Article

The Russian Revolution and the Freedom Struggle in India: Rabindranath Tagore's *Letters from Russia*

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Abstract

The Russian Revolution and its experiments with socialism impacted the Indian Freedom Struggle in many different ways. Not only did it play a catalytic role in the formation of the Indian Communist Party and eventually helped the transformation of a good number of freedom fighters into communists, but it also initiated debates and discussions within the public domain regarding the relevance of this great political upheaval to the Indian situation even among thinkers and intellectuals who had not been converted to socialist thinking. This essay documents the impact of the Russian revolution on the Bengali intelligentsia who were involved in the freedom struggle. In particular, it chooses one episode, in this complex intellectual history which evolved in many different ways in different parts of India, that is, Rabindranath Tagore's visit to Soviet Russia in 1930 and assesses the impact of the ideas unleashed by the revolution on the intellectuals in Bengal.

Keywords

Indian freedom struggle, Rabindranath Tagore, Communist Party of India, Left movement in Bengal, Kazi Nazrul Islam

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I

The Russian Revolution and its experiments with socialism impacted the Indian Freedom Struggle in many different ways. Not only did it play a catalytic role in the formation of the Indian Communist Party and eventually helped the transformation of a good number of freedom fighters into communists, but it initiated debates and discussions within the public domain regarding the relevance of this great political upheaval to the Indian situation even among thinkers and intellectuals who had not been converted to socialist thinking. This happened in spite of widespread anti-Soviet propaganda and the stringent measures taken by the British Government to suppress dissemination and discussion. In this article, I propose to study this broader hegemonic influence of revolutionary ideas—that goes much beyond the concerted efforts of the Comintern—on India's perceptions of its own freedom from foreign rule.

I have, for my purpose, chosen to focus on one particular episode in this complex intellectual history which evolved in many different ways in different parts of India, that is, Rabindranath Tagore's visit to Soviet Russia in 1930 and the influential text which emerged from it—a series of letters in Bengali written to his friends in India on his experience there and published as a book in 1931. Partial English translations of it were published in *The Modern Review* in 1931 and 1934; in 1934, the colonial government stepped in to proscribe the particular number of the journal which contained the translation and all possible future translations of the text (Tagore, 2001, pp. 1155–1163). The first English translation of the full text was only available in 1960. In spite of this, there is little doubt that this intervention from a person of Tagore's stature, his voice being audible across continents, had wide reverberations. The *Literary Digest* in the USA wrote on 1 November 1930, even before any translations of the letters were available that 'Tagore might be accepted by Soviet Russia as its most effective propagandist' (Quoted by Gnatyuk-Danil'chuk, 1986, p. 291).

However, Tagore was certainly not the first in Bengal to show an interest in what was happening in Soviet Russia and its relevance to India. As a matter of fact, socialist ideas had reached at least some intellectuals in Bengal long before the Russian Revolution took place; Shipra Sarkar (Sarkar & Das, 1998, pp. 5–6) mentions an unnamed person sending a request to the office of the First International in 1871 to open a branch in Calcutta. She also refers to an anonymous Bengali translation of *The Communist Manifesto* in 1876. 'Samya', a collection of papers by Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, published in 1879, contained brief references to 'communism' and the 'International' (Tagore, 1969, p. 387). But

the Russian Revolution of 1917, once it occurred, immediately caught the imagination of the Bengali print media and enthused its readers. Starting with the much-respected editor of *Prabasi,* Ramananda Chattopadhyay, welcoming the end of Czarist rule in Russia and the setting up of the Provisional Government (a republican government) in April–May 1917 (Sarkar & Das, 1998, pp. 27–30) we find a plethora of features, discussion and debate on the Russian Revolution in a number of Bengali journals which catered to the general reading public. These are sometimes critical, often highly appreciative, but more often than not, fairly well informed. Tagore's letters have to be seen in the context of these on-going discussions.

In the second section of this article, I have studied the general ambience of discussions reflecting the intellectual ferment generated in Bengal by the Russian Revolution, as also the exchange of ideas among sections of the public both for and against the revolutionary experiments. In the third section, I have dealt more elaborately with Tagore's letters on Russia and references in them to the kind of social reconstruction he had himself initiated in Santiniketan and in different parts of the landed property owned by his family. In the concluding section (fourth section), I have made some tentative comments on the relevance of this episode for us and for our understanding of the Russian Revolution in the present context. I am of the firm opinion that the intellectual field I am describing here shows that the presence of the Russian Revolution within the many folds of the discourse of the Indian Freedom Struggle and the legacy it has left for us is far from being a mere 'derivative discourse'.

II

We shall concentrate in this section on the discussions which were taking place in Bengal roughly between 1924 and 1934. What were the major issues highlighted and how were these contextualized with reference to the Indian Freedom struggle? What common points did they have with Tagore's letters? These years were crucial for Soviet Russia too; they signified the end of the Civil War, consolidation of Soviet power against external enemies and rapid economic and social reconstruction following 'war communism'. But these were also the first years after Lenin's death, years of the growth of the authority of Stalin in the Party leading to the eventual suppression of all oppositional voices. How did the reading public in Bengal who were not necessarily converts to socialism register these changes? These questions too will be addressed here.

One contemporary figure who was among the first to respond to the Russian Revolution in its early years, was the poet-activist Kazi Nazrul

Islam, a close friend of Muzaffar Ahmad, foremost among the founders of the Communist Party of India. They were also close political associates in the 1920s. As a poet, Nazrul belonged to altogether a different genre from Tagore, but upon his request, the latter sent his blessings in the form of an inscription in verse for *Dhoomketu* (The Comet), a bi-weekly journal started by Nazrul and some others in 1922; this inscription calls upon 'the comet' to 'build a bridge of fire over the darkness'. The journal was proscribed for sedition very soon and Nazrul was sentenced to jail for a year. Tagore dedicated to him his play *Basanta* (The Spring) while he was in jail. Again when Nazrul was on indefinite hunger strike in Hooghly Jail with others, demanding the status of political prisoners, Tagore sent him a telegram saying: Give up hunger strike, our literature claims you. He had hoped earlier that Nazrul would join Santiniketan and be a teacher there, but soon recognized that this was not the political trajectory the younger poet was following. Even then his appreciation of Nazrul as a poet on his own right remained intact.

Muzaffar Ahmad tells us that *Dhoomketu* was by no means a mouthpiece of the communists. According to him, Nazrul deviated from their joint plan to build up the Communist Party in India when he went full swing into launching this journal (Ahmad, 1967, pp. 308–309). Nazrul's fiery pieces here involved a call to immediate radical action against the draconian penalties being imposed by the colonial government on young freedom fighters and deplored the weakness and hypocrisy of political and religious leaders; they also gave full-throated support to the demand for Complete Independence for India initiated by Hasrat Mohani in 1921 at the Ahmedabad conference of the All India Congress. Still *Dhoomketu* had little to do with the patient ground-level work needed to build up a Communist Party. Muzaffar Ahmad was aware of this but recognized the spring-heads of revolutionary inspiration lying behind the poet's intensely emotive engagement with anti-colonial politics.

In fact, the revolution in Russia was one important catalytic factor in the shaping of Nazrul's politics. Even in poems like 'Pralayollash' (Celebrating Destruction) written in 1922, when he welcomes the demolition of the old world in favour of a new, it is more likely that he is thinking of revolutionary changes 'on the other side of oceans' than of any movements being then led by either Gandhiji or other freedom fighters in India. His interest in the Russian Revolution had started from his days as a soldier in the colonial army. Muzaffar Ahmad quotes the evidence of one of Nazrul's closest comrades-in-arms in the Bengali Regiment where Nazrul was a havildar during the First World War, to prove that while the regiment was posted in Karachi, he was able to thwart the strictest surveillance to get hold

of proscribed literature including literature on the Russian Revolution. There was one occasion when within the heavily guarded barracks, he led a secret celebration either of the October Revolution itself or of some subsequent victory of the Bolshevik Party (Ahmad, 1967, pp. 204–205).

Nazrul must also have heard stories of Indian soldiers in the British army who had come in 1918 as part of the occupying troops from Iran to the Transcaucasian areas and who deserted to join the international brigade of the Red Army in the battle for socialism (Ahmad, 1967, pp. 205–207). This dimension of the young Nazrul's experience is reflected in two of his early literary efforts which were published by Muzaffar Ahmad in 1919–1920 before Nazrul was demobbed, in the journal of the Bengali Muslim Literary Society which the former was running at the time. In one of the stories, 'Byathar Dan' (Sorrow's Gift), two idealistic young men, frustrated in love, find a cause worth fighting for by joining the 'Army of the Servants of Liberation' (Sarkar, 2000a, pp. 247–258). According to Muzzaffar Ahmad, Nazrul had actually used the term 'Red Army' initially, but in order to avoid police interference, the former changed it at the time of publication to make the connotation more general (Ahmad, 1967, pp. 201–202).

In spite of the sentimentality and the gush which characterize 'Byathar Dan', it is an effective trope of the appeal of the Russian Revolution for colonized youth in search of a mission. It focused the Russian Revolution from a completely different angle to what was being advertised loudly by many of its detractors in India and abroad. Crass materialism and the brutal destruction of all values and morality were being attributed to it, but Nazrul's imaginary perceives the Revolution as an event that seeks to turn into practice what had been an abstract idealization so far. It bridges the gap between the actual and the possible and sublimates personal frustration into the search for humanity's emancipation. For him, the 'Red Army' or 'The Army of the Servants of Liberation' stands for commitment to the highest human values and supreme self-sacrifice.

Second, at the moment when the Indian Freedom Movement was about to develop into a mass-struggle, Nazrul's appeal to the reading public, particularly to middle-class youth, contributed to a growing awareness of the historical subjectivity of the classes most exploited by colonial rule, namely, the urban and the rural proletariat. This was 'an echo of mass-movements' and 'felt in the concern and concentration of a section of the intelligentsia on issues of "labour" and "poverty"…' (Chattopadhyay, 2011, p. 109). The perception of the revolution 'using' the proletariat for 'higher' ends was not uncommon among the middle class reading public. Saratchandra Chattopadhyay's peripatetic revolutionary hero 'Sabyasachi'

in his novel *Pather Dabi* (1926) declares that the only hope of a colonized people lies in a total revolution in the course of which 'the coolies and the workers' might have to be ruthlessly 'sacrificed like sheep and goats'. He adds: 'This happened in Hungary, this happened time and again in Russia, in the June Revolution in France in 1848, the city streets turned red with the blood of the workers' (*Sarat Rachanabali*, 1977, p. 142). But Nazrul's prose piece 'Dharmaghat' (Strike) appearing in *Nabajug* in 1920, a year of workers' strikes in Bengal, is an early description of a very different trajectory of emerging working class consciousness (Sarkar, 2000a, pp. 421–422).

Nazrul came from an indigent rural family and, according to Muzaffar Ahmad, developed some direct connections with the working classes. In 1926, when he was working for the newly formed Workers' and Peasants' Party of Bengal, he used his command over colloquial Bengali to speak directly to the latter crossing all class barriers. Nazrul's songs and recitations became popular among the jute mill workers and later even among peasants struggling for their rights.[1] At the request of Muzaffar Ahmad, Nazrul made the first Bengali translation of 'The Internationale' in 1926; poems, such as 'Samyabadi' (The Socialist) and 'Krishaker Gan' (The Peasant's Song), which were published in *Langal* (*The Plough)* and had a special appeal to these classes, may not have been approved by Saratchandra's 'Sabyasachi' as being a waste of effort, but they did have a role in cutting across class barriers to establish empathy between middle-class youth and sections of the toiling masses. Together with John Reed's *Ten Days that Shook the World* and Albert Rhys Williams' *Through the Russian Revolution*, Gorky's *Mother* also had been making the rounds within Bengali middle-class readership even from the mid-1920s. Nazrul's short novel *Mrityukhsudha* (Hunger for Death), started in 1926–1927, contains an early instance of a description of unified workers showing their organized force to protest against the arrest of their leader as a 'bolshevik spy' (Sarkar, 2000b, pp. 363–452). Whether inspired by Gorky or not, this invention is possibly one of the first of its kind in Bengali fictional literature and an early instance of the introduction of the issue of proletarian subjectivity into the ideological fabric of the Freedom Struggle.

What I am really trying to show is that this fabric was by no means monochromatic. The years that I am speaking of saw the birth of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (1925) and ugly incidents of communal violence between Hindus and Muslims. But the continually growing tensions between the communities do not necessarily constitute the most dominant feature overshadowing the ideological space. Contesting

hegemonies were also developing. One must remember that the Communist Party of India itself was being shaped during these years. Tagore himself had in the early days of the anti-partition movement in Bengal been influenced by neo-Hindu ideas about the glories of ancient 'Hindu' India and the revival of 'Brahminical' ideals (Sarkar, 1973, pp. 53–54). But over the years, he grew out of it and pointed out that instead of blaming solely the British for fomenting troubles between Hindus and Muslims, leaders must recognize the internal curse of social inequality to which the latter have been condemned for centuries. His fiction and non-fictional work bears strong testimony to what may not be immediately evident—the emergence of a new secularism that stood up against divisions in the name of religion. Similarly, we tend to forget that there are voices such as Nazrul's which compete with the concept of social revolution as inevitably revolution from the top and move towards a vision of the subjectivity of exploited people. Russia, in recognizing the importance of such subjectivity in the battle against inequality, added a new dimension to debates within the Bengali reading public even before Tagore's visit.

The discussions come in the form of features and columns in journals and newspapers and many of these are not of a Leftist persuasion. Of course, Left-wing groups or Communists had their own papers and journals, such as *Nabajug, Samhati, Langal* and *Ganabani*, which were vocal in such debates. Left-minded intellectuals, such as Bhupendranath Dutta, Binoy Sarkar and Sushobhan Sarkar, were also writing during this period on socialism and the Russian experiments with it. But in this article, the emphasis shall be on non-Left literature. The social ferment generated by the Freedom Struggle might have made it possible even for them to initiate discussions on the Russian Revolution. The monthly *Prabasi* is an example of this; it was a highly respectable middle-of the-road journal for the educated middle class. But following the piece welcoming the Provisional Government of February 1917 in Russia by Ramananda Chattopadhyay, we find quite a few features and papers which take an open and positive view of the subsequent developments. The daily *Anandabazar Patrika* runs an editorial on 30 January 1934, where the death of Lenin, 'a great mind' is condoled and it is said: 'The world has seen Lenin as a terrible force of destruction. But…Lenin only gave a beneficial direction to what was a spontaneous proud uprising of the people against the oppressive rule of the Tsar' (Sarkar & Das, 1998, pp. 61–63).

The monthly *Basumati* (January 1928) gives a pragmatic summary of the reporting on the celebration of the 10th year of the Revolution

in Soviet Russia in British newspapers and points out how difference in class-approach leads to radically different versions of the developments in Soviet Russia (Sarkar & Das, 1998, pp. 91–93). The conservative *Westminster Gazette* thinks that Lenin's experiments, seeking to make the impossible a reality, have led to the rise of one group of 'monopolists' instead of another; interestingly, the *Gazette* is reported to be praising Stalin as a 'realist' who is not following the earlier trajectory of the Revolution. The *Daily Chronicle* and the *Manchester Guardian,* however, assert that those who had predicted that Soviet Russia would be destroyed by its pursuit of abstract rigid principles have been proved wrong; the Revolution is continuing, the revolutionaries are correcting their course and emerging stronger. *Basumati* agrees that Soviet Russia has good reason to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the Revolution; quoting the experience of a young Muslim youth from Bikaner who had gone to Russia as a 'muhajir', it says that Russia did not practise apartheid against any ethnic group, and it regarded all the workers of the world as their comrades and supported the liberation of peoples all over the world. It needed courage to come out with such praise of Soviet Russia in spite of fear of retribution from the colonial government, but the moot point is the manner in which the implicit contrast with the situation in India was being highlighted.

Who were the opponents in this debate? What were their major arguments to dissuade the Indian Freedom Struggle from treading the Russian path? For one, there were those who felt that the *mantra* of economic liberation had left a spiritual void and that the destruction of the hegemony of the upper classes (which had produced and disseminated ideological and cultural resources for a long time for the whole people), led to a gross emphasis on mechanical rather than substantive equality. Others depreciated the Soviet experience suggesting that ancient society in India, described by them as 'Hindu' society, was truly imbued with the essence of socialism. This 'Hindu socialism' regarded the 'Hindu joint family' as an example of redistributive justice and interpreted the caste system as a structural innovation which afforded space within society for different ethnic groups. Nalini Kanto Gupta, a resident at Aurobinda's 'Ashram' in Pondicherry, led the tirade against the 'materialist ideology' of the Russian Revolution. Shibram Chakrabarty, better known as one of the foremost comic writers in Bengali, replied to such vilifications in his *Moscow Bonam Pondicherry* (Moscow versus Pondicherry) in 1929 (Quoted by Sarkar & Das, 1998, pp. 100–109).

In his tongue-in-cheek fashion, Shibram points out that Gupta's complaints are mere emotive propaganda equating the socialists with

'asuras' who have rejected man's godlike aspect and are therefore doomed. He accepts the appellation 'asuras' for socialists in the sense that being more interested in the 'body and the mind' than in the abstract soul they are 'more human' than the gods and asserts that it is the latter's closer connection with reality which is likely to succeed in promoting the emancipation of mankind rather than the vague spiritualism of the gods. Gupta perceives the Russian Revolution as a 'dictatorship of Shudras' and says that Lenin might be 'a Brahmin catering to Shudras', but the true Brahmins who can ensure the 'higher good' of the human race as a whole 'would be of a different breed' (Sarkar & Das, 1998, p. 123). Shibram replies that it cannot be assumed that Bolshevism is taking mankind as a whole towards barbaric darkness and evil simply because the Shudras or the proletariat who constitute 'fifteen and a half-annas' of human society are gaining the upper hand over the other 'half-anna', namely the exploiting classes. Shibram also roundly ridicules the idea that 'Mother India' has a special spiritual authority to liberate the world.

Shibram points out, however, that socialism is not altogether alien to India. Ancient Buddhist philosophy, according to him, has components of socialism. 'Muslims who have also become Indians in the process of history' carry some such components in their own religious practices. Shibram even goes to the extent of finding in the ancient Hindu joint family hints of redistributive justice. However, his use of such an example must be distinguished from the attempts of 'Hindu socialists' to depreciate the Russian Revolution. He is not saying that ancient India can offer a better model of socialism, but merely pointing out that even in societies based on religious faith, Hindu, Buddhist or Islamic, the principle of redistributive justice, which is one of the basic ideas behind socialism, has been recognized in certain prevalent norms and practices. Shibram also argues that the Soviet system of bringing all able-bodied persons compulsorily within the labour force is not necessarily opposed to the self-fulfilment of the individual (Ghosh, 2007), but consists in a redirection of the individual's sense of his/her fulfilment and grants the individual dignity by giving dignity to physical labour.

Going on a different tack from Shibram, Nirmal Kumar Basu, anthropologist and Gandhian, contrasts Gandhi's method of 'peaceful persuasion' (satyagraha) positively with the course of coercive action followed in the Russian Revolution, since the 'means' in the latter has to be justified by the 'end'. The moral dilemma created by violent subjugation of the individual to state power becomes redundant if the path of non-violence is followed. Gandhian 'Swaraj' envisages the combined benefit of all classes and not just of the 'Shudra'/proletariat. Thus, Gandhi's assertion

that 'the elementary necessaries of life [should] remain in the control of the masses' is similar to but also different from the socialist creed since Gandhi's 'masses' do not exclude the possessing classes. Basu also says that there is something like 'varnashrama' even in the Soviet system in so far as it is 'the state which determines what means of livelihood an individual would take up while in ancient [Indian] society it was determined by birth and enforced by the ruler' (Sarkar & Das, 1998, p. 189). The Gandhian path rejects both kinds of restrictions on individual choice.

Gandhi himself talks of a 'varnashrama'-based Swaraj, but, according to Basu, this is compatible with modern socialism in many more ways than with the 'varnashrama' of Manusamhita. The episode of the killing of the Shudra hermit Shambuka by Rama to preserve the merit of Treta Yuga shows that there is nothing socialistic in a society based on Manu (Sarkar & Das, 1998, p. 190). Nor can we find any attempt in the joint family system to include different castes within the same family and ensure redistribution of property.

> It is clear that when Gandhi talks of 'varnashrama'-based Swaraj he is thinking of a socialist version of the ancient system. Gandhi himself believes in this and once told the present writer that if some people in Europe think of him as a socialist, then they are not much mistaken. It is his empathy for ancient Indian society that makes him want to purify it in the ideological flame of modern socialism. (Sarkar & Das, 1998, p. 195)

Basu's point seems to be that like modern socialism, Gandhism also seeks to address the modern problem of social-economic inequality, but without reference to the class-antagonism which socialism perceives in it.

Tagore would have a great deal to say on one aspect of such inequality squarely addressed in revolutionary Russia by universalizing free compulsory education. But there are others before him who also ask why that is not possible in India. Is not the aversion of our leaders to provide education for the working classes the result of class-antagonism? Gandhi speaks of 'swaraj' for the poor, which means not that they would live in palaces, but that they would have a share in whatever necessities the richer classes use to conduct their daily lives. But would the leaders in India be willing to share the poorest man's black bread as Lenin did when the Civil War was creating great food scarcity? The radically different concept of equality in Revolutionary Russia consisted not merely in equal opportunities but in ensuring equal access to all resources for everybody; 'everyone was everyone's comrade',

there were no bosses and no servants except in so far as discipline was required to maintain the administration (Sarkar & Das, 1998, p. 64). Other authors too thought that if Lenin took recourse to 'autocracy' to impress upon the labouring people that they were co-owners of whatever resources the country possessed and also that every able-bodied adult would have to engage in productive labour to enhance these resources rapidly, then that was justifiable.

The extreme privations and the famine-like conditions that people had to go through in the early years of the Revolution were a test for the young state's ability to keep the latter with it. The bloody conflicts with kulaks during the process of nationalization of land come up as examples of the crisis in one or two pieces. But the general view is that the spirit of commitment and self-sacrifice shown by the Bolshevik leaders is what saw them through. For instance, if state ownership of resources meant that 'money could not buy goods, whatever was available was distributed in exchange for labour by the state' then that situation could only be sustained if people saw their leaders maintaining the same discipline. 'In that grim darkness facing the people, what sustained them was the unbreakable political will of a band of dedicated revolutionaries and their efforts to translate their conviction into reality' (Sarkar & Das, 1998, p. 177). In the years of transition from 'War Communism' to the New Economic Policy (NEP) when new debates arise, their flexibility in rectifying errors is also commended.

There is an interesting, somewhat critical paper in the monthly *Basumati* (1935) on 'discrimination in the Bolshevik state' (Sarkar & Das, 1998, pp. 168–170), where the author speaks of upper and lower classes in the Soviet Railway system. Engineers and officials who can pay more can go in greater comfort by the former while others who can pay less travel by the lower and only enjoy certain minimum facilities. The same situation is found in food shops. While state-run shops charge only a minimum price for food, the private shops are costlier. The 'extreme socialism' of earlier days is no more and restrictions on buying and selling were being relaxed. The Bolshevik argument as voiced by Stalin is quoted by the writer. It says that equality does not mean 'equalization of individual requirements and individual lives, but the abolition of classes' (Daniels, 1985, p. 240). Since production is doing better, those having a comparatively higher salary should be encouraged to spend more to enhance consumption. But this does not necessarily mean that such people have command over the means of production which are owned by the proletarian state. The apparent 'discrimination' could be a planned intervention to boost the economy. The author, however, remains sceptical.

There are more sombre warnings. The infamous Moscow Trials had not started yet. But in some pieces by authors who were generally in support of the Russian Revolution certain new developments are recorded. Nripendrakrishna Chattopadhyay, translator of Gorky's *Mother*, strongly deplores in 1928 (Sarkar & Das, 1998, pp. 96–97) the forcible banishment of Trotsky and his followers from political life; he says it is similar to the case of the inventor of the guillotine being guillotined himself. We also find Soumyendranath Tagore castigating the 'cult of Lenin' propagated by the Soviet state and expressing his dissatisfaction with the emergence of a kind of 'nationalist communists' in Russia who are so proud of their own achievements that they turn a Nelson's eye to the rest of the world (Sarkar & Das, 1998, pp. 110–114). However, on the whole, the achievements of the Soviet state, the immense benefits and dignity it provided to its workers, the transformation of Russia from a backward country to one that had developed its productive forces to compete with the major capitalist powers and its support for anti-colonial struggles were all perhaps factors in convincing many people that without autocratic leadership, all this could not have been achieved. Tagore, not an admirer of Stalinism, none-the-less saw Soviet Russia at this particular juncture and his admiration of the effective equality achieved certainly outweighed his criticism of 'dictatorship'.

There is a rare report in *Prabasi*, obviously taking its facts from some foreign newspaper, on the Second International Women's Congress (1921) in Moscow. It is a celebration of the empowerment of Russian women through the efforts of women leaders who had a major role in the Revolution. But the highlight of the report, a tribute to the spirit of internationalism, is the unexpected arrival of a group of burqa-clad women from Persia, Turkey, Azerbaizan, Armenia, China, etc., to the tremendous ovation of those present (Sarkar & Das, 1998, pp. 46–48). Prafulla Kumar Sarkar, in a later paper (1934) which hails the ambitious experiments being carried on in Russia to put men and women on an equal footing in their mutual relationships, describes the experience of an eye-witness which exemplifies women's substantial gains from the legal and social support provided by the state. The message is not of 'moral laxity' but of free and easy relationship in all spheres of society (Sarkar & Das, 1998, pp. 159–163). A report by an Indian attending the proceedings of a law-court in Moscow appeared in *Prabasi* in 1935, where once again the importance given to the issue of gender justice in Russian law and the simplicity and efficiency in the delivery of justice which helped women overcome their specific difficulties is highlighted (Sarkar & Das, 1998, pp. 164–168). In the following year itself, the Soviet state would withdraw

some of the measures taken after the Revolution to ensure women's equality. But that was still some years away when Tagore visited Russia.

III

Tagore reached Moscow on 11 September 1930, in the course of a long European trip and stayed there for about a fortnight. Invitations from Russia had reached him on more than one occasion starting from 1925, but he had not been able to avail himself of the opportunity earlier. Now in spite of ill health he was fairly determined to make the visit when the VOKS (All Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries) again invited him in 1930. Some detailed accounts of this visit appear in A.P. Gnatyuk-Danil'chuk's *Tagore, India and Soviet Union.* While conversing with members of the VOKS, he refers to the incarceration of communists arrested in the Meerut Conspiracy Case in 1929 as an example of British vindictiveness and bids his hosts be careful that his visit is not construed in a manner that might have harmful effects on 'his institution', that is, Visva Bharati. Professor Petrov, VOKS President, gave him full assurance that they would ensure that no such unpleasant consequences result from 'this intensely cultural visit' (Gnatyuk-Danil'chuk, 1986, pp. 227–229).

The fact that in spite of such fears, Tagore made it a point to visit Soviet Russia is an instance of his keenness to understand the changes taking place there. He had no hesitation in writing off at once a series of 14 letters to various friends on his experience there starting from 19 November and going on for some time after his departure; as public records of his impressions, they were sequentially published in *Prabasi* under different titles even as they came and were followed by a postscript addressed to Ramananda Chattopadhyay in April–May 1931. They were published as a collection (*Russia-r Chithi)* soon after together with three other short essays on related topics; in the book, the letters have no titles but are numbered. He also made a partial translation of the letters in English (published as 'The Soviet System') to 'allay the fears of his British and German friends' who might have misunderstood him (Tagore, 2001, p. 1163). But his appreciation of Soviet Russia was not uncritical and for whatever he says on his visit he seeks to provide objective evidence to the extent possible.

Generally speaking, his considered judgement is that in the eradication of certain basic forms of inequality, the Russians have achieved unique success within a remarkably short time. This is radically different from anything he has seen so far in Europe or the USA. This equality is substantive and not an enforced imposition of mechanical sameness by

the officialdom of the proletarian state. He finds evidence for this in the responses of the people he meets, the dignity which they seem to imbibe from the system of which they are a part and the liveliness and ingenuity they demonstrate in their exchanges with him. He keeps on contrasting with this the condition of India exhausted by imperialist exploitation. India's humiliated status is exposed in the example he gives of a British writer McKee, propounding in the Times Literary Supplement the biased thesis that India's poverty is due to early marriage and excessive fertility. Tagore contradicts this and points out that the 'root cause' is chronic lack of livelihood and the 'root cause' of that again is the fact that 'India must be kept poor to make England prosperous' (Tagore, 1962, p. 417). The sheer contrast convinces him that people in Russia are freer than Indians and capable of making their own destiny. For him, the whole objective of the Russian system, as he comments to the Russian writers, is 'very much like my own dream for a full life of the individual, for complete education' (Gnatyuk-Danil'chuk, 1986, pp. 225–226). Even the all-in-all presence of the state in the Russian system does not seem to subvert this objective because here politics has not been 'soiled by the greed of profit' (Tagore, 1962, p. 423); it is in the context of power-hungry Western and colonial states that Russia's mission to shun political greed seems unique.

Hunger for power, according to Tagore, is endemic to Western Nationalism and accepted as the highest creed in the West. In his perception, imperial greed is its consequence. 'It is carnivorous and cannibalistic in its tendencies, it feeds upon the resources of other peoples and tries to swallow their whole future' (Das, 1996b, p. 440). The lectures on 'Nationalism' which are his fullest critique of this began in 1916 and owe their trenchancy to its specific relevance for countries suffering colonial oppression.[2] In the Russian letters, he returns to the topic: 'Its restless churning produces nectar for a few but poison for the large majority.' Hence, he is particularly struck by Russia's utter rejection of the idea that greed for self-aggrandizement is a natural instinct in man; this is replaced by the mission of 'creating an extraordinary entity embodying common responsibility, common thought, possession in common' (Tagore, 1962, p. 397). They believe that this commonalty shall become more real for humanity than the differences among us once it can be established through right thinking and right practice. Hence, education for all is so important for them. It is through common education that they wish to develop the common mind to work for the good of all humanity. They are 'vishva-manah'—having a world-oriented mind. The term 'vishva-vidyalaya' applies to their system most aptly. It is from his own position

as one of the colonized that the poverty and the humble living standard he witnesses around him in Russia strikes him positively as carrying no sense of shame with it, since everybody participates in it or a common end. Professor Petrov's house which he visits is no exception. Equality can be felt to be real here (Tagore, 1962, p. 379).

So far as the Soviet economic system is concerned, he agrees with its critics that the efforts to abolish individual possessions altogether go against human nature. This is the other extreme to voracious possessive individualism and cannot be sustained. Having arisen as reaction to disasters born of extreme aggrandizement of the self that characterizes Western civilization, this system suffers from an imbalance on the side of collectivity and tends to sacrifice the individual to the collective. As a solution, however, he only invokes an idealized picture of village society in ancient India where the social structure itself seems to have allowed some redistributive justice, balancing social will with individual beneficence. Obviously he is not satisfied with this answer himself. 'It is not impossible that in this sick age, Bolshevism is the only medicine. But it cannot continue forever, and the sooner the patient can move out of the doctor's regime, the better for him' (Tagore, 1962, p. 425). In a parting interview given to *Izvestia,* he also warned the Russian people 'to have pity on those who did not share their views' (Gnatyuk-Danil'chuk, 1986, p. 255). But still his appreciation outweighs such criticism.

Tagore is also critical of the dictatorship of the state. From his comments, it is evident that this is not something he has experienced directly during his visit; he believes, however, that there is substance in the charge of 'severe repression' of independent thinking which is attributed to the imposition on society of the unilateral mould of 'Marxian economics'. This hampers the free growth of humanity, and there is no doubt that the negative effects of dictatorship are present in Russia also. But Tagore affirms in the very next sentence that in Russia, even dictatorship of the state has a positive side. 'That is education, which is the very opposite of coercion' (Tagore, 1962, pp. 421–422). In the letters, Tagore even compares Bolshevism with Fascism in so far as in both, the collective will coerce the individual will. But he is also careful to emphasize a basic difference: in spite of the severity with which they restrict personal freedom, the Russians have gone on nurturing and developing all the faculties within the individual personality through education and cultural practices; they have freed the mind from subservience to retrograde social-religious practices and blind belief. They have never given up reason altogether and hence the system 'has not crushed the individual mind in every way like Fascism'.[3] In spite of

disturbing news about the growth of authoritarianism within the Soviet Union even later, he never discards this basic assessment which came from his own first-hand impressions. 'Those who really want to tyrannise kill the mind first; but they (the Russians) have made the mind livelier. This leaves open the door to their liberation [from dictatorship]' (Ibid., p. 413).[4]

His exchanges with the young pioneers during his visit to a 'pioneers' commune' in Russia is contrasted with his experience of the visit to Santiniketan of the students from Gandhi's Phoenix School in South Africa. He says, he asked one of the Phoenix students whether he would like to go out strolling to see some flowering trees. The boy said, he did not know and would like to consult his team-leader. 'I said, do that later, just tell me now whether you wish to go, but he repeated his previous reply that he did not know'. The author concludes: this student is not in the habit of thinking on his own. He moves as led by others and does not need to take his own decision. He adds that this mental passivity is there though not to the same extent among many students who come to Santiniketan and implicitly this is related to the colonized state which puts the mind in shackles. On the other hand, he finds the young pioneers free and articulate in talking to him although he learns that they have come from the most deprived classes; he comments that for them education is not removed from the real world and is geared towards making 'full human beings' of them (Ibid., pp. 392–393). A girl says, we are our own guides in whatever we do and we take all decisions by discussing things among ourselves. They put education to practise by going regularly to the countryside and imparting various kinds of information required by the country people through the method of 'living newspapers' and similar innovative campaigns.

The educational research and experiments going on continually all over Russia were of course of immense interest to Tagore, one of the most innovative pedagogues of his time who not only had set up an experimental school in Santiniketan at the turn of the last century but was actively engaged in preparing the syllabus, in writing textbooks and even in actually teaching the children in which he is said to have excelled. Later, Sriniketan was also founded to train students to take up work of rural reconstruction as a regular activity. Many of the methods followed by Soviet pedagogues in making education meaningful even for the most deprived, reminded Tagore of his own experiments, such as the extra-mural component he always sought to add to his methods to do away with learning by rote. He regretted that the very experiments adopted in earnest by the Russians with such good effect had been regarded as chimerical by his own countrymen when he had tried them out. He was pleasantly surprised by the fact that pictures drawn by the

school children in Moscow which were shown to him were ‘real pictures, their own invention, and not copies of pictures they had seen’ (Ibid., p. 396). This was an indication for him that ‘parrot’s training’ was not what they were getting.

He was equally impressed by the countrywide continuous programme of public education that was meant to give a new sense of dignity to the people. Through all the stormy days of revolutionary change, the leaders had issued strict injunctions that the rich cultural treasures earlier in the possession of the aristocrats were not to be destroyed and academics, intellectuals and artists, themselves half-starving in those difficult days, had guarded these and helped to preserve them in state-owned museums (he mentions the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow in particular) which had been opened to ordinary working people. They flocked every day in thousands from all corners of Russia to get acquainted with this great cultural heritage which now belonged to them; the museums were provided with expert guides to initiate untrained people in understanding and appreciating these treasures which included examples of classical and folk creativity from different corners of Russia (Ibid., pp. 398, 403). This internal tourism was actively promoted by the state to enhance living communications among working people all over Russia.

To say nothing of the people of a colonized country crushed under the opprobrium of their supposed cultural inferiority, this aesthetic hunger, according to Tagore, is a characteristic one rarely finds even among working people in the advanced Western countries.

> It is only a false *machismo* which insists that Saraswati’s *veena* must be converted into a stick to beat up everyone with in order to demonstrate power; in this country they have proved this. All these immense preparations are only to ensure that the workers who are to run the factories are also able to appreciate all forms of art. All the performative arts have flourished here. Even in the time of famine immediately after the 1917 Revolution, they danced, sang and performed plays. It did not interfere with the vast real life drama in history in which they were acting. (Ibid., p. 399)

The other innovative experiment in public education highly praised by Tagore is the system of ‘region study’ initiated through the local museums of which he says there were 2000 all over the country with a total membership of about 70,000. Instead of keeping knowledge in a centralized pool in some urban Russian centres it was inspiring production and dissemination of information *in situ* about the past history and the present economics of far-flung regions. He speaks of similar experiments in culling local knowledge tried by individual teachers at Visva

Bharati, but with less success (Ibid., p. 398). This decentralization of the production and dissemination of knowledge that Tagore observes, however, has another important implication both for Russia and for India in search of freedom. The far-flung regions of Russia to which the Revolution had spread were inhabited by people who had different languages, different religious beliefs and different ethnic origins even as in India. Some of them were nomadic tribes bitterly resentful of the military and cultural domination of the so-called 'greater Russians'. Tagore sees it as one of the great achievements of the Russian Revolution that with the spread of public education it had found the true way to maintain unity among them by granting them freedom to develop their own languages and cultures as well as their local needs.

He appreciates this success all the more in the light of what was happening in India during these years and wonders that religious institutions all over the world castigate the Russians for their 'irreligion' when they have invested humanity not only in their own country, but everywhere, with so much dignity. He refers to the communal conflicts which had taken place in the district of Dhaka very recently (May 1930) and the prejudicial manner in which the colonial administration fomented it and contrasts it with what he finds in Russia (Ibid., p. 382). His long experience in running the family zamindari had brought him very close to the peasants a large majority of whom were Muslims. A very unusual landlord by all accounts, who won their love and faith by his constant engagement with the problems faced by them, he had also seen at first hand the humiliation they faced in the hands of officials not only because they were poor but because the code of untouchability operated against them as Muslims. He felt that the roots of communal hatred lay here and could only be removed in an atmosphere of substantive equality such as Russian revolutionaries were seeking to establish.

Tagore details the measures taken by the Soviet Government to bring education, health and agricultural and industrial development to the various republics and autonomous states which are part of the Soviet Union, but lie outside the boundaries of the European part of Russia. This is in complete contrast to the earlier 'imperialist policy of the Tsarist generals'. He takes a look at the sheer budgetary allocations provided for them in the Soviet plan, and taking the examples of the Bashkirs living to the South of Ural, the Uzbeks and the Turkmenians who had been the latest to join the Union, gives a vivid description of the dramatic improvement in their status in all respects. Schools have been set up with residential facilities in the neighbourhood of the wells around which nomadic settlements are to be found in Turkmenistan. One hundred

thirty hospitals have been established so far although the report says this is nothing to be proud of since each hospital has to serve 2,640 inhabitants (Ibid., pp. 408–409). Comparing this with the attitude of some Christian missionaries who harp on the 'difficulties' of working in India, Tagore says, here too there are difficulties, but they are regarded as problems to be solved not excuses for inaction. Institutes have been set up for the development of all the languages and the cultures in the region. Tagore quotes the bulletin as declaring proudly: 'for the last eight years the peace between the races of Azerbaijan has never been disturbed' (Ibid., p. 410).

The experiments started by Tagore in some parts of his own zamindari to improve agriculture and thus benefit the peasants show that far from being an impractical dreamer, he made some pioneering efforts which could not be duplicated because of the active apathy of the British Government and of political leaders, but which had a demonstrative effect in providing benefits to the peasant as long as they lasted.[5] Tagore was convinced that peasants' cooperatives might solve the problem of penury and indebtedness if addressed properly. He was not comfortable with being a landlord and confesses that he believed the peasant to be the true owner of the soil; he still went on holding his zamindari only because he felt to give away his land would be a sure way of handing the peasants over to the class of moneylenders. Very candidly he describes the problems that beset him as a landlord trying to make his 'ryot's self-sufficient. He had once called them together and explained to them the benefits of tilling the land jointly with a mechanized plough instead of wasting the whole day on small plots. They had agreed in principle, but had said, 'we are so ignorant, how can we find success in such a huge enterprise'. 'If I had said, I take the responsibility, the problem would be solved … But I had neither the training, nor the will power' (Ibid., p. 384). He did not give up the idea of cooperative farming, however and brings up the issue of 'samabaya niti' time and again. Positive effects of such efforts initiated by him have been recorded. While Tagore was aware of the differences between a collective and a cooperative enterprise, it was his faith in the principle of cooperation that helped him to keep an open mind about collective farming within the Soviet system.

He was cautious in his remarks knowing that the system had evoked many controversies within Soviet Russia. But he is basically convinced that in the years of the revolution both workers and peasants had 'retrieved their humanity' of which the same classes in India continue to be deprived. The former got rid not only of hunger and illiteracy but also of the ghosts of the past, the habits of subservience, the curse of blind religious faith. Hence, he feels that some of the basic mental barriers to collective farming have been removed. It is not a question of coercing

farmers by taking away their land and putting it into a common pool, but of ensuring conscious participation. For the most part, his assessment of their approach to the collectives is based on his conversations with the residents at the 'Central Peasants' House' in Moscow (Ibid., pp. 388–391).

To his question on their opinions about the collective system, the answers are lively, varied and based on experience. One Ukranian peasant says that initially, about 150 plots had been collectivized in their area, in 1929 about half the peasants took them back, but this was because the main principle of collectivization as propagated by Stalin had not been observed by the officials. It had not been voluntary informed collectivization. But those who stuck on ultimately benefited since production doubled. A woman from Siberia described how women's condition had improved dramatically and those who had benefitted were going around disseminating their experience to those who were still resisting. Wherever there was collectivization they had been able to set up schools, crèches and canteens. Another peasant from Sukhoz worked in a large state farm and talked about the increase in production by using mechanized instruments and scientific methods of agriculture.

However, when they were asked to raise their hands to show whether they would agree to the merging of their own plot of land into a collective farm there were many who disagreed. They were not very sure of the reason, but Tagore thinks it is an instinctive response of the peasants to losing what they consider a part of themselves. A Bashkir peasant, however, says that he has his own plot of land, but is joining the neighbourhood collective because to improve production, machinery is needed and these cannot be used on a small plot. Is it possible to maintain family ties while being part of a collective? The Ukranian responds that earlier both parents and children in their area had to migrate for work for several months in the year, now children can spend more time with parents. A woman says, since cooking and care of children is looked after collectively, there are fewer occasions for household quarrels. Tagore keenly observes whether joining collectives was voluntary, whether people could opt out, whether the quality of life had improved for all and above all whether collectivization had helped the cooperative mentality to take root. From his description, it seems hard to believe that the show was put up for his benefit. The possibilities of collectivization are recorded as well as difficulties encountered. Collectivization, at least as it appears to him, does not seem to be necessarily coercive. This is why he is able to relate it to his own experiments with cooperation.

IV

We have here made a selective study of some aspects of the Soviet system as highlighted by Tagore. His trip lasted only a fortnight and was confined to Moscow and its neighbourhood; his plans to visit Leningrad, Crimea and the Caucasus had to be curtailed because of his frail health. It was obvious that his perceptions were limited to the programme chalked out for him by his hosts. Language too must have been a barrier and the fact that a great deal of what he had been hearing about Soviet Russia from both his Western and Indian friends before the trip was deeply prejudiced, made assessment difficult. Yet what strikes us about the letters is the concreteness of whatever he saw, heard and read during his stay. In comparison, his critical comments on the dictatorial state appear to be based more on abstract fears that have come to him as hearsay and do not pertain to the direct impressions he was getting. Such limitations are only to be expected and we have to admit that Tagore was unable to see some of the worst effects of Stalinism even on workers' democracy, but it would be a profound mistake therefore to be dismissive of the uniqueness of what he saw and recorded.

He makes comparisons at every step with problems faced by the Freedom Struggle in his own country: the condition of the workers and the peasants, the educational system, problems arising out of differences among ethnic, linguistic and religious communities, above all, the question of inevitable clashes between popular will and the coercive machinery of the state. He was too well acquainted with the phenomenon of repression of popular will through the worst form of state terror which is the hallmark of colonial governments. He had already been apprised of the atrocities of Fascism too. But he never made the mistake of equating Fascism with the dictatorship of the state in Russia. Here he gives due weightage to his actual experience with the Russian people and positively contrasts it with British imperialism on one hand and Italian Fascism on the other hand. As he sees it, the latter two are destructive of man's basic dignity while the Russian Revolution has been able to give some of it back not only to Russians but to other oppressed people as well.

For all his deep respect for Gandhi, Tagore had basic disagreements with Gandhian politics. In the thinking of both Tagore and Gandhi, certain anti-statist elements are there. But Tagore sometimes carried it to an extreme in thinking that the essence of the Freedom Struggle 'did not consist of political stratagem for capturing state power. At its basic, it [Tagore's approach] is a kind of philosophical anarchism dismissive of

the state and political power' (Bhattacharya, 1997, pp. 25–26). After his brief brush with Swadeshi politics in the early years of the Bengal Partition, Tagore had generally kept away from direct involvement with political movements although he never refrained from speaking up against the colonial state. He also pointed out without mincing matters that spinning the *charkha* or burning foreign clothes had been turned by Gandhi into a political stratagem, into a 'magic formula' which requires the surrender of the intellect to a mechanical ritual and exacts obedience from millions while preventing them from exercising judgement (Ibid., pp. 82–83). He further deplored the obscurantism he found in the concept of 'Hind Swaraj' which professed to exclude Western modernity altogether. It is quite significant that Tagore who shied away from the idea of capture of state power and was suspicious of 'magic formulae' to influence the people to mobilize them even against reason, should be considerably less critical of the Soviet state. This exception made by him should not be taken as his blindness, but as the result of the depth of his impression. It signifies his conviction in Russia's comprehensive engagement with what Bannerji calls 'transformational pedagogy', 'the foundational social and cultural transformation' which Tagore considered to be essential for the project of decolonization (Bannerji, 2016, pp. 24–25).

Tagore's assessment of Russia in 1930, a crucial juncture both for the Bolshevik Revolution and for the Freedom Struggle in India, is significantly different from the general run of European opinion. But the reason for the difference may not lie altogether in the fact that the norms of bourgeois democracy are not available in a colonial state and therefore seem to be of less importance to Tagore than the universal availability of basic material facilities, such as food, health, education and livelihood. In fact, his emphasis throughout is on democracy in a broader and deeper sense, where people do indeed develop their minds freely to decide on the collective destiny of mankind. Whether Soviet Russia was already being forced to move away from that social-political trajectory is something we may continue to debate. But there can be no doubt that Tagore had correctly understood that the objective of the revolutionary effort—which had borne surprising fruit so far—was human emancipation of a kind that Western bourgeois democracy had not even imagined.[6]

Notes

1. This has been mentioned by Muzaffar Ahmad in *Smritikatha,* p. 69. A personal experience may be recalled here. In 1986, I witnessed a septuagenarian folk singer, also an agricultural labourer and a Dalit, give a performance of Nazrul's 'Krishaker Gan' with some local dialect variations at a village

function in the district of Hooghly. It may be recalled that in the early 1920s, Nazrul had been living in Hooghly and then in nearby Krishnanagar and composing some of these songs. It might be that this folk singer, used to oral culture, had, as a mere boy, heard Nazrul himself singing this song. It may have remained as part of his repertoire over the years to be presented again and again to audiences largely consisting of peasants. The dissemination of cultural resources takes place in many remarkable ways indeed!

2. The 'Nationalism' lectures were given by Tagore during his trip to Japan and the USA between May 1916 and March 1917. The First World War was going on at the time and his strong critique of the predatory nature of Nationalism in these countries and generally in the West provoked virulent attacks in the American Press and was denounced by Japanese intellectuals. It was also not received kindly by many of the nationalist leaders in India since Tagore found nationalist politics at home too mimicking the same voracious greed for power. It is because of this, he said, that we think our 'one task is to build a political miracle of freedom upon the quicksand of social slavery' (Das, 1996a, 1996b, p. 462). Tagore did not budge from this position in spite of the hostility it incurred and repeated his warning in later writings, such as *Kalantar* and 'Crisis in Civilisation' (*Sabhyatar Sankat)*. It is interesting to note that among some volumes by Tagore found in Lenin's personal library at Kremlin, 'Nationalism' was one which appears to have been frequently consulted by the Bolshevik leader (Gnatyuk-Danil'chuk, 1986, p. 125). An account of the international reception of these lectures appears in Majumdar, vol. 1, 1995 (Majumdar, 1988–1996).
3. Agents of the Fascist Government in Italy orchestrated Tagore's second visit there and organized a meeting with Mussolini, the head of the state on 31 May 1926. Mussolini was presented by the Fascist propaganda machinery as the 'strong man' who had saved his country from sure ruin. In spite of his discomfort with the cult of 'strong men' that he repeats later in the Russian letters, Tagore fell into the trap. His commendatory comments were inflated and publicized. It was only after a meeting with Romain Rolland and victims of Mussolini's dictatorship that Tagore realized his mistake and immediately retracted his earlier statements to denounce Fascism publicly. One of these pieces was an open letter to C.F. Andrews part of which came out in the *Manchester Guardian* followed by a fuller text later published in Visva-Bharati Quarterly (October 1926). He also repudiated through the *Manchester Guardian* the version of his Italian visit given by Professor Carlo Formici, a pro-Fascist scholar instrumental in organizing it (Das, 1996b, pp. 985–996). It is interesting to note that Tagore's friends in *Prabasi* and *Modern Review* failed to see Fascism for what it was and expressed unhappiness about Tagore changing his mind.
4. There are of course contradictory pulls complicating his position. Even in the interview given to *Izvetsia* before he left Russia, he makes an admonitory appeal to the Russian people in the following words:

> For the sake of humanity I hope that you may never create a vicious force of violence which will go on weaving an interminable chain of violence and cruelty. Already you have inherited much of this legacy from the Tsarist regime. It is the worst legacy you could possibly have. You have tried to destroy many of the other evils of this regime. Why not try to destroy this one also? (Vol. 3, 1991 (Majumdar, 1988–1996, pp. 95–96; Sen, 1991)).

But there are a few occasions when he goes further. The description of Tsarism and Bolshevism as the 'same demon turning now to this side and now to the other' is obviously provoked by some new negative information that has reached him. But even here, Tagore's critique is more against those in India who mimic the Bolshevists than against Bolshevism as such. (Rabindra Rachanabali, 1990, p. 706).

Again, in his writings on the subject in later years, he is careful to distinguish his 'samabaya niti' from forced collectivization and deplores the presence of 'coercion' in Soviet Russia (*Rabindra Rachanabali*, 1990, p. 747). At the same time, this does not cancel out the evidence of the Russian letters where ample instances of voluntary collectivization are provided.

Following Russia's attack on Finland in November 1939, at the onset of the Second World War, he praised the Finnish Republic and commented that even if Russia won against Finland, it would be a matter of shame for the former. But he still recalls the fact that it was the Bolsheviks who liberated Finland and the Baltic states from Tsarist rule and helped in their development. Even here, he does not charge Russia with having imperialist designs against Finland. It is still not the same for him as Fascist aggression (quoted in Majumdar, vol. 6, pp. 68–85).

On the other hand, in some of his last writings like 'Crisis in Civilization' (1941) and in the stinging open letter to Miss Rathbone (June 1941), he expresses his unfaltering admiration for Russia again and again for its unsparing energy in 'fighting disease and illiteracy…in steadily liquidating ignorance and poverty, wiping off the humiliation from the face of a vast continent'. He contrasts with the imperialist powers sacrificing the welfare of the subject races to their own national greed the 'genuine attempt being made to harmonise the interests of the various nationalities' scattered over the vast tracts of land in Russia (Das, 1996b, pp. 723–724).

5. The Tagore family had landed properties in Silaidah in Nadia district, in Patisar in the Rajshahi district and in Sajadpur in Pabna district. When Tagore was entrusted with the job of looking after these properties, he took up many developmental schemes there and sought to involve the peasants into cooperative enterprises which would help them solve their own problems and improve their lives. In 1912, he bought some land in Surul in the neighbourhood of Santiniketan and started an agricultural farm and a research laboratory. L.K. Elmhirst helped him in 1922 to start a Department of Rural Reconstruction and Rural Development at Sriniketan in Surul (Raha, 2011, pp. 179–187). In 'Sriniketaner Itihas o Adarsha' (*Rabindra Rachanabali*, 1990, pp. 785–789) and 'Samabaya Niti' (*Rabindra Rachanabali*, 1990, pp. 743–760), he describes his objectives. His Russia visit encouraged him

profoundly because he found basic similarities between what he was doing on a small scale and what the Russians were attempting all over their country. Letters written to Pratima Devi and Rathindranath, his daughter-in-law and his son, around this time bear ample evidence of this assessment (*Rabindra Rachanabali*, 2001, pp. 1160–1161).

6. All translations from the original Bengali are, unless otherwise stated, mine.

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