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A CONVERSATION BETWEEN GORA OF RABINDRANATH TAGORE AND JOHN TANNER OF MAN AND SUPERMAN

Abhishek Kumar*

'Man and Superman' of George Bernard Shaw and 'Gora' of Rabindranath Tagore have been popular and path-breaking works of art in both Great Britain and India. While the play 'Man and Superman' articulates the life force in all its glory and fullness, Gora, the protagonist of the novel is a close embodiment of that life force. It is this relationship between the two works that is enchanting and illuminating at the same time. This conversation between the two characters extends their philosophy and almost inevitably their personalities. It begins with John Tanner seeking to enlist Gora to his venture that seeks to extol virtues of idleness. The idleness as he defines serves as a facilitating idea for the manifestation of the life force as envisaged by Bernard Shaw. The organization, Members of Idle Rich Class, MIRC as it is called, is developed through the binding force of The Ten Commandments. The context of the conversation is maintained as it was when the two seminal works were written.

Dear Gourmohan Babu

Welcome to MIRC (members of idle rich class). I am delighted to find a member in a far away land that is our own and yet not quite. Your persuasions are strong but are still under construction, your actions are driven by impulse and have a certain sublime quality about them and yet they are done for the sake of action alone. Your efforts towards rejuvenation of Hinduism are laudable but your approach excludes a large part of humanity. In your words people discover you and yet they are lost. In you, the youth finds hope and yet it is as despairing as ever.

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You fight all that is decaying and decrepit in your society and yet you are not free from it. You look at women as instrument to your ends and yet no woman is with you. You say you are one with people and yet you seem distant and apart from the rest. In all your qualities I find in you traits of a deserving member of our society and therefore I welcome you.

Idle you are not but rich you are. Your richness originates from probably your birth, your upbringing, your education, your society and your whole being. I find you at a stage in history when the old his reluctant to give way to the new, the tradition is holding on to its withering visage with paint and rouge and youth is not man enough to challenge the old. You are that youth who is becoming a man.

Your idleness is the source of your thoughts and also actions. The new man in England wants to work and work efficiently. This quest for efficiency is leading him to a race that will lead to self destruction. The new man in India, if it is you, gives us a new paradigm and if idleness is the cause for the advent of new man, hail idleness.

Our call is to all who share our vision for the world, which seeks to establish the rule of idleness. For in it lay the real success of human effort. You may refer to the Ten Commandments of our society, given below before accepting membership. It is idleness that foment revolution, questions authority, creates art and music and enriches civilization. I am afraid of the new man in England. He will rob us of idleness and of opportunity to enjoy. I look at you with hope.

Yours Affectionately

John Tanner

President & Member

Idle Rich Class

PS: Your nickname amuses me and your friendship with Benoy has a sincerity that I envy. In you I find a curious mix of the cult of east and the vigour of the west. I am happy and eager to have you as a member of our society and look forward to your response.

The Ten Commandments As Promulgated By the Members of Idle

Rich Class

- # 1 Idleness is my God and no other
- #2 I shall seek no other object
- #3 I shall not represent idleness with any image that may seek my prostration before it
- #4 I shall not be vain in idleness
- #5 I shall not spend a day that is not idle
- #6 I shall honour those who beget idleness
- #7 I shall not kill those who do not seek idleness
- #8 I shall not seek idleness of others
- #9 I shall seek equitable distribution of idleness in society
- #10 I shall not bear false witness against neighbour or myself to seek idleness

Dear Mr Tanner,

Thank you for the offer and the welcome but I am convinced that I must refuse with all humility. It is impossible to deny that you are aware of my economic situation, but I assure you I cannot be counted among the idle nor idleness is or can be my objective in life.

In fact, it is heartening to note that you recognize that I am a man of action. I am sure you are not unaware of the tenets of Hinduism that base actions on the rich foundation of our ancient religion and culture. We are, therefore, fortunate to be guided by principles and actions which are ancient, but which have endured and the direction or the lack of it as it seems to your trained western eye is an integral part of the principles and actions of our religion. The glorification of individual effort as is wont in your culture is based on the premise that the individual is alone and has to fend for his salvation without much support from culture, religion and society where as in our system, the whole system exists to facilitate his movement forward. No wonder that your commandments are a response to this empty glorification.

Your deification of idleness is only recognition of the vacuous society and culture that your civilization has come to. In activity and in progressively endless analyses, you have sought joy and success. Your cities are clean but your hearts are dirty, your buildings are tall but

your people are puny, your society is lively but the morals that govern the society are dead, your machines run faster but your civilization has come to a grinding halt. You are seeking to resuscitate your dry sources with wells of the east that refuses to dry despite the pillage wreaked by you and your ilk.

Yours truly,

Gourmohan Bandyopadhyay

PS: I like your banter with your chauffeur and enjoy your helpless state before Ann Straker

Dear Gourmohan Babu

I understand your bitterness and I cannot blame you for that. Historical processes and necessities often grind individuals and nations and your country is a victim at the moment, however there was a time when your country epitomized prosperity and knowledge. I am sure the day will come soon when your country will earn its rightful place in the world firmament.

The concern of our society is not countries or groups of people but human race. What we are experiencing today, you will experience tomorrow. The progress of science is a juggernaut that cannot be stopped. Soon it will turn into technology and will not require any talent for adoption. Masses will turn to it for profit and for ease. Technology will suck all vitality from their being and create them in its own image. James Watt will be the messiah of new society and Bernard Shaw its handmaiden.

I presume, idleness the term has irked you. Our conviction comes from the idea that perfectibility of man cannot be achieved by inordinate emphasis on material prosperity, which seems to be the direction of the western civilization and our destiny is to be a cog in this giant wheel of progress. My driver's pride in his ability to manoeuvre a motor car scares me and in it I see the destruction of human race, as more and more will discover sources of pride in their facility with machines.

In idleness I see hope and promise. We look at Idleness not as a negative

contemplation and creation. You may call it meditation in consonance with your cultural moorings. In the idle contemplation of life in all its manifestations we believe mankind shall find its purposes and the means to fulfil them, in it shall be found the answers to the questions that have troubled generations and in it alone can man realize his glory of being.

Hail idleness.

Yours Affectionately

John Tanner

PS: You may laugh at the moment but I shall have the last laugh when I can foresee Sucharita wreaking havoc with your steely resolves.

Dear Mr Tanner

I understand that we need not quibble on semantics and I am with you on what you call idleness which probably is equivalent to tapasya in our culture as the laboratory or the method for experimenting with new ideas and finding solutions to the challenges posed by current political and social situations as also for reinventing the society for future challenges. I admire your ambition and also the effort to institutionalize the process which in my view is an individual calling and am not sure if it can be forged out of common and collective human urges.

I come from a country and culture that has reposed immense faith in "salvation for all" and has a well-defined body of thought and processes to achieve it. Pardon me but I must say that your effort evoked mirth in me but I am sure you would excuse my impertinence if you were a part of this great tradition called Hinduism which has for thousands of years experimented with such ideas and have assimilated those which worked and eschewed those which did not.

I do understand that the institutions must represent the culture that engenders them and must also reflect the flavour of the times. I therefore am eager to see how your membership unfolds, both for itself and for the society.

Yours truly,

Gourmohan Bandyopadhyay

PS: Sucharita will be a fellow traveller and little else as I do not admit the charms of venus as readily as you do.

Dear Gourmohan babu

Organization is necessary to attain scale. While individual contemplation may effect changes in self and in the immediate vicinity, the force of organization can unleash hitherto hidden potential at a scale difficult to even imagine in the ordinary schema. In your own context, you may be witness to the impact of Brahmo Samaj. I understand you are grappling with them as is your ancient society with its modernity. The Spartan and organizational elements in Brahmo Samaj almost Christian in character must be befuddling the sensibilities of Hindus. I believe it is a preview of things to come. Religions and societies shall become slaves of organizations of economic and technological force and their might can be met by only another organization that can respond with an equal vigour. Individual is likely to be crushed under the weight of the organization.

MIRC is proposed to be such an organization that prepares mankind for the impending onslaught and that enables humanity to respond. Its response is likely to champion the cause of humanity itself in its most myriad form. It must uphold the value of transformation of weakness into strength, of ill will into goodwill, of ignorance into knowledge, of chaos into harmony and of man into a superman. It must be led by a superman himself and in you I find that strength. In men like you, the organization like MIRC can find its fruition, its meaning and its fulfilment of purpose.

Affectionately yours

John Tanner

PS: The charm of a woman does not brook resistance. You will soon experience it.

Dear Mr Tanner

I am not really flattered when you call me a superman or a leader. When I am pursuing a task, I am simply acting upon my convictions and am

not hesitating in giving my all for the task. If this act needs were to be labelled, I would be at a loss to find a word. Your suggestions are neither endearing nor apt as I am neither a leader nor a superman. I have ordinary faculties and if any quality I have, it may be more than ordinary vigour. In fact I find you to have extraordinary capability to persist and inspire. You also seem to have a vision that far transcends the immediate though I must admit that your sarcasm, verbosity and rhetoric often make me question your commitment. I often wonder if you say things for the sake of saying them. I on the other hand, am not able to speak if I have not felt the word within. This particularizing the universal is probably preventing me from developing a vision which you are able to do so comfortably.

I therefore admire you and frankly have begun enjoying this conversation.

Yours truly

Gora

PS: Pray tell me, why women are achingly beautiful.

Gora, Character and the Novel

Gora, both as a character and novel symbolizes awakening, not a timid and unannounced one but a thundering and fulminating one. Gora is as vigorous in his errors as he is in his righteousness which either pulverizes an unsympathetic audience or mesmerizes an eager one. Gora, born to Irish parents were brought up by a Bengali Brahmin family. He showed tremendous enthusiasm in preserving a pristine culture of Vedic Brahminism and tolerated almost no breach. In Sucharita he found a woman who was every woman and more. She represented her race and Gora saw her as a means to an end. He discovered new and tender emotions within him as he came in closer contact with Sucharita. Paresh babu, father of Sucharita, surprised Gora with his sagacity and clarity, which he could not refute and so began the journey of Gora and his transformation that can also epitomize the transformation of Bengal. John Tanner or Don Juan or call what you will and Man and Superman Life Force as an idea was developed and introduced by Shaw in Man and Superman. John Tanner embodies the life force. As is wont with

the body, he is limited by it and yet his spirit soars over sublime understanding of humanity and its place in society. He also illuminates the path to ever perfectibility of man and confronts the vice like grip of the biological purpose of woman which prevents man from moving forward.

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