Preface

The debate between Gandhi and Tagore appeared to have been about many things: satyagraha, the non-cooperation movement, the boycott of educational institutions, swadeshi and the burning of foreign cloth, Gandhi’s mantra that “swaraj can be attained by the charkha” (Tagore, in Bhattacharya 2008: 109) and the possibilities of self-mortification in Gandhi’s fasts. However, one can argue that Tagore’s exchanges with Gandhi did not constitute a set of disconnected arguments. These arguments could be reinterpreted as Tagore’s efforts to articulate his insights about the possibilities of untruth in Gandhi’s conception of the proper means to the truth/satya. The arguments exchanged between them also brought out the differences between their conflicting understandings of freedom/swaraj. Consequently, the issues that divided Gandhi and Tagore were more fundamental than can be imagined by looking at the immediate terms of their exchange. This book tells the story of the Gandhi–Tagore debate. It argues that the debate was primarily about truth, possibilities of untruth and the nature of freedom/swaraj.

It is important to state how this volume differs from earlier accounts of the Gandhi–Tagore debate. For one, there has been no complete volume on this debate apart from Prof. Sabyasachi Bhattacharya’s book which compiles the details of the exchange itself. Accounts of the debate form single chapters or parts of chapters (Raychaudhuri 1999; Sen 2005; Sengupta 2005; Vajpeyi 2012) in books that are primarily dedicated to other issues. More substantively, while most commentators have noted the differences between them they have argued that there was a more fundamental agreement which underlies the differences. For instance, Prof. Tapan Raychaudhuri has argued that the “genuine differences in opinion and world view have deflected attention from the vast areas of agreement between the two” (Raychaudhuri 1999: 141). In the same spirit, Prof. Sengupta argues “… it is fair to conclude, beneath the level of differences in their thinking, there was a very real resonance between their fundamental positions” (Sengupta 2005: 50). In contrast, Amartya Sen has argued that the Indian tradition was characterized by features such as rationality, debate, heterodoxy, scepticism, pluralism and toleration of difference. This (in his view) is what made it an “argumentative tradition”. Sen’s discussion of the issues that separated Gandhi and Tagore and the issues that brought them
together is part of a larger argument, which is that the Indian tradition itself (from its earliest political beginnings) had made space for disagreement and difference. Therefore, this tradition had laid the basis for the adoption of democracy and secularism in India (Sen 2005).

This book denies that there was any “real resonance” (Sengupta 2005: 50) between the philosophical categories in terms of which Tagore and Gandhi thought of freedom, truth, possibilities of untruth and modes of resistance. The book argues that the differences between Tagore and Gandhi can be understood in two ways. At one level there was a discussion of the immediate issues which divided them while at another level these arguments were only symptomatic of deeper divergences which need to be philosophically interpreted. Any reinterpretation must examine Tagore’s reservations about Gandhi’s conception of freedom as moral self mastery involving “unquestioning obedience” (Tagore, in Bhattacharya 2008: 78) to moral rules. Consequently, a rethinking of this debate involves an interpretation of Gandhi’s relationship to tradition, his dialogue with the traditional formulations of virtues, his fundamental moral insights and his conception of truth. The book argues that an examination of this debate must take serious note of the fundamental philosophical differences between Gandhi and Tagore. However, this must not be taken to deny the areas of agreement between them. For instance, it cannot be ignored, that both Gandhi and Tagore came closest in their attitude towards the nature. They rejected the anthropocentricism of modernity and shared a sense of wonder in living life in an enchanted cosmos.

However one may wonder what is the point of making a philosophical enquiry into the Gandhi and Tagore debate. There are two reasons that can be offered in answer to this question. Firstly the debate is important to understanding Gandhi as a philosopher. For the debate is about Tagore’s criticisms of Gandhi’s central notions and Gandhi’s efforts to explain his ideas. As Sorabji has recently argued: “Gandhi was indeed a thinker and he offered philosophical reasons for what he thought” (Sorabji 2012: 1). According to Sorabji two of the possible ways in which Gandhi’s explanations can be characterized as philosophical, are as follows: “First, Gandhi did more than any philosopher…to subject his ideas to criticism through his daily and weekly writing, much of it nationwide. Second, he often gave reasons of a philosophical kind” (Sorabji 2012: 196). It is noteworthy that this debate brings out at their best the philosophical character of Gandhi’s reasons for what he thought and did. The debate also makes it clear that Gandhi welcomed (in fact, often invited) criticism and was ready to think seriously about it. It is therefore the central task of this book to bring out the contribution that this debate can make to a philosophical rethinking of Gandhi’s fundamental ideas and arguments.

The other reason for looking at the debate is to bring out the contribution which it made to the creation of India. Perhaps one can say that this contribution continues to be as relevant today as when it was first made. The debate between Tagore and Gandhi made the fairly significant point that the central issue confronting colonial Indians was to determine what was meant by swaraj/freedom and what were the proper means to attain swaraj. Both Tagore and Gandhi argued that Indians could only properly reconstitute, the individual/collective Indian self/swa, after they had
determined what it would mean for all Indians to be free. Such freedom was an essential precondition to the task of rethinking the individual and collective self-identity of the Indian people. In this context, one can consider that both Tagore and Gandhi thought that freedom meant much more than political self-determination. For Gandhi, it meant moral self-rule *qua* progress towards a more authentic human life. For Tagore, it meant that each individual Indian should be free in her mind to respond to reasons in what she did and thought. On either interpretation, individual freedom became a prerequisite to the progress into a more authentic Indian identity. Tagore and Gandhi emphasized that the task of rethinking the collective self of free India/*Hind Swaraj* would be seriously threatened if Indians engaged themselves in a revivalist search for the legitimate Indian instead of understanding what it would mean to live a free and properly human life. This is the central message of their debate and consequently of this book about the debate.

One can ask, of course, why it should matter (conceptually and practically) at all that Gandhi and Tagore emphasized the need to define *swaraj*/freedom rather than recover/find the legitimate Indian subject who was to be free. At this point it would be useful to recall Isaiah Berlin’s comments made in another context. Berlin has brought out the importance of ideas to “historical movements”

> “… that to understand such movements or conflicts is, above all, to understand the ideas or attitudes to life involved in them, which alone make such movements a part of human history, and not mere natural events” (Berlin 1998: 193). It seems apparent that the ideas that informed the debates about India influenced the nature of the movement for India’s independence from colonial domination. “These beliefs about how life should be lived, what men and women should be and do…” (Berlin 1998: 1) also significantly influenced the collective Indian imaginations of what free India ought to be like. To come back to the present enquiry, one can argue that the movement for *Hind Swaraj* was indeed influenced by the questions raised by the intellectuals and political leaders who thought about India. These questions had often been framed (prior to the Gandhi–Tagore debate) in terms of enquiries into the authentic self of India. Such enquiries prioritized the quest for the self of India by focusing etymologically on the first particle, in the composite word *swaraj*. That is, the reflexive pronoun *swa* commonly translated as ‘self’/or broadly ‘to do with the self’. The primary issue in the minds of colonial Indians who responded to concerns about the authentic *swa* in *swaraj* became that of determining who was the legitimate Indian. In these terms, movements for India’s freedom often became inextricably linked with revivalist arguments expressing the urgent need to recover the legitimate self of India by going back to her past.

The Gandhi–Tagore debate relocated the central concern in the debates about India. For 26 years, across the pages of the national newspapers, the debate emphasized the composite etymological sense of *swaraj* as ‘rule of self by the self’ or freedom. The exchanges between Tagore and Gandhi, it may be recalled, were primarily about *swaraj* and what ought to be the *proper* means to *swaraj*. Gandhi spoke about collective participation in non-violent programmes such as *satyagraha*, *swadeshi* and the burning of foreign cloth, spinning and the non-cooperation movement, as the proper means to both self rule and home rule. Tagore argued that
these programmes were contrary to the spirit of the individual’s freedom in the mind as there were possibilities of the coercion of the unique individual in such collective movements. The importance of this shift of attention, from the search for the authentic self of India to the meaning of freedom, can become apparent when one considers that if the colonial Indian quest was defined (as indeed it had been, before and after, this debate) in terms that prioritized a search for the legitimate Indian self there would be conflicting results of such a search. The enquiry about the nature of the self of India would in itself lead (and indeed had led in the past) to conflicts about legitimacy. It could well emerge that though there were many different individual and collective Indian selves there was no uncontested agreement on the legitimate Indian. The quest for collective freedom would be lost, even before it began, if it depended upon a prior answer to the question: ‘who was the authentic Indian to be freed/empowered?’ On the other hand, if (as Gandhi and Tagore argued) the primary issue confronting colonial Indians was thought of in terms of determining the proper meaning of freedom that enquiry itself would become the enabling factor for the individual Indians to rethink the proper self of a plural India. They would then find themselves able to imagine a diverse India collectively as a free state. An important consequence of such a relocation of the debate about India from, conflicts about the authentic Indian self to intellectual contestations about the meaning of swaraj, was also that it emphasized the need to think seriously about the selection of the proper means to swaraj.

To appreciate the significance of the shift involved in relocating the debate about India (from the quest for legitimacy to the meaning of freedom) one can look at the etymology of the word swaraj itself. Swaraj is a complex term derived from two simple Sanskrit terms-swa a reflexive particle meaning “self”/or broadly “to do with the self” and rājya meaning “mastery” or “rule”. Since the first part of the term swaraj is the reflexive particle swa, which can be translated as the “self”, the term swaraj can be easily associated with the search for the authentic/true, self/swa. This is borne out by the fact that swaraj has had a history of association with revivalist movements in India. In such contexts the term has primarily signified not only freedom but the quest to secure freedom for the true/legitimate Indian. One may recall that Shivaji used the term for the first time (in the mid-seventeenth century) in Maharashtra during his attempts to establish a kingdom independent of Mughal authority. At that time the dominant sense of swaraj was to emphasize the search for the legitimate self/swa of India. Swaraj was thought of as a freedom to find, or more properly, to recover the authentic Indian self. It meant Maratha/Hindu rule against Muslim/outsider domination. The term swaraj continued to exert an influence on debates about India and it was frequently used from about 1885–1947 in the course of anti-colonial struggle. It also had a long history in the politics of the expatriate Indians. However, though much used, swaraj was also a much contested term amongst the expatriate Indian community. Tolstoy became an interjector into these contestations when, in response to a letter by Taraknath Das (1884–1958), the editor of the Free Hindustan, Tolstoy wrote the “Letter to a Hindoo”. He argued (in this letter) that non-violence was the only legitimate means to swaraj available for morally upright Indians. Gandhi chanced upon this letter in 1909 (just before he left
London) and he wrote the preface and translated it into Gujarati during the same week that he wrote *Hind Swaraj* in 1909.

Perhaps it is on account of this close association between *swa* and *swaraj* that Ananya Vajpeyi has recently argued, that several hundred years after Shivaji, India’s key nationalist figures (Tagore, Gandhi, Nehru, Ambedkar and Abanindranath Tagore) were engaged in a search for “the ‘swa’ in ‘swaraj’” (Vajpeyi 2012: x). They were interested in the answer to the question: “What constitutes India’s self?” (p. x). They each thought (in their own ways) that “there was a crisis of self-hood” (p. xiv) and that the “swa would be discovered in the past” (p. xiv).

A contrary and fairly important insight emerges from the consideration of the debate in this book. Namely, that Tagore and Gandhi were primarily interested in determining the meaning of *swaraj* or freedom. They argued that it was important that individual Indians realized that the anti-colonial movement was a quest for *swaraj*, rather than a search for the *swa* in *swaraj*. It may be recalled that (as Vajpeyi reminds us), Nehru had once asked the question: “what was this India…?” (Nehru, *The Discovery of India*, quoted in Vajpeyi 2012: xi). Aurobindo had also sought an answer to the question: “What was this ancient spirit and characteristic soul of India?” (Ghosh 2011, in Bhushan and Garfield 2011: 41). However, in the second phase of his debate with Gandhi, Tagore raised a significantly different question: “What is this *swaraj*?” (Tagore, in Bhattacharya 2008: 114). Much earlier, in the closing words of *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi had declared his life quest: “In my opinion, we have used the term ‘swaraj’ without understanding its real significance. I have endeavoured to explain it as I understand it, and my conscience testifies that my life henceforth is dedicated to its attainment” (Parel 2009: 117). It is important to recall Parel’s argument that one of the reasons that Gandhi wrote *Hind Swaraj* (on a return journey from London to South Africa in 1909) was to respond to the politics of expatriate Indians, many of whom thought that *swaraj* was inextricably linked with a recovery of the legitimate *swa* in *swaraj*. “Gandhi’s interlocutors in *Hind Swaraj* belong to two camps—those opposed to his philosophy and those in favour of it. Among those opposed, are, first, V.D. Savarkar and Shyamji Krishna Varma,… They want to transform India into a Hindu ethnic state by the use of violence, including terrorist violence” (Parel 2009: xv).

Interestingly, one can argue that Gandhi made a significant contribution to the composite sense of the term *swaraj* itself. For, though Gandhi himself often translated *swaraj* as *self* rule, in doing this he might have become a victim of the same colonial epistemic violence that he identified and criticized in other contexts. To get closer to what Gandhi meant by *swaraj*, one can recall that *swa* is part of the family of words involving “se”, that is, proper or of one’s own most orientation. It should be noted that when Gandhi spoke of *swaraj* he had in mind more than *self*-rule. Gandhi clearly meant to invoke a teleological conception of the properly *human* life as the life *swabhavik* to man *qua* man and not only to an Indian, a Gujarati, a Hindu, a Muslim or a Parsi. In this context, Ajay Skaria has made the point that though *swabhavik* is often translated as “natural”, ‘swa’ is also a cognate of words involving *se*, “proper”, “ownmost”. *Bhav*: “orientation” (Skaria 2010: 145). One can argue that when Gandhi spoke of *swaraj* as *self* rule he meant to
invoke the freedom of each person to live a life that came naturally to her as a human self/subject. For Gandhi, as he declared in many places (and this is discussed in Chap. 2 of the present volume), the properly human life natural to man (or the life of man’s inner most orientation) was one which progressed non-violently towards a telos which was “truth”. It was on account of such an understanding of swa as coming from “se”/ownmost, that Gandhi interpreted swaraj in a dual sense—as self-rule and as home rule, normatively grounding the former in the latter. Such an understanding also made room for a rethinking of the collective Indian self as not a Hindu, Muslim or Christian self but as a properly human self who was free to live a ahimsanat life that came naturally to man qua man. Both Gandhi and Tagore argued that political home rule could only be grounded in individual freedom. By doing this, they also emphasized individual responsibility for securing collective freedom by reiterating the relationship between the selection of the means adopted to realize freedom and swaraj as the goal or end. Tagore argued that “swaraj alone can beget swaraj” (Bhattacharyya 2008: 120). Gandhi, it may be recalled, had argued that means and end are inseperable.

It becomes important to note that though they agreed on relocating the debate about India to swaraj, the disagreements between Tagore and Gandhi were centered around on the proper meaning of that term. Gandhi had already explained what he meant by swaraj in Hind Swaraj. He had said that swaraj was to be understood in a dual sense—as home rule and what he called self-rule. Gandhi made it clear that home rule was dependent on individual self-rule. This was explained: “Real home rule is self-rule or self-control. The way to it is passive resistance: that is soul-force or love-force” (Parel 2009: 116). While Tagore also had a dual understanding of swaraj, he rejected Gandhi’s understanding of it. As I argue in Chap. 5, individual freedom was understood by Tagore in terms closer to the enlightenment and to Kant. At the individual level, swaraj was freedom in the mind or a freedom to reason and judge for oneself rather than moral self-mastery. As home rule, swaraj was a complicated end which required a comprehensive programme of national reconstruction and the removal of internal obstacles such as Hindu–Muslim antagonism. Thus, though both Tagore and Gandhi saw swaraj as related to the self and to India, they had different understandings of what swaraj meant for the self and for the collective.

The importance of this debate between Gandhi and Tagore in relocating the issues at stake in the anti-colonial Indian movement can become apparent if one considers another text that was written around 1881–1882. This was Ānandmath or The Sacred Brotherhood, which was written by Bankimchandra Chatterji. Ānandmath can be properly described as primarily engaged in (what Vajpeyi has described as) the quest for the “‘swa’ of ‘swaraj’” (Vajpeyi 2012: x). In Ānandmath, this search was not conceived in the terms of a rethinking of the self but as a recovery of the legitimate swa in swaraj from India’s ancient past. The protagonists in the story were the children/santan of the ‘mother’ who reclaimed their true self by turning to the enduring ideal of Hindu ascetic renunciation in the service of the mother/country. As Bhabhananda put it in this novel: “We’ve lost our religious way of life, our caste status, our self-respect, and our family connections—and now
we’re about to lose our lives! If we don’t get rid of these bearded degenerates will anything be left of our Hindu identity?” (Chatterji 2005: 147). Chatterji argues (through the events in the novel) that it could only be after the Indian self had been reclaimed that it would make sense to establish swaraj for the sake of that self. The prioritization of the need to first recover, and then empower, the legitimate self of India rather than determine what it meant to be free becomes clear from the tactical acceptance of colonial rule by the santans to overthrow Muslim dominion in India. This was construed as an opportunity to empower the legitimate Indian self by Western learning and Western science. This becomes clear at the end of Ānandmatth when the Healer comes to Satyananda Thakur after the war and says:

For a long time now the outward knowledge has been lost in this land, and so the true Eternal code has been lost too. If one wishes to reinstate this Code, one must make known the outward knowledge first…. The English are very knowledgeable in the outward knowledge…. Therefore we’ll make them king (Chatterji 2005: 229).

This understanding of the Indian movement as a search for the swa in swaraj was grounded on the concept of legitimacy. The important question was not what is the meaning of swaraj and what can be the legitimate means to attain it. Rather, the important question was: ‘Who is the legitimate Indian?’ One can note that the term santan invokes the mother–child relationship as a metaphor for defining the legitimate Indian. It is only those who are born of the mother, “The ‘Mother’s Children” (Chatterji Ānandmatth 2005: 146), who can claim legitimacy. The mother is a metaphor for the country and this literary argument settles legitimacy not by place of birth but by the relationship of faith with the land of birth. In Ānandmatth, the quest for swaraj was thought of in terms of empowering the reclaimed authentic Indian self. It may be noted that reclaiming unlike rethinking has the sense of “taking back” what is already one’s own and has been lost. Most importantly, in Ānandmatth there is a central insight that the means to such legitimate reclamation (note the invoking of the mother-santan relationship as the grounds of legitimacy) —whether violence by santans or tactical acceptance of British rule to drive out the Muslim empire—were unimportant, since the “end” put the means in perspective as purely instrumental.

It is important to note that the exchanges between Gandhi and Tagore reclaimed the debate about India from questions about the individual’s legitimate relationship to the land of her birth to questions about swaraj and the proper means to swaraj. The significance of this shift in collective imagination cannot be overemphasized. However, though the debate was primarily centred on swaraj, it involved arguments about a set of related Gandhian categories. It should be noted that these arguments are important for the philosophical rethinking of central Gandhian insights. Chapter 1 of the book makes a fairly detailed summary and examination of the major issues discussed, in terms of the four historical phases of the exchanges in this debate. It can therefore be skipped by a discerning reader who is familiar with the details of that exchange. Chapter 2 makes an attempt to rethink Gandhi’s fundamental moral insights. The chapter examines the philosophical implications of Gandhi’s reconstruction of Patañjali’s yamas/niyamas as virtues of character.
While Gandhi’s engagement with the Bhagavad Gītā is well known, his relationship to the Yoga Śūtra is lesser known. There are over 200 references made by Gandhi in the Collected Works to Patañjali and the Yoga Śūtra. While Chap. 2 attempts to recover Gandhi’s engagement with India’s classical tradition, it also reinterprets Gandhi’s central moral insights.

Swaraj and related categories were not the only important issues in this debate. The debate also brought out Tagore’s difficulties with Gandhi’s understanding of “truth”. The debate between Gandhi and Tagore was about truth: Tagore wrote “The Call of Truth” (Modern Review) and Gandhi addressed “The Poet’s Anxiety” (Young India, June 1921). Chapter 3 of the book is about Gandhi’s truth. This chapter examines Prof. Akeel Bilgrami’s interpretation of Gandhi’s truth as primarily relativist. That such a discussion is philosophically important is obvious but it is especially important to the central task of this book which is to make a philosophical examination of the Gandhi Tagore debate. If Gandhi rejected objective moral truths and endorsed a Jain form of pluralism and internalism about truth (as Bilgrami thinks he did) it would be inconsistent for him (both in thinking and practice) to debate with Tagore about the truth of the central Gandhian “principles” (Gandhi himself used this term) such as satyagraha, non-cooperation and charkha.

Another way in which truth enters the debate is through a consideration of the possibilities of untruth which were present in the Gandhian methods to arrive at the truth. Chapter 4 brings out Tagore’s insights about the possibilities of untruth in Gandhi’s movements, while Chap. 5 points to the differences between their conflicting interpretations of swaraj.

As evident from this discussion, I use the word “India” in this book rather than “Indic”, a term which might find more following among scholars writing about the colonial period in history. It has been argued by such scholars that the empirical analytic and ideological sense of “Indic” might work better for positing a geospatial unit about whom we speak without any reference to an entity such as a nation. If modern Indian political thought can be understood, it can perhaps only be through the problematizations of the founders of modern India. These were also the intellectuals who constructed, and intellectually contested, the primary political categories in terms of which the political was imagined. Since their varied and contesting imaginations made a political point about centring on an entity called “India”, no matter how much they might have debated its swa qua self or questioned the legitimacy of “nation”, as an appropriate category to designate “India”, I prefer to retain the use of that term.

This book argues that the differences between Tagore and Gandhi’s imaginings of free “India” came from their differently negotiated relationships to tradition and modernity. However, though Tagore was closer than Gandhi to the Western Enlightenment (and its central ideas) he cannot unreflectively be taken to be a modern. One reason for this is that Tagore rejected the anthropocentricism of Western modernity which puts man at the centre of the universe and dismantles the idea of a wider order. It was his rejection of the primarily modern, “anthropomorphomorphic hallucination” (Tagore 2012: 88), of seeing man everywhere that brought
Tagore fairly close to Gandhi. For, they both shared the belief that man could be thought of only against the vastness of the cosmos: “We stand before this great world” (Tagore 1996: 511). The conclusion (Chap. 6) brings out Gandhi and Tagore’s shared sense of life in an enchanted universe.

References

The Tagore-Gandhi Debate on Matters of Truth and Untruth
Puri, B.
2015, XXXV, 181 p. 1 illus., Hardcover
ISBN: 978-81-322-2115-9