



RESEARCH ARTICLE

TAGORE'S CRITIQUE OF NATION, NATIONALISM AND MODERNITY

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ABSTRACT

Rabindranath Tagore was essentially a poet, but he was over conscious of the fact that he belonged to a subject country and this sense of humiliation was deep into his political personality. The arrogance of the British rulers in India predisposed him to exploring the reasons behind the rise of materialism, power politics and imperialism. What was clear from Tagore's perspective was not simply the strong distinction between Eastern and Western historical experience but also the relative inferiority of the West. This paper is a humble attempt to reflect upon his critical ideas on modern nation and nationalism.

INTRODUCTION

Serious questions have been raised as to whether Rabindranath Tagore had a political philosophy or not, on the ground that Tagore was essentially a poet and neither had the temperament nor the logical consistency of a political philosopher. It has also been alleged that the terms he used like freedom, society, nation, nationality etc. were vague and often misleading. However, there is no doubt that a towering personality such as Tagore could not keep himself aloof from the political events of great importance such as the partition of Bengal, the Jallianwala Bagh incident or the mainstream of national struggle for independence. His literary writings of different stages reflected different problems which agitated his mind. Tagore was over conscious of the fact that he belonged to a subject country and this sense of humiliation for having been a citizen of a subject country was deep into his political personality. The arrogance of the British rulers in India predisposed him to exploring the reasons behind the rise of materialism, power politics and imperialism. He believed that European and Eastern civilisations were fundamentally different and felt a deep pain to experience the dissolution of the pre-British Indian culture under the impact of the British Raj dismantling the traditional structures of ideas and beliefs in the social, cultural and religious arenas. His painful experiences were reflected in his words, "I came to a world where the modern city-bred spirit of progress had just begun driving its triumphal car over the luscious green life of one

ancient community.....the wailing cry of the past was still lingering over the wreckage....the modern city newly built by a company of western traders and the spirit of modern time seeking its unaccustomed entrance into our life, stumbling against countless anomalies".^[1] But Tagore chose not to dwell on this. Instead of making cultural void a theme of his poetry and thinking, he plunged himself, heart and soul, in the task of bringing about a cultural revival in the face of the challenging European ideas and to regenerate Indian culture so as to restore our faith in ourselves which was very much shaken at that point of time. It was the Tagore family who took up this challenge posed by the European culture to our indigenous culture, religion, education and politics with their movement to build our own world with our own thoughts and energy of minds.^[2] The ideas which occupied a central place in Tagore's philosophy were those of unity, religious, spiritual or aesthetic, with an emphasis on the individual who, in his opinion, is the centre of the experience of unity. He earnestly pleaded for the subordination of the material and political aspects of the society as they tend to vitiate the harmonious spirit of social existence, when remaining unchecked, and deflect social energies in the direction of corrupt political professionalism, ruthless imperialist expansion and exploitation of the weak. Tagore used the term 'nation' in order to indicate this phenomenon. For him the term 'nation' stands for "an intense consciousness of self- interest concentrated in political

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¹ Rabindranath Tagore(2013), *The Religion of Man*, Vishv Books Private Ltd; 3rd edition, pp. 170-171.

² Rabindranath Tagore(2002), *Talks in China*, Rupa and Co, pp.28-29.

organisation”.[³] For Tagore, “A nation is a political and economic union of people organised for a mechanical purpose”.[⁴] The nation is a force that is greater than the sum of its parts: it has a purpose, and this purposeful element is manifested in the form of the state. Therefore, in Tagore's critique, the nation is always the ‘nation-state’. Here Tagore made a distinction between state and society. The nation is equated with the state as “the organised self-interest of a whole people, where it is least human and least spiritual”.[⁵] The nation-state is a “machinery of commerce and politics”[⁶]. However, the society, unlike the nation, is a space where the individual naturally identifies with the other members of the community. It has “no ulterior purpose”, and is “an end in itself”. There is nothing forced or artificial about living in such a gathering. Another concept, inherently more evil than civil society, is “politics”. This, according to him, encourages greed and selfishness in the garb of nationhood. In his opinion, the society is a spontaneous self expression of man as a social being. It is a natural regulation of human relationships, so that men can develop ideals of cooperation with one another.[⁷] Tagore replaces the ideology of nation with the idea of *swadeshi samaj*, an environment of social relations that are not mechanical and impersonal but based on love and cooperation.[⁸]

Tagore believed that nation is concerned with the material and political aspects of the society, rather than its aesthetic aspects like arts, literature, religion etc and therefore is detrimental to a harmonious social existence. Tagore restricted his use of the term ‘nation’ to imperialist nations only and not to the subject nations rallying their strength by appealing to their past glories. An imperialist ‘nation’ does a great deal of harm not only to the subject people but also to its own countrymen. In its own country it creates professionalism in place of spontaneous activity, officialism in place of voluntary activity and egoism and conflict in place of cooperation and sympathy, bringing about a perversion in the normal forms of social relationships. For the subject people, it is not only economic exploitation but what is worse is that all their creative pursuits come to acquire a political orientation.[⁹] In the development of this argument, Tagore made a distinction between the internal and the external. He believed that humanity is guided by ‘inner ideals’.[¹⁰] Western nation-state as an organisational political form was detrimental to the social environment in which man could realise his true inner freedom. Thus Tagore's rejection of the nation-state and nationalism entailed the outright rejection of one of the core pillars of modernity. Tagore used an interesting analogy, suggesting that the idea of the nation is manifested in the professionalism of the people. Professionalism refers to a situation where men specialise their knowledge, organise their power and prefer to mercilessly elbow each other in their struggle. It is precisely this kind of

competitiveness that Tagore sees as being inherent in the modern idea of the nation. The nation-state, for Tagore, is an organising system and a structure of power producing efficiency but also monotony and sameness as is manifested in the modern towns of the West.

It was the arrogance and cultural conceit of the British rulers in India that was instrumental behind Tagore's undertaking the task of reviving Indian culture and it also made him Asia-conscious. This was the reason behind Tagore's dichotomy between societies that find the basis of their power in the realm of the state and politics on the one hand, and on the other, at the level of society and religion. Contrasting Asia as a whole with the West, Tagore pointed towards a limited role for the state in the Asian countries. He urged for ‘solidarity of the Asians’ and the ‘dignity of the Eastern Mind’ which was in no way inferior to European civilisation. He believed that the Western civilisation, undoubtedly, has made remarkable progress in the field of science and technology but has ceased to grow morally. Japan's achievements symbolised the slow awakening of the Asian countries from their deep slumbers. Tagore, who was an avid advocate of inter-civilisational alliance, envisioned a symbiosis of the East and West. He never gave up hope for a possible union of the East and West, in which they would meet as equal partners in a creative engagement; “I believe in the true meeting of the East and the West”. [¹¹]

Tagore's views on nationalism can only be understood by first arriving at a generic definition of the “nation” and then of “nationalism”. It has been admitted by many scholars over the decades that it was difficult to lend the term “nation” a concrete and tangible form. Benedict Anderson pins the emergence of nationalism to the period of 18th century Enlightenment, when rationalist, secular thought began to acquire political shape and one can agree with Benedict Anderson's classic phrase, “imagined community”, a product of a specific stage of human development. The origins of nationalism are, therefore, fairly modern. Ernest Gellner associates nationalism with the growth of industrial capitalism, and Timothy Brennan attributes it to the literary wave in the 19th century, especially the rise of the novel. Tagore was of the view that nationalism was only an “organisation of politics and commerce, that brings “harvests of wealth”, or “carnivals of materialism”, by spreading tentacles of greed, selfishness, power and prosperity, or churning up the baser instincts of mankind, and sacrificing in the process “the moral man, the complete man . . . to make room for the political and commercial man, the man of limited purpose.”[¹²] Nationalism, according to Tagore, is not “a spontaneous self-expression of man as social being,” where human relationships are naturally regulated, “so that men can develop ideals of life in co-operation with one another”, but rather a political and commercial union of a group of people, in which they congregate to maximise their profit, progress and power. Tagore deemed nationalism a recurrent threat to humanity, because with its propensity for the material and the rational, it trampled over the human spirit and human emotion; it upset man's moral balance, “obscuring his human side under the

³ Anthony. X. Soares, (ed),(1970) *Rabindranath Tagore: Lectures and Addresses*, London: Macmillan.

⁴ Rabindranath Tagore(1917), *Nationalism*, Macmillan, p. 9.

⁵ *ibid*, p. 55

⁶ *ibid*, p. 49

⁷ *ibid*, p. 51

⁸ Kalyan Sen Gupta(2005), *The Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore*, Aldershot: Ashgate, p. 50

⁹ A.H.Somjee(1961), “The Political Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore”, *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, Vol.22, No.1/2, January-March, April-June, pp. 141-143.

¹⁰ *ibid*, p. 1

¹¹ Krishna Dutta, and Andrew Robinson.(1997), *Rabindranath Tagore: An Anthology*. New York: St. Martin's, p. 172.

¹² Rabindranath Tagore(1917), *Nationalism*, p. 9.

shadow of soulless organisation”^[13] With its overemphasis on the commercial and political aspects at the expense of man’s moral and spiritual qualities, nationalism stifles the innate and instinctive qualities of the human individual. Another dangerous aspect of nationalism is that it leads to division of humankind propagating that ‘the nation is greater than the people’ ^[14]. Tagore’s 1917 *Nationalism*, based on lectures delivered in America, pay explicit attention to the backdrop of imperialistic capitalist expansion and militarism. It was the competitive sense of nationhood that was the driving force behind the greed for ever greater acquisition that he saw as the root cause of the Great War of 1914-1918. Tagore’s point was that the shift away from a social-religious form of life towards a state-political form, embodied in the transitions from ‘people’ to ‘nations’, inevitably led to the aggressive, competitive and acquisitive practice of imperialism. Tagore’s *Nationalism* was a testimony to his engagement with political affairs, attempting to debunk the criticism that he was only concerned with socio-cultural and economic developments. In his prophetic statement, “The Nation is ruling India”, he identifies the chief problem in India as being a racial divide and a dehumanizing classification of society that deems some inferior to others. For him, commitment to nationalism leads to shunning of moral responsibility that makes men lust for power, and their duties to their family begin to come secondary.^[15]

What was clear from Tagore’s perspective was not simply the strong distinction between Eastern and Western historical experience but also the relative inferiority of the West. As Tagore put it, the teaching and example of the West have entirely run counter to what we think was given to India to accomplish’.^[16] The spiritual and humanistic civilization of the East was perceived by the West as being metaphysical and incapable of progress. This notion was proved a fallacy by Japan’s climactic rise to prominence. In the chapter on nationalism in Japan, Tagore lauds Japan for breaking out of the shackles of its old habits and debunking the Western stereotype that Asia lives in the past. He points out that Japan did not merely emulate or blindly adopt the mechanized model of the West but is a remarkable amalgamation of the old and the new, embracing modernity while retaining a firm hold on its ancient traditions. Tagore also warned Japan against excessive European influence. Tagore wrote that nationalism is “a cruel epidemic of evil . . . sweeping over the human world of the present age and eating into its moral fibre.” ^[17] This conviction emerged out of his strong belief that the West must envisage a bridge with the East, and that only through a convergence of the two would world peace be able to prevail. This view was sharply criticized by his European contemporaries, Georg Lukacs and D. H. Lawrence, in whose eyes the West was inherently superior to the East, hence the fusion of the two was impossible and it was this Western contempt that irked Tagore the most. In his novel “The Home and the World” (1915), Tagore challenged this Western notion of the “nation”. He argued that “It was Buddha who conquered

the world, not Alexander.” For him, worship of the nation leads to a kind of “othering” that incites hatred and even war between countries. He saw a parallel between imperialism and nationalism, from his experiences of British colonization that sought to justify the dominance of the colonizers over underdeveloped regions, He perceived nationalism as an artificial creation that stifles human emotion and it is a manifestation of the industrial process that transforms the moral man to an immoral and greedy one who is entangled in politics and commerce.^[18] In his critique of the modern nation and the ideology of nationalism, Tagore reserved his wrath for Indians and the British alike, and he was a consistent defender of what he saw to be the truth, which bore no relation to caste, creed or nation. Thus, even after the Amritsar Massacre, which prompted Tagore’s impassioned renunciation of his knighthood in disgust, he wrote to C. F. Andrews, “Let us forget the Punjab affairs, but never forget that we shall go on deserving such humiliation over and over again until we set our own house in order. Do not mind the waves of the sea, but mind the leaks in your own vessel”. At the height of the non-cooperation movement, and in spite of the extreme brutality of the British response, Tagore still declared that Gandhi’s ‘pugnacious spirit of resentment’ was a mere emptiness of negation.^[19]

Tagore saw India’s jumping on the bandwagon of nationalism, a Western construct, as a compromise of all that its rich culture and heritage stood for, which would compromise India’s history and identity. He warned: 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. When you borrow things that do not belong to your life, they only serve to crush your life. . . I believe that it does India no good to compete with Western civilization in its own field. . . . India is no beggar of the West.^[20] Tagore’s alter ego, Nikhil, in “*The Home and the World*”, says, “I am willing to serve my country; but my worship I reserve for Right which is far greater than country. To worship my country as a god is to bring curse upon it.” ^[21] In other words, Tagore was undoubtedly patriotic, but not to the extent where pride in India began to matter more than truth and conscience. This brand of radical hyper-nationalism, according to Tagore, promoted self-aggrandizement leading to disaster of humankind. It is his insistence on universalism that forms the basis of his critique of modern nationalism. According to Kalyan Sen Gupta, the latter became a core philosophy guiding Tagore’s views on not just nationalism, but on other subjects as well. It might have emanated, Sen Gupta surmises, from Tagore’s understanding of the Upanishads, where the concept of brahman is evoked to represent a universal “world soul” that Tagore interpreted as the “Infinite Personality”.^[22] Tagore emphasises racial and religious unity persistently in his writings. Among his numerous odes to his motherland and his nation, “**Bharat**

¹³ Mohammad A. Quayum(2004), *Imagining “One World”*: Rabindranath Tagore’s Critique of Nationalism, Malaysia:International Islamic University.

¹⁴ Rabindranath Tagore(1917), *The Nation, The Modern Review*, Vol.22, No.1, p. 3.

¹⁵file:///C:/Tagore/Colloquium%20C2%BB%20The%20Patriotic%20Gurudev%20Tagore%E2%80%99s%20Nationalism.htm, accessed on 23.05. 2015.

¹⁶ Rabindranath Tagore(1917), *Nationalism*, p. 49.

¹⁷ Rabindranath Tagore(1917), *Nationalism*, p. 9

¹⁸file:///C:/Tagore/Colloquium%20C2%BB%20The%20Patriotic%20Gurudev%20Tagore%E2%80%99s%20Nationalism.htm, accessed on 23.05. 2015.

¹⁹ Tagore to C. F. Andrews, 7 September (1920): Dutta and Robinson (eds.), *Selected Letters of Rabindranath Tagore*. p. 237

²⁰ Anthony X. Soares ,(ed)(1970). Rabindranath Tagore: Lecture and Adresse., London: Macmillan, , p. 106.

²¹ Mohammad A. Quayum(2004), *Imagining “One World”*: Rabindranath Tagore’s Critique of Nationalism, Malaysia :International Islamic University.

²² Michael Collins(2008), “Rabindranath Tagore and Nationalism: An Interpretation” in University of Heidelberg *Papers in South Asia and Comparative Politics*, p. 8.

Tirtha" ("The Indian Pilgrimage"), is a call to all Indians to unite irrespective of barriers like race, class and religion:

Come, O Aryans, come, non-Aryans, Hindus and Mussulmans—
 Come today, O Englishmen, come, Oh come, Christians!
 Come, O Brahmin, cleansing your mind
 Join hands with all—
 Come, O Downtrodden, let the burden
 Of every insult be forever dispelled.
 Make haste and come to Mother's coronation, the vessel
 auspicious
 Is yet to be filled
 With sacred water sanctified by the touch of all
 By the shore of the sea of Bharat's Great Humanity!

Tagore was of the view that such unity and plurality of consciousness could be achieved only through proper education of the people and not adulation for the Charka that Gandhi suggested, along with cultivation of their freedom of thought and imagination as well as eradication of poverty through modernisation. Tagore's vision of a free India actively seeking a common destiny with the rest of man kind, is most ardently expressed in the poem in *Gitanjali*: "Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high". Tagore always maintained that nationalism is a "great menace" to civilisations, and that he was not "against one nation in particular, but against the general idea of all nations". But this does not imply that he was devoid of all attachment to his homeland. His opposition to nationalism was based on the fact that it is a concept imported from the West. Though he rejected India's cultural isolation, he simultaneously advocated a deeper appreciation of its traditions. In this sense, according to Amartya Sen, he had a dual attitude to nationalism that is evident is Tagore's own statement, "Neither the colourless vagueness of cosmopolitanism, nor the fierce self-idolatry of nation-worship, is the goal of human history".^[23] Although apolitical by temperament, Tagore at first was drawn towards the Indian National Movement and started giving lectures and writing patriotic songs with such fervour that Ezra Pound quipped, "Tagore has sung Bengal into a nation".^[24] But soon after, Tagore saw the movement turning violent with the nationalists agitating against innocent civilians, especially the Muslims who were in favour of the partition for practical as well as political reasons; Tagore began to withdraw himself from the movement.

A champion of non-violence or Ahimsa, Tagore found it difficult to accept the insanity of the nationalists in their burning of all foreign goods as a mark of non-cooperation, or youths turning to the cult of the bomb, hoping to liberate their motherland from the yoke of foreign tyranny by violence and terror. Thus, finally, Tagore withdrew from the movement, when a young Bengali radical, Khudiram Bose hurled a bomb, killing two innocent British civilians in 1908. He withdrew support of the movement, despite cries of betrayal from the nationalists, and never again endorsed or encouraged any political struggle that showed the slightest hint of violence.

²³ file:///C:/Tagore/Colloquium%20%20C2%BB%20The%20Patriotic%20Gurudev%20%20Tagore%E2%80%99s%20Nationalism.htm, accessed on 23.05. 2015.

²⁴ Anita Desai(1985), "Introduction." *The Home and the World*, 1915. Trans. Surendranath Tagore. London: Penguin, pp. 7-14.

Tagore maintained that India's immediate problems were social and cultural, not political. He questioned the very purpose of political freedom when the elites in society were exploiting the lower classes, especially the untouchables so ruthlessly! In his short story, "Purification," he exposed the absurdity of Gandhi's Satyagraha movement and the hypocrisy of the Indian nationalists who were fervently opposed to the British oppression but themselves oppressed the poor as well as the untouchables. Tagore hoped that India could hold herself as a model of unity for the rest of the world only if she could establish equanimity between the various races and religious groups, through social co-operation and regeneration of the spirit. In a poem entitled, "The Sunset of the Century," written on the last day of the nineteenth century, Tagore in a mood of outrage and disenchantment wrote:

The last sun of the century sets amidst the blood-red clouds of the West and the whirlwind of hatred.

The naked passion of the self-love of Nations, in its drunken delirium of greed, is dancing to the clash of steel and howling verses of vengeance.

The hungry self of the Nation shall burst in a violence of fury from its shameless feeding.

For it has made the world its food.

And licking it, crunching it and swallowing it in big morsels,
 It swells and swells

Till in the midst of its unholy feast descends the sudden shaft of heaven piercing its heart of grossness. ^[25]

This anti-nationalism sentiment—that nationalism is a source of war and carnage; death, destruction and divisiveness, rather than international solidarity, remains at the heart of Tagore's imagination in most of his writings: his letters, essays, lectures, poems, plays and fiction. Radical nationalism that acted as opiate of the people, making them irrational, willing to both kill and die for it, perpetuating a logic of war, instead of a cycle of freedom and peace, was an anathema to Tagore. In spite of Tagore's anti-nationalism stance, he was a highly patriotic poet, evident in the many patriotic songs and poems he wrote. However, Tagore denounced patriotism that, like religious formalism, "breeds sectarian arrogance, mutual misunderstanding and a spirit of persecution. In a letter to C.F. Andres, written from New York, he explained, "This is the ugliest side of patriotism. For in small minds, patriotism dissociates itself from the higher ideal of humanity." ^[26] The on-going violence in the subcontinent vindicates his position. India has since then been broken up into three countries: India, Pakistan and Bangladesh; millions rendered homeless in the aftermath of the independence of India and Pakistan in 1947, one million of which also lost their lives in inter-religious riots, ^[27] several riots have also broken out between the Hindus and the Muslims, claiming thousands of lives. Tagore's vision

²⁵ Rabindranath Tagore(1917), *Nationalism*. p. 80.

²⁶ C.F. Andrews(1928), "Letters to a Friend", in Sisir Kumar Das (ed.), *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*: Volume Three, New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi.

²⁷ Stanley Wolpert(1993) , *A New History of India*, Oxford: Oxford UP, p. 348.

might seem idealistic but it is not unattainable. It calls for a humanitarian intervention into present self-seeking and belligerent nationalism, through the introduction of a moral and spiritual dimension in the institution. It also requires us to step out of history to reinvent a new future for ourselves that respects human dignity and sees every individual and nation as equals, in a true democratic spirit.^[28] Tagore's critique of nationalism is based on his deep belief in the superiority of Indian civilisation's social-religious model over the West's political 'nation-state model'.

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²⁸ Mohammad A. Quayum (2004), "Imagining One World: Rabindranath Tagore's Critique of Nationalism", Malaysia: International Islamic University.