

Political Career, 1906–1910

Mother India

When you wrote that you looked upon India not as an inert, dead mass of matter, but as the very Mother, the living Mother, I believe that you *saw* that Truth.

My dear sir, I am not a materialist. If I had seen India as only a geographical area with a number of more or less interesting or uninteresting people in it, I would hardly have gone out of my way to do all that for the said area.

Is there something in what you wrote? Or was it just poetic or patriotic sentiment?

Merely a poetic or patriotic sentiment — just as in yourself only your flesh, skin, bones and other things of which the senses give their evidence are real, but what you call your mind and soul do not really exist being merely psychological impressions created by the food you eat and the activity of the glands. Poetry and patriotism have of course the same origin and the things they speak of are quite unreal. Amen.

11 February 1936

Two Wings of the Independence Movement

It is common today to read and hear the statements of influential Indian leaders condemning the revolutionary efforts of their compatriots in by-gone years. Yet I think that there is little doubt but that the Bengali “revolution”, to name one phase of the larger movement, was of paramount importance in the understanding and realisation of the goals for which the nationalism of the 20th century was heading.

Sri Aurobindo has received your letter.¹ He says there were two

¹ *Written by Sri Aurobindo to his secretary, who replied to the correspondent. — Ed.*

wings to the Independence Movement. First, there was the external political and constitutional movement. And secondly there was the revolutionary movement which meant a preparation for an armed revolt. He considered both the movements necessary and had his share in preparing both. 19 April 1949

The Swadeshi Movement (1905 – 1910) and Later Developments

When I read the speeches you delivered before 1910, it seems to me as if Gandhi had almost copied everything from that — Swaraj, Samiti, Non-cooperation, and so on. If not outwardly he must have received these things from you in an occult way.

The whole of Gandhi's affair is simply our passive resistance movement given an ethical instead of a political form, applied with a rigid thoroughness which human nature except in a minority cannot bear for long and given too a twist which seems to me to make it harmful to the sane balance and many-sided plasticity necessary for national life. What with Gandhi, Hitler and the rest (very different people but all furiously one-sided and one-ideaed) a large part of humanity seems to have gone off its balance in these times. 21 September 1934

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Did you enjoy the article "Fifty Years of Growth" by K. R. Kripalani in the *Visva-Bharati*?² Fifty years of growth refers by the way to the Congress. About the Swadeshi period he writes: "A long time was to elapse before we were to appreciate the infinite possibilities of the muddy waters at hand. In the meantime something startlingly romantic happened. . . .

"The fountain [of undefiled water] was cut by the fiery shafts of Tilak, Vivekananda, and Aurobindo, among others. They gave to Indian Nationalism its fiery basis in India's ancient cultural glory and its modern mission. . . . It is always more beautiful and more inspiring to contemplate the Idea

² K. R. Kripalani, "Fifty Years of Growth", *The Visva-Bharati Quarterly*, vol. I, part IV, New Series (February–April 1936), pp. 53–60.

and be drunk with it than to face the actual facts and touch the running sores. . . .

“But this spirit, fiery and beautiful as it was, was fraught with grave dangers. The glory that it invoked and the passion that it aroused were so intensely Hindu that Muslims were automatically left out. Not that they were deliberately excluded. . . . However that may be, it seems now not unlikely that had the influence of Tilak and Aurobindo lasted in its original intensity, we might have had two Indias today—a Hindu-istan and a Pak-istan, both overlaying and undermining each other. . . .

“However that be, the fact remains that the conditions of our country being what they were, the beneficial effects of Tilak’s and of Aurobindo’s political personalities were soon exhausted, and might, if prolonged, have proved dangerous, if Gandhiji had not come on the scene. . . .”

Subject, politics,—taboo. Writer Kripalani a “romantic” and “idealistic” visionary without hold on realities, living only in academic ideas—so not worth commenting. All the present Congress lot seem to be men who live in ideas only, mostly secondhand, borrowed from Europe (Socialism, Communism etc.), borrowed from Gandhi, borrowed from tradition or borrowed from anywhere; Kripalani looks down on the old Moderates for being in a different way exactly what he himself is—only they were classics and not romantics. So what is the use of reading their “histories”? However quite privately and within brackets³ I will enlighten you on one or two points.

(1) The Swadeshi movement was idealist on one side (no great movement can go without an ideal), but it was perfectly practical in its aims and methods. We were quite aware of the poverty of India and its fallen condition, but we did not try to cure the poverty by Khaddar and Hindi prachar. We advocated the creation of an industrial India and made the movement a Swadeshi movement in order to give that new birth a field and favourable conditions—cottage industries were not omitted in

³ *Sri Aurobindo put brackets at the beginning and end of this reply to indicate that it was not to be circulated in the Ashram at that time. — Ed.*

our view, but there were no fads. The Swadeshi movement created the following very practical effects:

(a) It destroyed the Moderate reformist politics and spread the revolutionary mentality (as Jawaharlal now calls it) and the ideal of independence.

(b) It laid the foundations of an industrial India (not of course wholly industrial, that was not our intention) which is however slowly growing today.

(c) It brought in the commercial classes and the whole educated middle class into the political field—and not the middle class only, while Moderatism had touched only a small fringe.

(d) It had not time to bring in the peasantry, but it had begun the work and Gandhi only carried it farther on by his flashy and unsound but exciting methods.

(e) It laid down a method of agitation which Gandhi took up and continued with three or four startling additions, Khaddar, Hindiism, Satyagraha = getting beaten with joy, Khilafat, Harijan etc. All these had an advertisement value, a power of poking up things which was certainly livelier than anything we put into it. Whether the effects of these things have been good is a more doubtful question.

(2) As a matter of fact the final effects of Gandhi's movement have been

(a) A tremendous fissure between the Hindus and Mahomedans which is going to be kept permanent by communal representation.

(b) A widening fissure between caste Hindus and Harijans, to be made permanent in the same way.

(c) A great confusion in Indian politics which leaves it a huge mass of division, warring tendencies, no clear guide or compass anywhere.

(d) A new constitution which puts the conservative class in power to serve as a means of maintaining British domination or at least as an intolerable brake on progress—also divides India into five or six Indias, Hindu, Moslem, Pariah, Christian, Sikh etc.

(e) A big fiasco⁴ of the Non-Cooperation movement which is throwing politics back on one side to reformism, on the other to a blatant and insincere Socialism.

That, I think, is the sum and substance of the matter.

As for the Hindu-Moslem affair, I saw no reason why the greatness of India's past or her spirituality should be thrown into the waste-paper basket in order to conciliate the Moslems who would not at all be conciliated by such a stupidity. What has created the Hindu-Moslem split was not Swadeshi, but the acceptance of the communal principle by the Congress, (here Tilak made his great blunder), and the farther attempt by the Khilafat movement to conciliate them and bring them in on wrong lines. The recognition of that communal principle at Lucknow made them permanently a separate *political* entity in India which ought never to have happened; the Khilafat affair made that separate political entity an organised separate political power. It was not Swadeshi, Boycott, National Education, Swaraj (our platform) which made this tremendous division, how could it? Tilak whom the Kripalani man blames along with me for it, is responsible not by that, but by his support of the Lucknow affair — for the rest, Gandhi did it with the help of his Ali brothers.

There you are. On a tabooed subject — it is, I think, enough. Not at all for circulation you understand and quite confidential.

14 April 1936

Living Dangerously

There is a coward in every human being — precisely the part in him which insists on “safety” — for that is certainly not a brave attitude. I admit however that I would like safety myself if I could have it — perhaps that is why I have always managed instead to

⁴ I am referring to my prophecy made at the beginning of the Non-Cooperation movement, “It will end in a great confusion or in a great fiasco.” I was not a correct prophet, as I have pointed out before. It should have run, “It will end in a great confusion *and* a great fiasco.” But after all I was not speaking from the supramental which alone can be infallible.

live dangerously and follow the dangerous paths dragging so many poor X's in my train. 5 January 1935

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You wrote the other day that you have lived dangerously. All that we know is that you were a little hard up in England and had just a little here in Pondicherry at the beginning. In Baroda we know that you had a very handsome pay and in Calcutta you were quite well off. Of course, that can be said about Mother, but we know nothing about you.

I was so astonished by this succinct, complete and impeccably accurate biography of myself that I let myself go in answer! But I afterwards thought that it was no use living more dangerously than I am obliged to, so I rubbed all out. My only answer now is !!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! I thank you for the safe, rich, comfortable and unadventurous career you have given me. I note also that the only danger man can run in this world is that of the lack of money. Karl Marx himself could not have made a more economic world of it! But I wonder whether that was what Nietzsche meant by living dangerously? 15 January 1935

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I was grieved to see that you rubbed off what you wrote. We want to know so much of your life, of which we know so little!

Why the devil should you know anything about it?

Of course I didn't mean that lack of money is the only danger one can be in. Nevertheless, is it not true that poverty is one of the greatest dangers as well as incentives? Lives of great men show that.

You are writing like Samuel Smiles. Poverty has never had any terrors for me nor is it an incentive. You seem to forget that I left my very safe and "handsome" Baroda position without any need to it, and that I gave up also the Rs. 150 of the National College Principalship, leaving myself with nothing to live on. I

could not have done that if money had been an incentive.

I know that the idea has obvious fallacies, but isn't it broadly true?

Not in the least.

But what is the use of telling me what Nietzsche meant by living dangerously, and how am I to know that you mean the same?

Certainly not the commercial test. I was quoting Nietzsche — so the mention of him is perfectly apposite.

Kindly let us know by your example what you mean by living dangerously.

I won't. It is altogether unnecessary besides. If you don't realise that starting and carrying on for ten years and more a revolutionary movement for independence without means and in a country wholly unprepared for it meant living dangerously, no amount of puncturing of your skull with words will give you that simple perception. And as to the Yoga, you yourself were perorating at the top of your voice about its awful, horrible, pathetic and tragic dangers. So —

16 January 1935

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I beg to submit my apologies. I committed this folly because of ignorance of facts. Believe me, I did not know that you were the brain behind the revolutionary movement and its real leader till I read the other day what Barinbabu has written about you. I only knew that you were an extremist Congress leader, for which the Government was shadowing and suspecting you. Now that it is confirmed by you, I know what is meant by the phrase "living dangerously".

Wait a sec. I have admitted nothing about "Barinbabu" — only to having inspired and started and maintained while I was in the field a movement for independence. That used at least to be

a matter of public knowledge. I do not commit myself to more than that. My dear fellow, I was acquitted of sedition twice and of conspiracy to wage war against the British Raj once and each time by an impeccably British magistrate, judges or judge. Does not that prove conclusively my entire harmlessness and that I was a true Ahimsuk?
17 January 1935

Politics and Truth-Speaking

Would it not sometimes be dangerous to speak truth, e.g., in politics, war, revolution? The truth-speaking moralist who would always insist on not concealing anything may bring disaster by revealing the plans and movements of one side to the opposite side.

Politics, war, revolution are things of stratagem and ambush — one cannot expect the truth there. From what I have heard Gandhi himself has played tricks and dodges there. Das told me it was impossible to lead men in politics or get one's objects without telling falsehoods by the yard and he was often feeling utterly disgusted with himself and his work, but supposed he would have to go through with it to the end.

There is no necessity to reveal one's plans and movements to those who have no business to know it, who are incapable of understanding or who would act as enemies or spoil all as a result of their knowledge. Secrecy is perfectly admissible and usual in spiritual matters except in special relations like that of the shishya to the guru. We do not let people outside know what is going on in the Asram but we do not tell any lies about it either. Most Yogis say nothing about their spiritual experiences to others or not until long afterwards and secrecy was a general rule among the ancient Mystics. No moral or spiritual law commands us to make ourselves naked to the world or open up our hearts and minds for public inspection. Gandhi talked about secrecy being a sin but that is one of his many extravagances.

17 May 1936

Some Political Associates

I knew very well Sister Nivedita (she was for many years a friend and a comrade in the political field) and met Sister Christine, — the two closest European disciples of Vivekananda. Both were Westerners to the core and had nothing at all of the Hindu outlook; although Sister Nivedita, an Irishwoman, had the power of penetrating by an intense sympathy into the ways of life of the people around her, her own nature remained non-Oriental to the end. Yet she found no difficulty in arriving at realisation on the lines of Vedanta.

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I knew Satish Mukherji when he was organising the Bengal National College (1905–7), but afterwards I had no contact with him any longer. Even at that time we were not intimate and I knew nothing about his spiritual life or attainments — except that he was a disciple of Bijoy Goswami — as were also other political coworkers and leaders, like Bipin Pal and Manoranjan Guha. I knew Satish Mukherji only as a very able and active organiser in the field of education — a mission prophetically assigned to him, I was told, by his guru, — nothing more.

3 December 1932

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Charu Dutt, I.C.S., wrote a review of Jawaharlal's *Autobiography* in the *Visva-Bharati* review last month. Did you know him well of yore? Political?

Charu Dutt? Yes, saw very little of him, for physically our way lay far apart, but that little was very intimate, one of the kind of men whom I used to appreciate most and felt as if they had been my friends and comrades and fellow-warriors in the battle of the ages and could be so for ages more. But curiously enough my physical contact with men of his type — there were two or three others — was always brief. Because I had something else to do this time, I suppose.

28 September 1936

The Surat Congress (1907)

I happened to read an article in which the author mentions the Surat Congress, but strangely enough he does not even mention your name whereas Tilak, Lal, Pal take the prominent place. It is impossible he could not have known the part you played. In a Gujarati novel, K. M. Munshi has brought you in and indicated you were the central figure, putting certain things in movement and keeping behind the veil. X also says that Tilak used to consult you. How is it these things are forgotten by these Gandhiites?

Probably they know nothing about it, as these things happened behind the veil. History very seldom records the things that were decisive but took place behind the veil; it records the show in front of the curtain. Very few people know that it was I (without consulting Tilak) who gave the order that led to the breaking of the Congress and was responsible for the refusal to join the new-fangled Moderate Convention which were the two decisive happenings at Surat. Even my action in giving the movement in Bengal its militant turn or founding the revolutionary movement is very little known.

22 March 1936

Leaving Politics

I may also say that I did not leave politics because I felt I could do nothing more there; such an idea was very far from me. I came away because I did not want anything to interfere with my Yoga and because I got a very distinct adesh in the matter. I have cut connection entirely with politics, but before I did so I knew from within that the work I had begun there was destined to be carried forward, on lines I had foreseen, by others, and that the ultimate triumph of the movement I had initiated was sure without my personal action or presence. There was not the least motive of despair or sense of futility behind my withdrawal. For the rest, I have never known any will of mine for any major event in the conduct of the world affairs to fail in the end, although it may take a long time for the world-forces to fulfil it. As for

the possibility of failure in my spiritual work, I shall deal with that another time. Difficulties there are, but I see no cause for pessimism or for the certification of failure. October 1932

Inability to Participate in Politics

There was a report in the *Hindu* that a deputation was coming from London to Pondicherry to ask you to take the helm of politics as a successor to Gandhi. The report says that you know 35 languages and have written 500 books.

I have read the wonderful screed from London. Truly I am more marvellous than I thought, 35 languages and 500 books! As to the seven pilgrims, they must be men of the Gita's type, *niṣkāma-karmīs*, to be prepared to come all these thousands of miles for nothing. 2 September 1934

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Sri Aurobindo says that it is impossible for him to take up political action and enter the political field which would involve a sacrifice of his spiritual work.⁵

His spiritual help is given to the country and individually to all those who aspire for it. He is ready to continue this help and even to increase it if it is necessary. But he is convinced that written messages alone are not sufficient to have a permanent effect or even a sufficiently wide effect.

Among the members of the Ashram he sees nobody whom he can send to represent him effectively.

⁵ This reply was written by the Mother at Sri Aurobindo's dictation or under his instructions. — Ed.