

Bridging Worlds: Tagore's Universal View in Gora

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Abstract

Tagore's novel *Gora* embodies his universalist ideology, advocating for a united world embracing diversity without nationalism or cosmopolitanism's pitfalls. He believed in respecting one's culture while empathising with others'. Tagore envisioned a world united by love, transcending borders and restrictions. He emphasised unity amidst diversity, merging Eastern and Western ideas. He saw spirituality as essential for true universality, rooted in his concept of the "Universal Man." Tagore's vision, influenced by Indian Upanishadic thought and various philosophies, offers relevance in today's conflict-ridden world, emphasising the evolution of man towards higher consciousness.

Keywords: Universalism, the East and the West, Jivan Debata, Embrace Diversity, Oneness

Embracing Universalism - A Tagorean Tapestry:

Tagore was a bit ambivalent towards the modern idea of nationalism and civilisation. He felt this concept of nationalism was a narrow organisation of politics and commerce, "where man prospers, gains what appears desirable, conquers enemies but perishes at the root" (qtd in Jahanbegloo 71). For Tagore such nationalism where the human morality, human spirit and human emotion are trampled over for material benefits can become a recurrent threat not only to a state but even to humanity at large. Talking about the meaning of civilisation Tagore says, "the role of essential components of human rationality such as instrumentality, utility, usefulness and productivity were considered indispensable in all earlier civilisations but never dominant." (Singh 49) Unfortunately in the modern civilisation the hierarchy has reversed deadening the importance of human values and morality. His answer for this civilisational crisis was a united world. For Tagore, united world is not a vague colourless cosmopolitanism or the self-idolatry nation worship. He says, "Uniformity is not unity... Those who destroy the independence of other races, destroy the unity of all races of humanity". (qtd in. S. Tagore 421)

He firmly believed that the nation and world must go hand in hand; i.e., every country must respect and value their own country and its practices at the same time have empathy towards other cultures and embrace all. Tagore saw the unity among diversity and wanted to bring the East and the West together, synthesising their varied ideas, practices, and way of life. For Tagore, universal civilisation was a moral culture of brotherhood unlike the culture of nationalism which is bound by geographical limits. Tagore believed civilisation was a continuous process where humanity strives for excellence not materially but morally and spiritually. For Tagore, there was no universality without spirituality. Thus, he based his concept of Universalism on the grounds of spirituality.

According to Kalyan Sen Gupta, Tagore's concept of universalism is spiritual because of two important aspects. The first one is the soteriological aspect. For Tagore the highest purpose of civilisation is not merely living in it and making use of it but transcending the selfish acts and realising one's true self through the vision of oneness. The second aspect is the aesthetic dimension. In one of his lyrics Tagore writes,

“Step out of yourself, and stand outside

You will hear within you the music of the entire universe.”(qtd in. Sengupta, 2005, p.12)

In stepping out of one's narrow self one does not simply experience the whole but would experience a 'symphonic whole'. This symphonic whole is experienced when one feels this oneness with all in this world, in humanity as well as in nature. Harmony is the central thought of his thinking. Tagore always brings in this analogy of musical instruments when he talks about harmony in existence. Just like the strings of a musical instrument produces sound not in isolation but in harmonious being, we too the beings of the world can produce the music of spirit when we live in harmony. Tagore had a firm conviction that this plurality of cultures offer a great opportunity for a symphonic harmony than a dissonance.

Tagore's concept of Universalism finds its bedrock in his concept of Man. While talking about the concept of Man, Tagore stresses on three aspects of man which transcends him from being a mere man to Man, the universal being. The aspects are the surplus, love and freedom. For Tagore, man is not a helpless victim of fate but a co-creator of the world with the divine. Man for Tagore differs from all the other creatures on two important criteria. The first one is, man has the ability to transcend the bounds of necessities. Animals are tied to instincts and necessities thus majority of their activities are in fulfilling their necessities. Man on the other hand has the capacity to transcend these instincts and necessities and can exercise his freedom in creativity. Another important characteristic of man which differentiates him from other creatures is the power of discrimination of 'what is' and 'what ought to be done'. For animals it is always what is and what is desired whereas man has this discrimination power in his consciousness which guides him towards the moral good. In the world, there are many things that are good for one and evil for other, thus man is made to take decision not based on his necessity but based on what must be done for greater good of all. Here he transcends himself from the life of desire to life of purpose. Having traveled from the world of nature to world of humanity, man gains the freedom of creativity and realises the surplus capacity within him. He exhibits the surplus in many spheres of human life - in his aesthetic endeavour, in religion, in comradeship and in harmony with the nature. This surplus in him makes him realise the supreme person in him, the *jiban debata*, who is the life force of the entire humanity. At this stage man transcends from a mere physical man to a personal man. Tagore's *Gora* illustrates this concept of evolution. The novel is structured like a bildungsroman, tracing the path of Gora's

progress from narrow identification with the nation through customs and religion to truer understanding of human worth.

Universalism in Gora:

The novel *Gora* is set in the background of the mid nineteenth century India, when the western ideas of nationstate started penetrating into the subcontinent. The novel documents the ideological modifications Tagore underwent during the early twentieth century and how he stood against the western idea of nationstate especially towards the idea of monocultural nationstate. As Buddhadeb Bose clearly puts, “the author, rather than expressing himself directly vis-a-vis an authorial voice, articulates his position through gestures and markers.”(qtd in Dutta, 2021, p.6) Thus in *Gora*, Tagore deals with the aspects of civilisation that is needed in a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, and multi-religious nation like India. Idea of *Bharatvarsha* is the key concept in *Gora*. *Bharatvarsha* in the sense it does not refer to just the geographical position of the country but the culture, practices, tradition, religion, ethos which are the integral part of the people’s life make it a nation. The novel’s eponymous hero, Gora, an outrageously fair complexioned orthodox hindu, who not only fiercely rejects the reformists ideas of the pre-independence India but also considers them as collusive to the West. Gora is not a fanatic who blindly supports his religion but the one who has a higher understanding of it. For him Hinduism is not merely a religion, but the essence of the Indian cultural existence. His only mission is to make people to give up this slavish imitation of the West and embrace their very own culture. Thus he clings to the Hindu Orthodoxy as a resistance towards modernity and westernisation. This can be seen in his first visit to Poresh Babu’s house. Gora startles everyone with his appearance. Among the brahmo bourgeois Poresh family members there appeared Gora with an eye catching caste mark on his forehead, in khadi attire and Cuttack shoes. Tagore says he appeared as a “living image of rebellion against the modern age.” (R.Tagore, “Gora” 107)

However, this forthrightness and strict attitude of his makes him seem an arrogant, self-asserting and an aggressive person. But, actually he is an optimist who envisions a utopian *Bharatvarsha* where all are united under one umbrella through hinduism. A kind hearted Gora, who can’t even withstand a small injustice done to a downtrodden believes that all these ‘evils’ can be eradicated if all embrace hinduism. But the irony lies in the fact that Gora who is a fearless hindu missionary is actually neither an Indian nor a hindu by birth but an Irish and christian, whose parents died during the sepoy mutiny of 1857. The couple, Anandmoyi and Krishnadayal save him and raise him as foster parents. However this truth is revealed to the protagonist only at the end of the story.

The novel can be claimed dialectical in two senses. The first one is from the dialogue perspective. Gora, the protagonist is always in conflict of opinion with most of the characters in the story. The philosophical character is always provoked by his interlocutors. As Ananya Dutta Gupta correctly puts, “instead of giving any one point of view pre-eminence, the author opts for a more dialectical approach. Each point of view may be said to contain a convincing slice of truth in it; each contributes to the quest for the whole truth”.(qtd in Dutta, 2021, p.6) These interlocutors are always the opposed set of characters who provide cue question and Gora refutes them with his astounding eloquence and validates his point. The common interlocutors are the Brahmo critics like

Poresh Babu, a liberal, philosophical and spiritually wise person born of out of the Brahmo faith, Haran and Boradasundari, leading members of the samaj who bear hostility towards the hindu religion and slavishly complacent with the British rule in India, Binoy, another important character in the novel who mediates between the extreme hinduism and exclusivist brahmoism and most of all is the young brahmo girl Sucharita, who has a mind of her own, smart and very progressive. Gora's opponents may disagree with him but cannot ignore him. His strength of character is felt by everyone, especially Sucharita, one of Tagore's unforgettable women characters. Through Sucharita, Tagore portrays how new Indian woman with fine intellect and social conscience see Gora.

The second and the most important perspective is the evolution aspect of the hero. Gora evolves in stages. The change that we see in Gora after the revelation of his parentage is not a sudden metamorphosis of the character but a gradual evolution throughout the novel, from what he thinks he is to what he really is to what he becomes by drawing his own inner strength and redeeming himself from his cancelled past. Here we can see that Tagore is bringing in his concept of Man. According to Tagore, man evolves from being a mere physical man to a personal man and finally draws upon the surplus within him and becomes the Universal Man.

For Tagore, love is an important aspect for man to elevate himself to a higher level. He defines love as the "greatest delight when we realise ourselves in others, and this is the definition of love." (R.Tagore, "Religion of Man" 30) Tagore's view of love must be understood with reference to the concept of ideal harmony. The spirit of oneness that we realise through the divine with all is the ultimate end and fulfilment of humanity. The truth behind this spirit of oneness is love. Tagore feels man is gifted from this perspective. Through love man can exercise his freedom and find fulfilment. Not only that, he comes to an appropriate stance towards his fellow beings. He sees himself in the entire creation. Thus Tagore calls love as perfect comprehension of the Universal Man.

The so-called narrow minded conservative Gora whom we witness in the beginning of the novel has the first spark of this love when he says to his father that he wants to go to Triveni to take the holy dip in Ganga. Krishnadayal wonders why can't he do the same here in Calcutta as the same Ganges flows here too. But the justification that Tagore gives, proves this spark of transition.

He had decided to bathe at Triveni because many pilgrims would gather there. Merging with that mass of humanity, he wanted to surrender to the vast current of national life, and to feel the nation's turbulent pulse within his own heart. At the slightest opportunity, Gora wanted to forcefully cast aside all constraints and prejudices, to come down to the level the general public, and declare with all his heart: 'I am yours, and you are mine!' (R.Tagore, "Gora" 86)

The first seed of the evolved future Gora who worships India not any particular religion lies in this warm embrace of the nation in its collective manifestation. The second transitional moment for Gora is when Binoy comes and expresses his love for Lolita to Gora.

The abstract love that he had read in books, Gora sees it for the first time as truth of life in the eyes of Binoy. They then go on to talk whole night. Gora too confesses his love and says his love is of different kind and it is the love for his country, his Mother India. Knowing only bookish way of loving the nation, Gora for the first time experiences that even the love for motherland can

pervade the entire being and touch the soul. This agitation of the soul doesn't allow him to sleep throughout the night and walks up to the roof. As the dawn breaks out he has a quasi-mystical experience:

For an instant, he stood transfixed, and from his crown, a ray of light seemed to rise like a fine stem, blossoming into a thousand-petalled lotus that filled the whole sky. His entire spirit, consciousness and strength seemed to extinguish themselves in surrendering to this supreme bliss. (R.Tagore, "Gora" 173)

Gora recognises himself not just with the nation but with the entire creation. However Tagore doesn't leave it here. He prepares a ground from here to test and shake up his hero's complacency. One such incident is the death of Nanda, a youthful son of a carpenter and a staunch follower of Gora. Nanda dies a premature death due to the spread of tetanus by a chisel because of lack of treatment and ignorance of his mother who instead of calling a doctor calls an exorcist. Through this incident, Tagore showcases the difference between the higher understanding of a religion and lower understanding of a religion. Gora is shocked and horrified by this incident. All the more, Benoy's criticism of Gora's narrow nationalism of excluding women from outer world, led to the death of Nanda pricks the hero to soul. Gora realises that enlightenment cannot be brought to all, when one half of it is excluded.

Similar incident occurs at Chor Ghoshpur village. Gora finds that the entire village has been terrorised by the English indigo planters who has forced the entire village to grow only indigo and sell it to them at a very low price. Foru Sardar, a representative of the entire village who questioned this injustice was arrested unethically and put in jail, abandoning his only son Tamiz. A good samaritan hindu couple, Ramapati and his wife, had adopted this boy temporarily till his father's return. Here, through this couple Tagore makes the protagonist as well the readers to realise his unified cultural vision beyond religious and racial identities. Gora is moved by the simple humanity found in this unorthodox hindu couple to its complete contrast a selfish brahmin rent collector of the indigo factory. He realises that purity is not an external factor but inner refinement. Thus Gora sheds his orthodoxy to his justice and humanity. The time he spends in jail gives Gora to reflect on all these incidents and on himself. His vision of Bharatvarsha evolves from abstract to concrete and broadens. He realises that it is no more an ideal but a land filled with millions of people. All these incidents lead the hero to the final aspect of man to transcend himself to a universal being.

The ultimate transition happens in Gora is when he comes to know about his real parentage. In a single moment his entire universe shatters down. He loses his caste and religion but finds himself as a true citizen not just of nation but a global citizen with world being his home. With religion being gone, the patriotism that was lying under comes to the fore. Gora now understands that his country is

no longer a fortress of ancient culture to be defended against foreign enemies and internal enemies, but the perennial India of confluence of nations and nationalities, creeds and communities, and a mystic unity in its manifold diversities. It is a joyous temple from where he welcomes the world. (Chatterjee 195)

This is the true freedom. For Tagore freedom is not independence and non-interference but harmony in one's relation with other and indeed world at large too. Tagore calls this as 'freedom of social relationship'. Such kind of a freedom must be understood as an obligation. Obligation must not be taken as a burden upon us but must be taken as an interpersonal relationship where all belong

to one family, the family of mankind. This kind of freedom and obligation originates from the experience of love.

Conclusion:

By drawing attention to the historical tensions between the Hindu nationalism and Brahmo cosmopolitanism in the novel, Tagore clarifies his stand point for a united world. He is not pointing towards hybridity that hangs between two worlds but a syncretism where everyone are recognised and accepted. According to Tagore, through love, man finds truth and truth shows him the beauty. Beauty is nothing but the ideal perfect harmony in creation. However, Tagore feels that to unite this individual feeling with the universal feeling, one must free themselves from selfish interests and desires and prepare themselves to share the burden of others. The novel *Gora*, illustrates this concept of Tagore's where the protagonist goes through the path of surplus, love and finally attains this freedom of social relationship by accepting the responsibility of one's community, consequently humanity at large.

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