

Friendships of 'Largeness and Freedom,' Andrews, Tagore, and Gandhi, An Epistolary Account, 1912-1940

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Any collection of recorded exchanges between figures as renowned as Rabindranath Tagore, Charles Freer Andrews and Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi is worth revisiting. Uma Dasgupta's edited collection, *Friendships of 'Largeness and Freedom' Andrews, Tagore, and Gandhi, An Epistolary Account, 1912-1940*, claims distinction in its adding of Charles F. Andrews' letters to this eminent constellation and teasing out more meaning thereby.

While many letters exchanged between Mahatma and the Poet (and I am referring particularly to Prof. Sabyasachi Bhattacharya's remarkable collection *The Mahatma and the Poet: Letters and Debates Debates, 1915-1941*, New Delhi: National Book Trust, 1997) have been variously anthologized/curated, yet this new book deserves attention, not only because it adds Charles Freer Andrews' letters to this tridirectional epistolary exchange, but as it foregrounds the idea-ideal of friendship. Edward Carpenter, among many early European modernists, wrote eloquently about friendship's vivifying possibilities, given that it was a human choice, unfettered by exigencies of birth (and ties that such natalities imposed) and hence uniquely 'modern'. These conscious choices of 'friendship' as encoded in the expressive mode of letters, lend these three their 'largeness,' their 'capacity' to conceive a human, borderless world. Even when the letters in Dasgupta's collection are focalized around struggles for Indian independence, these three interpret freedom in the broadest sense possible.

Epistolarity as a cultural tool is pivotal to this production of capacious 'freedom' even as it functionally communicates. Rabindranath Tagore was of the opinion

(and this was perhaps best expressed in *Streer Patra-The Wife's Letter* of 1914- the time from which this book's dynamic relational matrix is recorded) that letters create intimacies that are qualitatively superior to those forged through physical-verbal nearness. Physical nearness, Tagore knew, was often conditioned by factors over which socially embedded human beings had little or no choice. Words, especially when exchanged on a daily basis, were bound to lose their charge, their immanence. Letters are that special arena where the charge of diurnally exchanged words could be reinvented, where the ordinariness of physical proximity could be transcended. The functionality of a letter combined with its creative possibilities makes it a potent tool for a reinvention of ideas and relationships that are founded within them. Each letter in Dasgupta's collection is creatively distinct, even in dissent, and coinages that we have taken for granted in our political life (such as 'Sentinel' for Tagore, and 'Mahatma' for Gandhi); may be rediscovered in their originary contexts.

The initial set of epistolary exchanges ("Their Friendship, Their Struggles; "South Africa and India's honour" and "Santiniketan and Phoenix School" are divided between the anti-apartheid and pro-indentured labour struggles of Gandhi in South Africa, and their resonances in India. The very imaginary of a 'free India' and its 'national honour' were forged within transnational conditions on South African soil, especially when Gopal Krishna Gokhale visited South Africa in 1912. Gokhale's visit gave legitimacy to Gandhian struggles against the Asiatic Act, and 'recognized' insults to indentured labourers of Indian origin as a blow to India's national image. These letters reveal how the Indian nation idea, and questions of India's political rights were successfully internationalised.

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Charles Andrews' associations with Henry Polack, one of Gandhi's closest associates, and Andrew's discipleship of Tagore, lent a densely intertwined international perspective to the Indian struggle for nationhood. The appearance of Charles Andrews and Pearson (at Tagore's behest) to Durban in 1914, may have been symbolic as the high tide of *satyagraha* movement had subsided, and Smuts had made agreements with Gandhi regarding the taxation rates and marriage laws of indentured labourers of Indian origin. Nevertheless, the significance of Pearson and Andrews' presence (given that they were renowned in their respective spheres and given that they were intimately associated with Tagorean causes of liberal humanist education) could not be missed.

Again, Polack and Kallenbach's much commented upon friendship with Gandhi and their role in community/ashram formations in Tolstoy and Phoenix of South Africa, found resonance in Andrews' earlier associations with Polack. These endeavours of creating alterities in community living and exploring freedom in everyday lived practices in South Africa, found their resonance in Tagore's Santiniketan. These multifocal friendships and their creative energies informed the idea of an 'independent Indian-nation'. Dasgupta's collection of letters brings home these subtle but important connections.

This portion of the book contains some far less known references (such as the Tagore household journal *Bharati* incorporating Bengali essays such as "Dakshin Afrikaye Bharatiya Upanibesh" or-Indian settlements in South Africa) and letters encoding Charles Andrews' English poem about the pathos of indentured labour in South Africa.

The second part of the collection records responses of the trio with reference to the "World War I"; the subsequent "Dilemmas, Depressions, Uplifts" and ends with epistolary exchanges regarding Gandhian "Non Cooperation."

The last part of the collection marks the emergence of sharp differences between Gandhi and Tagore over the 'non-cooperation movement; over Gandhian call to ban and burn foreign-made clothes; and especially

the Gandhian enjoining of the student community to boycott government educational institutions. Exchanged letters between the Poet and the Mahatma reveal sharp differences over adoption of *charkha* as a nation-wide ritual in aid of achieving spiritual independence. Andrews' letters at this point mostly adhere to the Tagorean points of view.

The most well known epistolary exchanges of dissent are appended to this collection, and these record the differences regarding 'interpretation' of the Bihar earthquake. While Tagore takes the rational empiricist point of view; refuses to discover 'logic' behind such natural calamities and considers such 'interpretation' as downright pernicious, Gandhi 'reads' the devastating earthquake of Bihar as consequential to the sin of practicing untouchability. Gandhi is of the opinion that the Indian caste Hindu practice of untouchability and systemic marginalization of the 'outcaste' in the name of religion is the cause of this great natural calamity in Bihar. Dasgupta's volume records a consistency in Gandhian point of view, including as it does, Gandhi's letters 'interpreting' General Dyer's massacre in Jallianwalabagh as also indirectly related to, and acting as scourge to the sinful practice of untouchability. These letters help see Gandhi within an ideological continuum, as someone who consistently believed in the inalienable connections between the mind and the external world, the mind's ability to change the material world through ethical practices, or to invite a chain of retribution upon the community. Dasgupta's collection helps readers see the Gandhian interpretation of the Bihar earthquake as neither sudden, nor eccentric. It also allows a revisit to the Gandhian ideas of freedom as holistic and organically related. A nation that practices untouchability and caste marginalization in one place, can only expect racial humiliation in another.

Though many letters in this collection may be discovered in earlier collections, Dasgupta's introductions that foreground freedom and ties of friendship, make this volume special. What also makes the book special are those rarely commented on letters and connections that were exchanged between Andrews, Tagore and Gandhi.