

Tagore's Prophetic Vision in 'Letters From Russia'

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Today, September 11, marks 90 years of the poet's visit to the Soviet Union. He had warned against "the imperfect contact between the wills of the leader and the led" - regimes today would do well to remember it.

Rabindranath Tagore reached the Soviet Union on September 11, 1930.

He had aired his desire to visit the country when he met Alexander Arosyev, the Soviet Union's ambassador in Stockholm. Arosyev, a hack writer who headed a union for cultural ties with other countries, was [executed](#) during Stalin's regime.

Playwright, critic and journalist, Anatoly Lunacharsky, who was also involved with the Ministry of Education, was the one who [invited](#) Tagore to Russia in his personal capacity. There was enthusiasm about Tagore's visit amongst certain people including Russian orientalist Sergei Oldenburg, who specialised in Buddhist studies.

My interest here is not to detail the visit, but focus on the famous text Tagore's visit to Russia produced: *Letters from Russia*. The letters were translated into Russian in 1956. Stalin reportedly wasn't pleased by the 13th letter where Tagore made critical remarks about the Soviet regime. As a result, Tagore's interview to the Russian daily, *Izvestia*, was not published in 1930 under Stalin's [orders](#). It was finally published in 1988 under Gorbachev's regime.

The first letter Tagore writes from Russia is dated September 20. His third letter was the last one he wrote from Russia's soil, dated 'Moscow, 25 September, 1930'. He left the shores of the Soviet Union on September 25, and reached Berlin on the 28th, the day he wrote the fourth letter back home. It is interesting that in the three letters Tagore wrote from Berlin - his fourth, fifth and sixth - he only speaks about his impressions of Russia. From October 3, his seventh letter onwards, Tagore is writing from the German-built ocean liner, SS Bremen, on his way to America. But the subject is still the impact that Russia had, and the questions it raised, in the poet's mind.

In his first letter on September 20, Tagore brings up the historical question of the world's "nameless people", who live without dignity and hope. He observes that "nothing permanent can be built on charity" that old, Christian ideal. Tagore fuses the idea of altruism with socialism: "Only by becoming equal can one render real help." He takes the point further: "Man cannot do good to those whom he does not respect." Tagore goes deeper than the idea that respecting others is a value defined by formal and political equality under the law.

The idea of "becoming equal" is a social-driven ethic and phenomenon, where the ethical impulse of doing good to others appears from the spirit of equality. Tagore marks here that the chief enemy against socially embedded altruism based on equality and respect is "self-interest". Tagore means here the self-interest of power that "denies people their human rights". The idea of respect, altruism and equality is clearly placed on materialist grounds. Tagore makes the strikingly Marxist point that

“the right to the land does not morally belong to the landlord, but to the peasant.”

Tagore felt Russia found a “radical solution” to the problem of self-interest in communism. But held that time was not yet ripe to comment on “the final fruit” of the experiment. He vaguely suggested “grave defects” in the system. Tagore visited Russia for his primary interest in studying the new education system under the communist regime. He was impressed by the “experiments” being carried out with the “methods of teaching”. He was all praise for it throughout. But he left an early warning in his first letter that it may be difficult to sustain “a theory of education [that] does not correspond with the law of the living mind”.

There were, however, certain high points in Tagore’s impression of the Soviet system of education. In his fifth letter, which he wrote from Berlin on October 1, Tagore narrated his visit to an educational centre called the Pioneers’ Commune. He was impressed by how orphaned children with no sign of neglect and awkwardness, welcomed him and answered his questions with confidence. The students acted as “living newspapers” and explained the Five Year Plan. In his seventh letter, Tagore wrote about how the Soviets used the museum as a pedagogical site.

In his second letter written on September 19, Tagore observes that due to the disappearance of the “distinction of [or, based on] wealth” in Russia, “the visage of wealth” has undergone a visible change: “there is not the unseemliness of poverty, there is mere want.” So human beings find themselves in an equal state, where the social state of poverty has been overcome by realising the natural state of want. The perception is: want is natural, poverty is social.

In his fifth letter on October 1, from Berlin, Tagore engages with the idea of property. He writes, “personal property is the language of [his] individuality”. And further says: “Had it been merely a means of earning one’s livelihood and not of self-expression, it would have been easier to convince him by argument that one improves one’s livelihood by parting with it.”

Tagore equates the idea of private property with intellect and talent. The argument is that property is part of something intrinsic and creative. Tagore believes that you can circumscribe “excessive individualism” but you cannot do away with the “desire” for private property. Just as want is natural, the desire for private property is also natural. The idea of the “common good” according to Tagore, must then act as a double limit-principle: disallowing property “from turning into greed, deceit and cruelty”, but also not taking away property “by force”. Like Rousseau, Tagore believes that property is natural, and needs to be refashioned to serve the common good.

In the case of Russian communism, Tagore writes: “In trying to solve the problem the Soviets have denied it. Hence there is no end to violence.” The psychological roots of violence unleashed by the Soviet regime emanate from the ideological refusal to accept the modern individual.

In the thirteenth letter written on October 3, that irked Stalin, Tagore vehemently argues in favour of the individual. In erasing the “proper line of demarcation between the individual and society” Russia, Tagore believes, behaved “not unlike the Fascists”. This makes the Soviet regime find it difficult to explain the suppression of the individual in the name of collective life. This was the “shadow side of the moon” Tagore famously described about Russia, in his eighth letter on October 5.

Soviet dissidents would have agreed with Tagore. The Soviet regime’s denial led to paranoia that tried to suppress voices of criticism. In this regard, Tagore makes two very striking arguments. One, that the communist regime made a “strange mistake”: Using a “pictorial and cinematographic interpretation of history” to show the cruelties of the Czarist Empire, the communist regime ended up adopting a “similar ruthless policy”. This is perhaps a great, recurring act of forgetting in history

by regimes that defeat the logic and moral force of their own argument or propaganda against other regimes, by indulging in mirror-acts of violence. This hypocrisy is both moral and political, and an abiding limitation of power. You can't fool people with it.

The other interesting argument Tagore makes against this violence takes the argument back to the question of nature. He writes: "Those who have not the patience to wait for human nature to come to terms with its own time believe in persecution." The idea of human nature in this formulation is one of changeability. Human nature is not fixed. If it is desired of human nature to change, or shift, its sensibilities, it is necessary to give it time. Tagore asks for patience when "theory is ready, but not men." It is an important statement against theorisation conceived as a scientific project and implemented as applied science upon human society.

Tagore is not against the advent of great change and the making of a "new age" that uproots "ancient beliefs and customs". In his third letter, Tagore critiques the meaning of "traditional;" as something that "clings" to human beings like "numerous apartments" where "its innumerable doors are guarded by sentries".

This image (and description) of tradition is reminiscent of Ambedkar, where the doors to knowledge and power are blocked by gatekeepers with a class or caste entitlement and interest. Tagore is excited that these doors have been broken down in the Soviet Union. He is worried of the "conceit" that enters the project of equalisation of wants. In the spirit of the Romantics, Tagore wants human nature "to be wooed" than coerced. Tagore seems to prefer the Aristotelian politics of persuasion.

Perhaps there is ground and space in Tagore's idea for us to rethink the question of originary violence. If it is impossible to think modern revolutions without violence, those who believe in this principle of change must acknowledge that violence limits what it achieves, and the limit gradually diminishes, and finally overcomes, the achievement. Tagore's timely warning for the Soviet Union was ignored by Stalin, but it turned prophetic. Poets are better visionaries than dictators.

To be sure, Tagore does not forget to point out the important difference between a communist experiment and a fascist one. He acknowledges that the Soviet state has put a hold on "the greed of unlimited power". This led to the suppression of individual freedom, yet there was a "redeeming feature":

"[As] far as the fundamental Soviet principles are concerned, they are unceasing in their endeavour to increase the inherent power of man by general education and culture: they have not continually repressed them like the Fascists".

Fascism is an assault on cultural freedom, and the spirit of education, both of which, for Tagore, require an investment in social change and a non-coercive spirit of equality. Tagore warns against "the imperfect contact between the wills of the leader and the led". We are once again witnessing the coercive nature of that contact today. Tagore's warnings are meant both for us as well as for dictatorial regimes to remember.

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