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Revisiting Native Practices through Gandhi and Tagore in South Asian Modernity

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Abstract

Background: As a spirit of contemporaneity, modernity fosters a sense of secularism, implying the ability to free oneself from unwanted biases that divide society. Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869-1948) emerges as the synthesis of tolerance and secular spirit in the first half of the twentieth century through his nonviolent resistance. Similarly, Rabindranath Tagore (1961-1941) critically assesses the ethos of his age and the modes of reformations required therein. Both Gandhi and Tagore base their understanding of native practices and present their voices to explore a new course of life in India, specifically with implications for all South Asian societies in general.

Methods: This study draws on the critical perspectives of multiple modernities, as further developed by Israeli sociological thinker S. N. Eisenstadt (1923-2010), to examine social changes occurring in various contexts. He argues that societies invent their own ways of dealing with the problems that emanate from their local sociological and political structures. This study critically assesses the native practices from which Gandhi and Tagore derive resources to develop their perception of the issues and challenges of their time.

Result: Although the tradition is often viewed as an immature state in the West, Gandhi and Tagore draw on local practices to inform their understanding of the challenges. As the harbinger of change in the South Asian landscape in the first half of the twentieth century, they relied on the redefinition and appropriation of traditional values and resources to resist the imperial forces.

Conclusion: Gandhi and Tagore have effectively harnessed native resources in shaping the ethos of a secular attitude in South Asia.

Novelty: Local resources embody the power to tolerate and transform the native challenges. Since South Asian modernity relies on native practices and their adaptation to contemporary contexts, it possesses a greater ability to navigate contemporary challenges.

Keywords: South Asian Modernity, Nonviolent Resistance, Secularism, Multiple Modernities

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Introduction

Native practices contribute to the formation of the ethos of contemporary times. However, Western modernity views tradition and/or native practices as the setback in the formation of the modern spirit. In South Asian modernity, traditional values have been appropriated as key factors that can navigate contemporary challenges. Indian philosopher and thinker, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869-1948) synthesizes his philosophy of nonviolent resistance from native practices. Similarly, Rabindranath Tagore (1961-1941) treats the cultural landscape of the Subcontinent as the source of nationalism in/for India.

Both thinkers approach the idea of tradition in a positive manner when dealing with social change. Western approach to modernity celebrates singularity, which foregrounds rationality as the key factor born out of nowhere while dealing with categories like 'tradition' and 'native practices' as immature states of life. When S. N. Eisenstadt's approach of multiple modernities is applied to discuss modernities in the Subcontinent, the idea of heterogeneity emerges across various spaces and historical phases of social and political development.

The colonial encounter leads Indian societies to believe that the ruling elite of the West is the measure of social progress. Colonial societies lose their previously celebrated sense of cultural heterogeneity. The heterogeneous traditions of the Subcontinent contribute to the strength of societies, which were rejected mainly during colonial rule. However, Gandhi and Tagore bring back to the limelight the sense of reverence for the heterogeneity of the Subcontinent. Critically assessing the unique tenet of South Asian modernity, Nandy (1983) sees the possibility of critical traditions as plural when he states,

> It is possible to speak of the plurality of critical traditions and of human rationality. At long last, we seem to have recognized that neither is Descartes the last word on reason nor is Marx that on the critical spirit. (1983, p. 8)

Unlike Kant's understanding of the past as an immature state, Nandy follows Eisenstadt's path to explore the multiple facets of social reality that develop uniquely in different contexts. Nandy views that it is mandatory to evaluate the impact of the past upon the ideas present. He finds that Gandhi and Tagore have adopted and employed tradition to find a ground of their own. Chakrabarty (2002) assesses Nandy in terms of the latter's perception of the past and says, "Nandy's position, by contrast, is respectful of the past without being bound by it. It uses tradition but in a way that is guided by the critique of the present that it has developed" (2002, p. 39). As a critical vocabulary in the study of social change, critical traditionalism has been referred to as a way of viewing the present as rooted in the past and understanding the context is required to make sense of the moment.

Modernities of One's Own: Critical Debate

Israeli sociological thinker S. N. Eisenstadt (1923-2010) argues that modernities have civilizational roots that help people explain the unique experiences of people in different times and spaces. For instance, the West and the East approach tradition differently, resulting in their unique perception of their contemporary life. Eisenstadt's analysis of India and the West highlights the striking differences. Arguing against the homogenizing tendency of Western modernity, he states:

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> …the greatly different civilizational dynamics of these two civilizations are indeed very striking. This applies to the overall political and economic dynamics, the structure and construction of the centres and of their activities, the nature of the protest movements, their articulation into political conflicts as well as to the modes of the incorporation of such movements and of their demands into the centre. (2003, pp. 329-30)

The historical contexts shaping the experience at the moment result in a unique one in each case. Eisenstadt juxtaposes monotheistic Europe with polytheistic South Asia to examine the values in each context (2003, p. 333) in which native practice or tradition emerges as the pivotal force in shaping the course of modernity.

The South Asian understanding of modernity fundamentally diverges from Western perspectives on it. The West views the past as an immature state of life, and modernity brings Enlightenment to the ignorant state of being. Furthermore, Western modernity assumes that every society experiences it in the same way. In South Asia, the experience of modernity celebrates the indigenous (native) practices, thereby highlighting heterogeneity. The convergent claims of Western modernity are refuted when South Asian modernities choose the past as a mature foundation for social development, paving better roads ahead. On the contrary, the West views history as a lack or absence, and social change helps societies escape their immature past. Western modernity appreciates and promotes escape, while South Asian modernities appropriate the cultural past in search of the future. The Father of modern India, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869-1948), and the great Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) treat tradition and history as a resource to derive motivation for developing their vision for the common good. History and tradition help them explore their own past and develop a vision for India's independence as a whole. South Asian modernities treat the past as a resource to guide the present, understand prevailing circumstances, and act to achieve future goals. South Asian modernities are embedded with the cultural perceptions and practices of people, and treatment of tradition and history as the positive traits that help achieve the cause of collective welfare.

The singularist approach to social change fosters a negative perception of tradition within the Western understanding of modernity. It assumes convergence as the key feature of social change across places and times, resulting in symmetrical social and political structures to regulate human experiences. Indian postcolonial historian Dipesh Chakrabarty (1948-) reevaluates the Western approach to homogeneity and challenges the Western claims of homogeneity and convergence as the inevitable outcome of every social change. As he argues, "If modernization has had a global history, there is no reason why reflections on that history should have to depend only on the intellectual resources provided by traditions of thought generally regarded as 'European' or 'Western'" (2011, p. 674). As a backdrop to the social change occurring in any society, tradition helps measure the leap after the change. It also makes it possible to measure the intensity of modernity. Modernity acknowledges the temporal dimension as a key aspect in examining social change. As Harootunian (2010) argues,

> …the strategy possessed no aptitude to see modernity as a temporal category authorizing specific social formations, demanded by the recognition of a pervasive

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> immanence which obscured the appearance of those historical moments testifying to arrhythmic and heterogeneous temporalities throughout the different parts of the world. (2010, p. 371)

Western modernity celebrates a disjointed modernity, while modernity in South Asia continuously evolves from its preceding past. This paper draws on insights from South Asian cultural theorists and historians to explore the native facets that persist in modernity.

Deriving from Historical Resources: Modernity of One's Own

South Asian modernity views history as a resource that helps build the present foundation of society. Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948) and Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) form the core of India's struggle for independence through their relentless activism, which included writings and political movements. Gandhi founds the vision of modern, independent India in the insights derived from the Shrimad Bhagavad Gita that he had read throughout his life from his childhood. His exposure to the cultural world leads him to formulate a larger vision for the nation. Gandhi's social philosophy is derived from the cultural worldview developed within his family; in other words, the Gandhian mode of resistance is rooted in his study of classical Hindu texts, such as the Gita. Therefore, Vishwanathan (2003) states, "… he … contrasts instinctive religious devotionalism, as derived from his mother, with rational critical reflection, which western commentaries on Hinduism helped him to develop" (2003, p. 28). This study has primarily depended on Gandhi's *Indian Home Rule* (1909) to discuss his ideals of Indian independence and his struggle against the imperial rule in India. Similarly, Tagore's "Nationalism in India" (1917) examines the cultural context of the Subcontinent and declares that the South Asian model of nationalism fundamentally differs from the Western model. Tagore strongly asserts that societies that fail to develop their own values turn defunct in the long run. He sees Indian societies developing their own ideals and values for their sustenance. As he states, "We, in India, must make up our minds that we cannot borrow other people's history, and that if we stifle our own we are committing suicide" (1917, p. 128). The historical and cultural frame allows societies to explore their strengths and complications that are growing within them. Modernity must turn its probing eyes upon the past and explore the knots that need to be loosened or tightened. Tagore observes that India's modernity must address social questions more than political ones; hence, he argues, "This basis has come through our saints, like Nanak, Kabir, Chaitnaya and others, preaching one God to all races of India" (1917, p. 119). The living repository of tradition serves as a resource from the past to delve into the complexities of the present and address the challenges society is currently facing. Social change treats historical ground as the temporal dimension through which any society can realize the challenges of its time. Societies compare the achievements of the present against the measures of the past, judge progress by the same standard, and determine their progress by measuring against the milestones of the past. Just like spatial dimension, history plays a pivotal role in deciding the course of modernity. Chakrabarty (2011) attempts to explore the social development of history through the analysis of the Sati system as prevalent in India. He says that Indian historian Ashis Nandy (b. 1937) associates the issue with critical traditionalism. Nandy argues that one does not unquestioningly accept or reject tradition for its face value;

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instead, he prefers to critically assess tradition in the larger frameworks of postcolonialism or modernity to understand the inner dynamics of the present. He states that Gandhi is the epitome of critical traditionalism in India (Chakrabary, 2011, p. 675). Modernity does not lie in people's escape from their own past; instead, it enables them to critically engage with their past and understand themselves and their world in a new light.

India's struggle for independence also implies its attempt to assert its political beliefs within the global order. In the first three decades of the twentieth century, Gandhi's rise marks a fundamental native challenge to the imperial political power center in South Asia. As a man rooted in his social values, he sees and believes in the political values that he has derived from India's living tradition. Additionally, Gandhi also incorporates the emerging values of the time into his political vision. For instance, Gavaskar (2009) states:

> With the advent of scientific reasoning the long-drawn process of historicisation, secularisation and rationalisation of meaning-making systems reaches its culmination, whereby the measurable, the tangible and the sensory gets enthroned as the ultimate validity norm of reality, and that which is non-empirical, non-sensory gets delegitimised in variational terms. (2009, p. 15)

Even while accepting the emerging values of his time, Gandhi questions the society that has fallen behind: it has experienced decline many times in history. On the other hand, South Asian societies have continually evolved despite multiple foreign attacks. Gandhi's reading of 'Swaraj' implies the general understanding of what appears on the surface. Nigam (2009) comments:

> Gandhi did not completely rule out the popular meaning of Swaraj, i.e., self-(native) government, but the real meaning of Swaraj, for him, would and should go beyond, and rather become the basis of this popular meaning. In 'Hind Swaraj', Gandhi's meaning of Swaraj is freedom for self-rule at the individual level or freedom for everyone to rule over one-self. But the process of acquiring this ability is a longer one. (2009, p. 37)

Gandhi realized that India had fallen prey to colonization due to internal weaknesses within Indian society. As the remedy, he turns his lens upon the past in search of the remedies. He recognizes the urgent need for India to develop the capability to govern the country. Gandhi's reading implies that South Asian modernity seeks to locate the problems of the present within the larger cultural and historical landscape by yoking together the past and the present, thereby nourishing the present.

South Asian modernity views history as a resource for contemporary individuals to critically examine past power relations and transform them into new circumstances. On the contrary, the West assumes the prevalence of the universal reason, implying that the same thing remains true for all people of all ages. Chatterjee (1997) critiques the ideals of universal reasoning, arguing that such a concept does not exist because it has not yet emerged in the last two hundred years since the Enlightenment (1997, p. 13). Western modernity developed two key tools during the Enlightenment: rationalism and universal generalization, as embedded in its transcendental approach. Neither tool could utilize history as a resource in the making of Western modernity. As Harootunian (2010) remarks, "The enlightenment project, upholding the powers of humans as historical subjects capable of making their own history and founding an historical knowledge

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dedicated to it, collapsed into the 'meaningless nature' it had sought to overcome" (2010, p. 368). Unlike the South Asian approach to modernity, the West has dispensed with time and tradition in its approach to social change.

South Asian modernities build on the resources of the past, which does not necessarily represent a dark space. On the contrary, the West believes that modernity releases societies from the immature state. Chatterjee (1997) distinguishes South Asian modernity from the West in the following words:

> … whereas Kant, speaking at the founding moment of Western modernity, looks at the present as the site of one's escape from the past, for us it is precisely the present from which we feel we must escape. This makes the very modality of our coping with modernity radically different from the historically evolved modes of Western modernity. (1997, p. 20)

The colonial past of South Asia teaches a different lesson in which the freedom fighters celebrate the lost native resources. For them, the cultural agenda appears more significant than it does to the thinkers of Western modernity: Western modernity attempted to break away from the entanglements of faith promoted by Christianity by adopting the rationalist frameworks of science. The South Asian experience demonstrates that cultural values and past experiences play a pivotal role in shaping the course of modernity. For instance, Washbrook (2010) argues,

> Indeed, the postcolonial situation now, marked by the emergence of China and India as global powers in their own right, has started to raise the issue of whether there is a singular Modernity at all, based on the Western pattern, or whether there might not be many different modernities, expressing the concept in very distinctive social and cultural ways? (2010, p. 125)

The universal claim of Western modernity crumbles from within, allowing a variety of modernities to emerge independently (Bhambra, 2011, p. 653). Modernities are viewed as being founded on the cultural values of contemporary societies. The Indian experience shows that the past serves as a resource and foundation to understand the ills of the past and redefine the course for the present.

South Asian modernity foregrounds historical practices that are at the forefront of shaping the contemporary ethos. In India's freedom struggle, Gandhi's efforts form the historical spirit in the first two decades of the twentieth century. His moral foundations were derived from his past acquittance with the culture in his family and society. Tagore also appreciated Gandhi for his overarching presence in politics. Evaluating the situation, Lal (2009) states:

> Tagore recognized that Gandhi uniquely stood for the application of "moral force" in politics, and the perpetration of atrocities by the British in the Punjab, to which both responded with firmness and dignity, cemented their relationship and enormous respect for each other. Tagore publicly lent his name to Gandhi's efforts to stir the entire nation into nonviolent resistance to colonial oppression, and in his letter of April 12, 1919, released to the press, he proclaimed Gandhi as "a great leader of men" who had come forward to resuscitate the "ideal" of India, "the ideal which is both against the cowardliness of hidden revenge and the cowed submissiveness of the terror-stricken.

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(2009, p. 294)

Gandhi was concerned about the erosion of Indian values and glory; he made critical remarks about the young generation, who could not revive India's glorious past. Gandhi (1909) firmly believes that India has a solid cultural foundation that can bring about its own liberation. As he writes, "…India remains immovable, and that is her glory. It is a charge against India that her people are so uncivilised, ignorant and stolid, that it is not possible to induce them to adopt any changes" (1909, p. 66). Tagore's trust in Gandhi's vision reasserts the collective quest for modernity through native practices and cultural values in India's struggle for independence.

Industrialization and the logic of capitalism aspired to break free from the chains of faith in eighteenth-century Europe. Outside Europe, the same logic of modernity helped prevail over imperial structures, turning non-European locations into a ground for the West's quest for material prosperity. South Asia views modernity as a cultural phenomenon embedded in the political quest for self-rule, as in Gandhi and Tagore's writings. For instance, Chatterjee (1997) argues, "…there is no general rule that determines which should be the element of modernity and which the emblems of difference" (1997, p. 18). Gandhi saw the complexities promoted through Western capitalism in India, which he saw as a disease for his society. As Menon (2017) states, "This nostalgic description is in contrast to the reality of the moment: the increasing mechanization of life which takes away human agency, sense of self, and volition from humans" (2017, p. 42). Gandhi chooses to assert India's values to win self-rule and discards the foreign ways of dealing with things. Washbrook (2010) presents a historical case in which colonial rationality promotes secularism, resulting in a scientifically valid social structure. However, South India historically records that the people appropriated the cultural values of the West by merging "ideals of Modernity with dreams of Tradition in the very same constructions. They self–consciously denied that the two had to be seen as exclusive of each other, to possess antonymic meanings" (2010, p.135). The appropriation of Western rationality does not exclude the cultural foundation of the native society in its quest for modernity.

Tradition is sustained in India's quest for modernity during its struggle for freedom. The colonial structures introduce India to many foreign values that advocate for a secular agenda for the state. Similarly, the imperial rule in India implements the technocratic logic of bureaucracy.

Tagore believed that imperial structures tarnished the self-image of the Indian people through their education. For instance, Gohain (2011) writes:

> In numerous contexts and on numerous occasions Tagore exposed the deplorable impact of western perceptions and concepts in the self-understanding of Indians. Their very approach to the problems of the country had been shaped by a mindset developed by western education, even though it did not mix well with the inherited, traditional ideas and attitudes, and created hurdles to real understanding of the society and the human situations in India. (2011, p. 24)

Critically viewing the separation that colonial education was imposing on Indian subjects, Tagore advocated for the need to integrate cultural values. He believed that citizens without a cultural foundation could not contribute to the nation with any productive vision. "Tagore was

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clear-eyed in his view that western science in his time had been harnessed to goals that shattered the integrity of man and specialized I knowledge of a particular type alone" (Gohain, 2011, p. 26). The continuity of life from past to present serves the cause of the present, as it enables people to view the complexities of history and find new ways to cope with them in the present. Tagore builds on his cultural vision of India by examining the higher impulses of civilization embedded in Indian values, while the lowest imperial values of material gain and earning a profit inspire the British people to maintain their rule in India (Tagore, 1917, p. 140). Saranindranath Tagore (2008) states that the master poet Tagore's cosmopolitanism varies remarkably from Kantian one because the Indian version incorporates cultural values and traditional factors, while the European one celebrates a rationalist frame and a scientific approach to life (2008, p. 1073). In India, Tagore and Gandhi found their vision of Indian independence to be beyond politics: they envisioned a future in which culturally rooted citizens enlightened the whole society with up-to-date techniques for addressing the challenges of their time.

South Asian nationalistic impulse is also derived from the native response to foreign rule. The organically evolving societies in South Asia invoke their unique social structures and cultural systems of values, resulting in a heterogeneity of cultural experiences of modernity. Washbrook (2010) examines the homogenizing tendency that is critically responded to by native cultural practices, as the native practices embed within themselves the heterogeneous character of cultural experience. Washbrook defines nationalism as "the most significant ideological force driving society to re-contemplate its future" (2010, p. 133) in the twentieth century, as it requires a willingness from the people to fight against the ruling forces and redefine their political structure for the collective social welfare. Tagore vocally articulated his vision for a nation based on welfare and justice. As Muralidharan (2006) remarks,

> Free of the subtleties of fiction, Tagore was himself to articulate his political sensibilities in a series of reflections on all that was wrong with the nationalist project, at it then was. Confidently swimming against the dominant current, which viewed the "nation" as a platform of collective salvation, Tagore critiqued it as the antithesis of all that the human spirit stood for. (2006, p. 6)

The colonial resistance movement gave rise to a unique cultural experience in Indian modernity. Reflecting on historical resources and native practices, Tagore and Gandhi emerge as typical voices seeking to establish culturally unique values as the framework for viewing contemporary social needs that demand intervention by social power agencies in search of direction for future courses of action.

Modernity and tradition do not appear as opposite poles in South Asian modernity. The struggle for Indian independence also portrays how each can enrich the other. In India's quest for self-rule, tradition has supported modernity. Tagore and Gandhi have viewed the past as a valuable resource from which to build upon their position and their vision of modern India as their ultimate goal. In the case of Tagore and Gandhi, tradition and modernity appear as the content and the form: the past shapes the self and paves a road for the self to understand the challenges embedded in contemporary social life. In contrast, modernity treats tradition as its foundation

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for observing and understanding the ends and means to address the challenges of the time. Thus, Chakrabarty (2011) presents a valid argument when he advocates for multiple modernities as an approach for locations beyond Europe to value "different histories equally" and reject the claim that "the West to be the center of the World" (2011, p. 672). Postcolonial historiography must dispel the ghost of universal claims for Western modernity in favor of regional modernities that equally uphold both temporal and spatial dimensions.

South Asian modernity closely aligns itself with the cultural heritage of the people and their political efforts to address the challenges of their time. Native practices form an impetus in approaching South Asian modernities, as modernities rely on past experiences to explore complexities and address issues. Unlike the Western claims of homogeneous structures, South Asian modernities assume heterogeneity that results from the cultural past. Saranindranth Tagore (2008) states that Rabindranath Tagore believes in reason as the essential thing in life. In other words, Tagore has found life and reason as integral to each other. As reason implies the idea of present and life assumes historicity, Tagore seeks an equilibrium between the present and the past. So, Saranindranath Tagore (2008) states, “Amartya Sen has claimed that, for Tagore, reason is sovereign…it is a mistake to think that the Tagorean cosmopolitan vision flows from a detached account of reason” (2008, p. 1082). As a cultural form of reasoning, South Asian rationality is subtly connected to the past, serving as a repository of both the cultural achievements and the flaws of people. One can derive inspiration from the native experiences of success and failure while reorganizing the social life. South Asian modernities preserve tradition as a resource for lived experience and treat it in the most lively ways.

South Asia celebrates heterogeneity as the key feature of its modernities. Founded on tradition as a living inspiration, South Asian modernities have appropriated Western values of secularism, critical rationality, and social awakening in their pursuit of self-rule and autonomy, shaped by the colonial past and the presence of foreign forces. Western modernity assumes the singular, homogeneous experience derived from a universalist approach to life. On the other hand, native resources from the past enrich South Asian modernity by incorporating cultural experiences into the formation of the present ethos. Gandhi and Tagore's writings reveal their perspectives on reality during the British colonial period in India. Fearlessly, they both derive inspiration from their cultural resources, including sacred texts and modes of mass education. The Western method of educating the people shocks Tagore, for he disagrees with the ahistorical ways of imparting knowledge. He knows that it was the most significant political move the British government made in India. Tagore envisioned a future class of technocrats lacking political sensibility in such task forces, which was the sole aim of colonial education. Gandhi also opposes the formation of such a mindset. He openly expressed his dissatisfaction about forming such a force during the inaugural ceremony of Banaras Hindu University in 1916, which was his first public presence after his return to India in 1915. Gandhi always aligned himself with the peasants who preserved native practices, advocated for self-sufficiency through participation in labor and production, and enhanced critical sensibility through reflection on one's own values and life. Gandhi and Tagore believe that critical rationality encompasses cultural sensibility in India's pursuit of modernity. Saranindranath

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Tagore (2008) examines the role of tradition and cultural forces towards formation of rational self as he finds that "life of reason detached from tradition is unintelligible" (2008, p. 1073). South Asia practices native resources derived from its cultural past and upholds the tradition that modernity and tradition include each other in the process of social change.

Conclusion

As one of the defining categories, tradition serves in South Asin modernity. Unlike Western modernity, South Asia views the past and tradition as a repository of cultural experience, deriving inspiration to understand and examine the complexities of the time and then envision the means and approaches to address the challenges. Gandhi and Tagore have heavily relied on tradition to locate the resources and build their vision of an autonomous India. Western modernity treats the past as the negative category that clings to the modern self at present. On the contrary, South Asian modernity locates the tradition at the heart of modernity. The cultural milieu encompasses both modernity and tradition as complementary aspects of the social change process in South Asia. Besides, Gandhi and Tagore also treat tradition like a living force in the formation of the ethos of contemporaneity in the first three decades of the twentieth century. Gandhi's *Indian Home Rule* (1909) and Tagore's "Nationalism in India" (1917) critically examine the formation of a native Indian self by reflecting on oneself and the society in which one has lived. Their personal experiences and cultural encounters have served as an impetus in shaping their perception of self and society. Though the struggle for independence had not gained any momentum in the first two decades of the century, Gandhi had already risen to a unique height by the mid-1920s. Tagore and Gandhi have shaped the core of India's quest for modernity through their writings and political movements. Both of them have heavily depended on the cultural resources and political experience of peasants and the downtrodden in their quest for modernity. South Asian modernity does not treat the past as an immature and discardable state of social life. Native practices inspire and inform the quest for modernity, keeping the drive for social change alive in South Asia.

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