationality normal aspects of governance (Gandhi, L., 2008). Politics were beginning to manifest more and more as the sphere of expediency as opposed to moral responsibility. The Indian political thinkers as reaction to this condition were not unanimous in denying modern politics, yet they doubted their ethical bases. These discussions had a decreased focus on the institutional design as such and rather on the ethical circumstances of how much power could be exercised without dehumanising. This is

what brought about a political issue on ethics: could politics still have anything moral to it, without it degenerating into coercion or romantic idealism?

It is against this backdrop that contemporary Indian political thought came up with several orientations of ethics towards politics. One of them attempted to rebuild the political action in a moral way by saying that the legitimacy should be founded on ethical behaviours but not only results. The other faction also considered ethical withdrawal as a part of politics and privileged the practise of culture, education, and spiritual activities as centres of moral revival when formal politics was deemed to be corrupt in their ethics. These orientations are not contradictory, but it produces different interpretations of the agency, responsibility and collective life. According to Pföstl (2014), the dilemma between ethical commitment and political effectiveness is the vein of several Gandhi-centred and post-Gandhian discussions.

The ethical criticism of politics in India was also influenced by doubt of the contemporary nation-state. Monopoly of power to violence and commitment was a challenge to the moral customs in the state whose principles emphasised conscience and interpersonal responsibility. Such scepticism did not imply political quietism even in all its forms but gave rise instead to other imaginaries of political life in which the power at its limits was underlined and the moral cost of collective abstraction magnified. These issues are the cause of future discussions of nationalism and moral duty in contemporary Indian philosophy (Chakrabarty, 2006; Devji, 2012).

It is this wider conceptual landscape into which Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore should be placed. The two hereditary ethical traditions that were sceptical of unchecked authority, but they were reworked in reaction to colonial modernity. Gandhi made ethics a political cause, where ethical self-transformation was the qualification to a lawful collective action (Haksar, 2017; Skaria, 2011). In his turn, Tagore predicted the ethical freedom of choice and humanistic universality, warning about the destruction of morality by the establishment of political collectivism and the cult in the name of nationalism (Collins, 2012; Chakrabarty, 2025).

This intellectual framework does not take ethics as a decorative aspect of politics but an ethnical check, which operates to restrain and redefine politics. Foreseeing ethics as a part of political reasoning, as it will be proposed in Indian intellectual traditions, the framework helps to make a comparative reading of Gandhi and Tagore that would not be based on contrasting biographical data but with the underlying questions of the responsibility of power, responsibility, and the role of the moral agent.

3. Mahatma Gandhi: Ethical Politics and Moral Authority

Mahatma Gandhi politics shows one of the most continuing efforts of contemporary political theory in the attempt to reshape politics as an ethically constructive domain and not just a strategic or institutional field. To Gandhi the crisis of modern politics was not only the domination by colonialists but also the moral reasoning behind the modern civilisation that gave precedence to power, speed and material growth over restraint and moral duty. Politics such as it was now conducted created a divide between the means and the end and justified violence by an appeal to either necessity or progress. Gandhi did not give up politics but exposed it to an intense ethical training based on the truth, non-violence, and self- transformation (Gandhi, 2010).

The inseparability of means and ends is the major aspect of Gandhian ethical politics. Gandhi was opposed to the ideas of consequentialist arguments that were used to rationalise unethical acts in the name of allegedly good objectives. According to him, political action could not bring justice using unjust methods because this already contained the ethical nature of the ends produced by these methods. This principle made ethics a political and a civic norm and left ethics as a personal virtue. The concept of truth (satya) did not simply represent an ideal, but also a way of political behaviour, which demanded transparency, uniformity, and readiness to bear misery instead of causing it. Non-violence (ahimsa) also was not passive resistance, but an active moral power that could reveal injustice without duly repeating it at the same time (Haksar, 2017).

The moral authority also followed a unique teaching of moral authority that Gandhi based his ethical politics. In contrast to the present-day sovereign authority, which is legitimised by the law or force, Gandhian authority was based on moral authority. The ability of the political actor to achieve obedience rested in the moral self-discipline, restraint and willingness to criticism to the self. This realisation is why Gandhi was insisting on the individual activities such as simplicity, bodily discipline, self-regulation forcefully not as an individual asceticism but the political training. Other publications like *Key to Health* expose the belief of Gandhi that ethical politics demanded an integrated self whereby the bodily habits, the state of mind and the moral purpose were unified (Gandhi, 1948). Personal moral ineptitude, he thought, could not fail to corrupt politics.

This moral sense enlightened Gandhi on his attack against the contemporary state and industrial civilisation. In *Hind swaraj*, Gandhi depicted the contemporary politics as something that cannot exist without a civilisation where exploitation, centralisation and moral irresponsibility were the order of things (Gandhi, 2010). State, and especially in his view

its dependence on violence and upon abstraction in the form of bureaucracy, turned out to be, in his judgement, morally debilitating, at least when in the hands of rulers seemingly of good will. His scepticism was no longer a form of anarchism but a quest to find political forms that reduced the use of coercion and enhanced moral agency. Renewing work -village uplift, sanitation, education and self-reliance was, therefore, not subservient to politics but its moral basis (Gandhi, 1941).

This paramount contribution to Gandhi was the operationalisation of this ethical vision which was called Satyagraha. Satyagraha was not a simple protest strategy and rather a scrupulous ethical approach that aimed at changing both the resister and the opponent. It required bravery, patience and disposition to endure and thus it subjected the ethical boundaries of political struggle. According to Bilgrami (2002), this is the philosophical novelty of Gandhi that ethics are a necessary condition of political effectiveness but not its by-product. The aspect of political legitimacy in this case was not based on victory but adhering to moral values.

This radical implication of this ethical politics has been highlighted by scholars. Skaria (2011) shows the way Gandhi tried to replace the republican sovereignty with the moral self-rule, and Devji (2012) interprets Gandhi as defining against the lure of violence that characterises modern mass politics. In these senses, Gandhi is seen as an ethical authority to the extent that it amounted to perpetual disengagement with political absolutism. It aimed at maintaining politics as a realm of conscience, dissent and of moral uncertainty instead of closing it by force.

In a nutshell, the Gandhian ethical politics transformed political action into a moral experiment in a continuous manner. By his insistence that politics should be answerable to morality in each and every level, Gandhi also uprooted conventional belief regarding power, legitimacy and action in concert. His thinking provides the view of politics based on the idea of the emergence of moral authority not through the command of the institution but as the result of the ethical integrity and the role of ethics becomes not as the external obstacle to politics but the very condition of its possibility.

4. Rabindranath Tagore: Humanism, Ethics, and the Critique of Political Nationalism

The political work of Rabindranath Tagore is characterised by a strong ethical uncertainty over the ethical implications of contemporary political structures, especially nationalism and nation-state with its focus. Tagore, unlike Gandhi, was not trying to revolutionise

politics, using the unique organisation of the mass political action, ethical reconstruction ones. He did it indirectly, though, confronting the moral boundaries of politics with the help of culture, education and humanistic philosophy. To Tagore, the key threat of the modern politics was its predisposition to pass the individual moral freedom to the collective abstractions, and thus eliminate all conscience, plurality, and ethical responsibility (Tagore, 1917).

The criticism of nationalism by Tagore forms the basis of his moralistic politics. He believes the country, as a political and ideology form, changed the living societies into power-driven, competitive, and conformity-driven mechanical organisations in Nationalism. In this context, nationalism was not only the method of anti-colonialism struggle, but the moral pathology that stimulated obedience instead of judgement and loyalty instead of ethical consideration (Tagore, 1917). Tagore never denied the existence of political domination but he bequeathed that it was dangerous to replicate the moral logic of the modern nation-state since it may lead to the replacement of one domination by another. Ethics, on his part, required one to be alert to such replacements.

At the heart of Tagore ethical vision is humanistic universalism that is based on the moral autonomy of the individual. In *The Religion of Man*, Tagore developed a relational and not an institutional ethics based on relating humanity. He argued that moral life should develop with sympathy, creativity and seeing the other as an end and not as a means (Tagore, 1931). This ethical humanism did not get down to politics. It argued that without a radical loss of ethics moral responsiveness could no longer be assigned to groups like the nation or the state. It was ethically questionable therefore, to have political systems that required unquestioning allegiance no matter how emancipating they claimed to be.

The notion of freedom was also influenced by Tagore because he was sceptical about politics. To him, it was less to have political liberty at the price of intellectual and moral freedom. Mass mobilisation, he felt, impregnated with a spirit of nationalism and fostering emotional extravagance and simplest morals, was dangerous. This issue is what explains why he has been fighting to have education and culture as one of his ethical practises. Models like *Visva-Bharat* were envisioned to be areas where the ethics of self-cultivation, inter-cultural dialogue and intense reflection may develop out of the coercive logics of the state (Chakrabarty, 2025). Education according to Tagore was not a merely pre-political education but a moral substitute of its extravagance.

This ethical withdrawal has been pointed out by scholars as having a political aspect with meaning. Collins (2012) sees the thinking of Tagore as a politics of friendship where

formal relations come before political loyalty and moderating effects of the violence of collective identity. Atkinson (1983) also compares moral sensibility of Tagore with pragmatism as exhibited by Gandhi as Tagore is always worried about the moral price of political action. Instead of providing a programme of resistance, Tagore provided a critique of political desire per se revealing the way there is a sacrifice of ethical ideals in the name of collective power.

The moral criticism contained in Tagore was not a political apathy. The driving force behind his interventions was that he was frightened that politics that are dislodged because of lack of ethics will empty human life. According to Chakrabarty and Pandey (2023), the political philosophy of Tagore serves as an intermediary form in that he was neither statist nor anarchic, nor nationalist or an anti-social. It is more appropriately viewed as an ethical speed bump which halts the dynamism of political absolutism. Tagore tried to maintain the spaces of moral imagination and creativity by foregrounding culture so that spaces of ethical freedom could be guaranteed through politics if it did not work.

However, Tagore has contributed to the modern Indian political thought, in this way, not so much in the field of institution design as in the field of the ethical critique. He transformed politics by exposing its blindness morality which cannot be absorbed completely to political constructs without being distorted. His humanistic morality therefore plays the role of correcting the political nationalism by reminding modern politics of the precarious moral states, on which authentic liberality relies.

5. Gandhi and Tagore in Dialogue: Convergences and Divergences

Intellectual engagement of Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore lies in one of the most fruitful ethical discussions of the Indian political thought of the contemporary era. Their interactions are usually represented as a contrast between the pragmatist and the poet or the political action and the withdrawal of culture. These are suggestive characterizations that blindly obscure the underlying philosophical landscape that their dialogue took place. It was the alternative not just to the policy of anti-colonial resistance, but also to the ethical significance of politics per se, its boundaries, suffocation, and the moral chances in situations of modernity.

Gandhi and Tagore were deeply anxious at the convergence level on the subject of modern civilisation and the political institutions. Both of them diagnosed modern politics as morally corrupt, interested in instrumentality, coercion and dehumanising human beings as a collection of abstractions. Neither of them believed in the modern nation-state, an

amoral instrument of liberation. Similar to the opposition of nationalism by Gandhi who sees it as a mechanised, dehumanising system, Tagore criticises the modern civilisation as devoid of moral value and violent (Gandhi, 2010; Tagore, 1917). This criticism, which is common in both of them, is an expression of a common moral drive: the call of politics being subservient to moral life, not to be subsumed by it.

However, their differences are no less important and shed some light on two ethically oriented worldviews on politics. The solution to the moral crisis of politics offered by Gandhi was to radicalise the political action. He aimed at internalising ethics into the activities practised by the masses by means of disciplined activities like satyagraha, constructive work and moral restraint. To redeem politics, according to Gandhi, it was possible to make ethical behaviour the order of all the levels of collective action (Haksar, 2017). Tagore, however, did not believe that his mass politics might ever be in a position to maintain this kind of ethical vigilance. This was due to a worry by him that in the name of collective mobilisation, individual conscience would invariably be thinned down and morality conformity promoted (Tagore, 1931).

This separation can specifically be perceived in the concept of agency that they hold different views on. Gandhi laid stress upon moral self-reformation, where a political activity was premised on individuals who have gone through ethical self-discipline, unleashing moral politics upon themselves. The ethic power to him came about in social action based on the suffering and discipline. Tagore on the other hand accorded moral autonomy more than collective discipline. He was worried that the moral imperatives of the mass politics would surpass individual opinion and creativity. Atkinson (1983) observes that Tagore did not intend to reject political mobilisation but based his rejection on the principle that he did not want to take away the freedom based on ethics so as to promote political urgency.

These opposite orientations are further explained by their disagreement on nationalism. Gandhi viewed nationalism as an instrument of anti-colonial struggle that could as well be morally contingent, i.e. risky, but possibly redeemed through non-violence and moral discipline. Tagore even viewed nationalism as morally questionable in its form which promoted exclusion, aggression, and subjugation of humanity to political identity (Tagore, 1917). Whereas Gandhi aimed at advancing nationalism with a moral aim, Tagore was interested in opposing the moral temptations of the same. This distinction is the point of decisive difference between the ethical reconstruction and the ethical refusal in the current politics.

Even though there are these differences, their discussion is not to be interpreted as the mutually exclusive options. Mukherji (2015) points out that Gandhi and Tagore were dedicated to a certain ethical project although they differed with regard to the political consequences of the same. The ethical politics that was practised by Gandhi ran the risk of moral overconfidence because it assumed that ethical integrity could be maintained in mass action through disciplined action in groups. The ethical humanism of Tagore, in its turn, was prone to political ineffectiveness by providing a moral commentary and lacking a plan of action to attack structural wickedness. They both revealed the weaknesses of one another.

The discussion between them therefore brings forth a perennial dilemma of egalitarian political thought how a moral life is frail yet demands a political act. Gandhi preempted responsibility in action whereby the morality had to dictate politics to the detriment of efficiency. Tagore anticipated responsibility not confined to action but gave a premonition of the side effects that politics usually comes with compromising ethics and thus dehumanising humanity (Collins, 2012). Collectively, they define a continuum of ethical reactions to power and not an opposition between two.

Comparatively, the Gandhi- Tagore dialogue adds more substance in the current thinking of Indian politics by denying facile compromises between ethics and politics. It points out that moral intention does not ensure the implementation of ethical politics and withdrawal does not guarantee it. Rather it is a controversial practise due to historical circumstances, types of power and the boundaries of human judgement. This paper brings to prominence the role of ethics as an answer to political issues but in a different way that is, as an important horizon in which politics has to be measured and bound against through reading Gandhi and Tagore in conversation.

6. Ethics, Politics, and Modern India: Contemporary Relevance

The ethical concerns that Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore have expressed are relevant in resonant and otherwise in a modern India where politics are becoming more polarised, instrumental and less ethical in their practises. The strengthening of the electoral contest, mass media and power concentration at the state level has aggravated demands to focus more on results than ethical behaviour. Re-examining the ethics criticism of Gandhi and Tagore in such environment would help to shed light on the cost of morality of contemporary political life and present independent sources of moral reflection as opposed to available answers.

The application of the inseparability of means and ends in contemporary Indian electoral politics is an example drawn from Gandhian teachings. The rise in the use of communally charged rhetoric, the centralisation of institutions, and the use of democratic methods for the gain of a particular political party are examples of the moral decay Gandhi spoke of in modern politics. Gianolla (2020) advances the idea of a growing correlation between Gandhian intercultural ethics and the populism conundrum: Gandhi speaks of a morally decaying politics characterised by the violation of democratic ethics by the subjugation of plurality and democratic legitimacy to emotionalism and irrationalism. Gandhi's ethics do not only serve to illustrate the past. They also form the basis for evaluating the contemporary political world.

Tagore's description of nationalism as a moral pathology is relevant to today's discussions on the issue of cultural homogenisation and minority rights in India. Political disputes over recent legislation such as the Citizenship Amendment Act (2019) exemplify what Tagore articulated as the conflict between the state's politically defined identity and the individual's moral agency. He argued that when nationalism is made an organising principle of politics, ethical judgement is replaced by collective conformity. This is relevant to the situation where nationalism is used to demarcate the borders of citizenship and rights and, in effect, defines belonging in cultural and religious terms (Tagore, 1917). Chakrabarty (2025) also articulates Tagore's humanistic universalism as a response to the politically defined identities that pervade nationalism and thus argues that Tagore's ethics offer a response to and a protection of plurality in the face of political abstraction.

Returning to the Gandhian framework, Mehta (2022) argues that there is an erosion of democratic morality in Indian democracy with the hollowing of ethics in governance while maintaining the forms of procedural democracy. This resonates with Gandhi's concern for the separation of the legitimacy of politics from moral responsibility. Simultaneously, the scheme devised by Gandhi also demonstrates its shortages in modern environments. The magnitude and the sophistication of the present day governance are putting a strain on the ability of the ethical self-regulation to work as an adequate protection against power abuse. Although Devji (2012) also warns that mass politics still carries an implicit propensity to the use of violence and moral confidence, one cannot be ethical even when presenting this in an ethical context. The Gandhian ethics is thus quite critical and not adequate unless it has the accompanying institutional cheques that will ensure the hardening of moral authority into unresponsive power.

The ethical criticism of Tagore is directly addressed to the culture and symbolic aspects

of modern politics. His arguments about nationalism as an immoral pathology find an echo in the world where political identity is taking the place of ethical pluralism among others. The moral autonomy and humanistic universalism of Tagore stands in opposition to political acts that require conformity to the rules and any kinds of opposition to them in the interest of unity among people (Tagore, 1917). Tagorean ethics in this regard provide an effective alternative account to political cultures that promote the equality of loyalty and virtue. Palshikar (2017) elaborates on this concern by analysing dominant party system consolidation in India following the 2014 elections, where loyalty to the party overrides ethical judgement and dissent is systematically suppressed. Tagore would recognise this as the sacrifice of individual moral judgement to political collectivism. Jaffrelot (2021) expands the study to illustrate how the emergence of Hindu nationalism reorganises Indian democracy by ethnicity and religion, placing the supremacy of political identity over constitutional pluralism. This development exemplifies the moral risk that Gandhi and Tagore were concerned about: Gandhi, because he believed that political legitimacy could not be maintained through exclusion; and Tagore, because he identified nationalism as a force that replaces ethical universalism with conformity to the collective.

Of particular relevance of Tagore are debates on education, culture, and discourse in the society. His ideas of the ethical self-cultivation by learning and creativity emphasise the restriction of ethical crises by the consequences of the political house only. Spaces of ethical reflection as Tagore advocates in his humanism could only be created through the space of politics as Chakrabarty (2025) attempts to argue. Nevertheless, the moral alienation of political action can equally result in Tagore to underestimate the structural aspects of injustice and provide criticism without being involved in the mechanism of influence.

Gandhi and Tagore write, respectively, complementary responses to contemporary political issues with respect to their ethic. Gandhi prefigures the accountable ethical action whereby he emphasises on the fact that the politics should have moral accountability at all levels. Tagore predicts moral boundaries to action, that politics will become corruptive of moral being when it presents itself as exclusive. The relevance of both of them is their opposition to the subjugation of ethics to moralism or political expediency.

The India of today, in which democratic practises co-exist with moral weakness, the Gandhi-Tagore dialogue prompts reconsideration of the concept of political legitimacy, which is not related to either the law or the popular will. This meaning of ethics is not a

limitation of politics, but a critical aspect that reveals the moral interests of power. Returning to their thinking, therefore, allows Indian politics today to be revisited in a more thoughtful way that considers the need to act, as well as the susceptibility of ethical life.

7. Critical Reflections and Theoretical Implications

The comparative interaction with Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore gives the significant theoretical implication of the range of study of the connexion between ethics and politics outside the frame of modern Indian thought. Their interventions with each other contest dominant assumptions in political theory that hold ethics as facing external normative ideal or as a secondary matter that comes second to power, interest and institutional stability. Rather, both philosophers are uncompromising, albeit on varied levels, by stating that ethics forms a vital pre-condition to political legitimacy.

One of the initial consequences is related to the form of political power. Gandhi claims about moral authority puts a wrench on the traditional concepts of sovereignty based on law or force. Finding power in moral goodness as opposed to institutional coercion, the Gandhi reflects the frailty of the power without a sense of moral restraint (Haksar, 2017; Bilgrami, 2002). But there is also a theoretical questioning of boundaries of the ethical authority in this step. The danger of moral conviction as the main source of legitimacy arises which may lead to the absolutization of ethics blurring the distinction between moral leadership and influence that may not be subject to checks and balances (Devji, 2012). The Gandhian mind, therefore, begs the question of whether the ethical power could not be limited without losing their critical power.

The contribution of Tagore baffles the politics theory in another manner. His humanistic ethicality questions the fact that political engagement is the main arena of moral accountability. Using foregrounding culture, education and aesthetic life as places of ethical values, Tagore changes the horizon of political thinking away from the institutional and procedural issues. His attack on nationalism highlights the moral risks of generalising, when the citizens are transformed into applications of political identity (Tagore, 1917; Collins, 2012). The ethical disengagement of Tagore, however, creates doubts regarding the productive power of the moral criticism, when isolated of the power structure. His thinking puts emphasis on the conflict between purity of ethics and involvement in politics that has not yet been settled down in the normative theory.

Another implication is the renewal of the ethics politics relationship by Gandhi and Tagore into a location of agitating rather than reconciling. This is implied by their conversation

that there is no way in which ethical politics can be stabilised into a set model or doctrine. Ethics is critical horizon which questions political act at the expense of not ensuring that there are moral ends. Such understanding criticises the teleological or moralistic understandings of political development and goes in line with the modern attempts of undoing politics to be an open-to-question ethical practise (Pförtl, 2014).

Lastly, the Gandhi Tagore analogy also helps to build comparative political theory since it shows that non-Western ethical traditions can have an intellectual autonomy of their own. Their critiques of modernity, nationalism, and power are not just instances of westernising their vocabularies but come up with different sets of vocabularies to think about political life (Chakrabarty and Pandey, 2023). Gandhi and Tagore challenge political theory by appealing to ethics as an element of politics by exhorting it, then, to critically reevaluate its own normative premises and be mindful of the risk of corruption of power of all kinds with regard to its moral susceptibility.

8. Conclusion

This paper has explored ethics as not a moral adjunct to politics but as a constitutive issue to the centre-stage of contemporary Indian political thinking by way of comparison between Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore. Through the dialogue of these thinkers, the paper has demonstrated that the differences between them were not accidental or even character typical but they represented the two approaches to power, collective life, and political responsibility in the conditions of colonial modernity in terms of ethics.

The intervention of Gandhi was in his trying to reconstruct the politics in an ethical way. He believed that political action can only be legitimate when it was ruled under the moral discipline, transparency, and non-violence. Politics on the vision was not left out of ethical scrutiny but in fact was the main place where ethical responsibility was to be practised. Tagore on the other hand dealt with politics by virtue of moral restraint and criticism. His humanistic approach pre-empted humanistic autonomy, innovation and cultural liberty by alerting of the threats of collectivism to morals, and personal extinction of nationalism and mass political abstraction. Where Gandhi was trying to salvage politics on the foundation of ethical action, Tagore was trying to save ethical life against the political encroachment.

A compilation of their dialogue divulges both ethics and politics to be in an accord of standing tension as opposed to agreement. Ethical politics is stated by Gandhi; it is dangerous of moral overconfidence and the weight of maintaining ethical discipline in the mass action. Due to the articulation of ethical humanism by Tagore, it is exposed to the risk of

becoming politically alienated and weakened connexion with power structures. Neither of the sides provides an entirely conclusive answer but they both reveal the insecurities behind the other. It is this repudiation of closure which is their virtue.

The unresolved conflict between Gandhi and Tagore is less of a theoretical problem and more of a constructive opportunity for thinking about what contemporary Indian democracy faces the most. With the use of populism that draws on the emotions of the masses and neglects ethics, their conversation suggests that democracy is not just about winning elections but also about being morally accountable. In the face of cultural homogenisation and narrowing of citizenship along religious and ethnic lines, Tagore's idea of moral autonomy and universalism depicts a resistance that is beyond formal institutions. Against the erosion of pluralism, the conversation between Tagore and Gandhi reminds us that Indian democracy needs the ability to act with courage and steadfastness, as Gandhi argued, and also the ability to reflect critically and with wisdom, as Tagore argued.

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