

## Nation and Nationalism: Conceptualizing Rabindranath Tagore's Idea of Nationalism through his essay *Nationalism in India*

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### Abstract

The aim of this paper is to problematize the façade of 'Nationalism' in Indian context as pointed out by the first Noble Laureate of Asia, Rabindranath Tagore. Unlike many of his contemporaries who argued that nationalism was a necessity to acquire freedom, Tagore was conscious about the implications of blind nationalism since it involved suppression of freedom. He understood nationalism as a movement that puts the entire interest of the state before the welfare of nations and even people causing the opposite effect in comparison to unification. He argues that India's strength was not in emulating the nationalism of the West but in the culture and spirit of India. Therefore, the essay *Nationalism in India* explores Tagore's arguments against the notion of nationalism, his criticism of the Western model of the nation-state and his vision for a society based on universal humanism. Tagore further disagreed with the political extremism that defines the Indian nationalist movement saying that India's identity should be defined by fraternity, toleration, and respect for other individuals. For all he was an eccentric figure whose ideas many a time directly contradicted the nationalist movements in India; his views brought out a balanced understanding of nationalism and its issues and the need for a harmonious multicultural society. In light of the modern discourses on nationalism, identity, and global peace, this essay will focus on the applicability of Tagore's views in the modern globalized society.

**Keywords:** Nationalism, Western, India, political, freedom, society

Most of the critics approve that nationalism is a modern concept which has almost become a philosophy for nation-states in postmodern age. But none of them could provide a concrete, unanimous definition for this concept. For example, Irish historian Benedict Anderson in his book *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* defined nation as 'imagined community' and nationalism as a deep camaraderie existing among the citizens of a nation-state who might have never known to or heard of each other. Yet they feel a sense of brotherhood among themselves. Ernest Gellner in his *Nations and Nationalism* considered nationalism to be "a theory of political legitimacy, which requires that ethnic boundaries should not cut across political ones, and, in particular, that ethnic boundaries within a given state - a contingency already formally excluded by the principle in its general formulation - should not separate the power-holders from the rest." (Gellner, 1). According to Hans Kohn, nationalism emerged in Western Europe in the eighteenth century; it spread across Europe in the nineteenth century; and it has become a "world-wide movement" in the twentieth century (Kohn,

4). Such ideas propounded by those critics suggest that the idea of nationalism is Western concept which is essentially Eurocentric. Here lies a fundamental question. Is the Western concept of nationalism equal to the nationalism in the East, especially in India or is there any difference? One of the authors from India, who has reconceptualized the idea of nationalism and defined nationalism of the East, is our national poet Rabindranath Tagore.

Tagore was born in the second half of the 19th century, which was the time when the nationalist movement against British rule was on the rise in India. Thus, in 1905, the Swadeshi movement began effectively at the doorstep of the Tagore family in response to the British partition of Bengal. Even though the man by nature was not a politically inclined individual, he initially joined the movement and began delivering lectures and composing patriotic songs with such zeal that Ezra Pound identified Tagore to have sung Bengal into a nation. But soon the happiness that Tagore felt in the society turned into mess as the nationalists started inflicting violence against innocents. Tagore, an advocate of non-violence or Ahimsa could not approve nationalists' move of burning all foreign goods of what they termed as a non-cooperation movement as it adversely affected the poor of Bengal as indigenous goods were more expensive than that of foreigners'. The youth still further disappointed him by joining the evil cult of the bomb, dreaming of freeing their motherland from incarceration with the help of violence and terror. In his essay written in Bengali, *Sadupay* ("The Right Means", 1908), Tagore has criticised the educated, English speaking elite leaders of Swadeshi Movement for 'forcing' ('threatening' as well) the Bengali subalterns (especially, Bengali Muslims & lower caste Hindus) to 'boycott' the British-made goods. Thus, in the name of fighting the enemy British, the Swadeshi leaders are becoming inimical to their fellow countrymen. He states that unfortunately we want freedom but don't believe in the idea of freedom from our hearts. We don't have the patience to respect the opinions of each other. This can be interpreted as a testament to his later rejection of the idea of nationalism.

Upon reaching Japan and US in 1916, Tagore delivered a number of lectures strongly condemning nationalism which was published as a book under the title *Nationalism* in 1917. It is divided into three sections- "Nationalism in Japan", "Nationalism in the West" and "Nationalism in India". In the essay *Nationalism in India*, Tagore has investigated the notion of 'real' problem in India which is 'not political', but 'social'. We, the Indians, are trying to emulate the politics of Europe which is essentially endowed with western ideologies. There is a fundamental difference between India and the West. European people have "racial unity from the beginning" which we lack (Tagore 2009, 64). In America and Australia, a systematic ethnic cleansing of the indigenous people or tribes has solved the racial problem. But India patiently lets different races grow since the beginning of civilisation. Moreover, the geographical hugeness of land and heterogeneity of races make this country look like "many of this country countries packed in one geographical receptacle"; and Europe is completely opposite, looking like "one country made into many" (ibid. 76). Lack of unity among multiple races and rigid casteism are social evils,

weakening the sense of unity amongst us. Although the differences in race and caste are not impassable barriers, we make them static, immutable with the passage of time. Moreover, in our caste system, different (discriminatory as well) jobs attributed to different castes cultivate competition, cruelty, and hatred among each other. Yet, he anticipates a sense of possible 'unity' from the saints like Guru Nanak, Kabir and Chaitanya Mahaprabhu who sermonise the existence of one God to all races. In the present era, we have to find unity which should be apolitical. But the closeness of different races, he argues, might have two implications: people of different categories shall either fight with each other for their self-interest or create an atmosphere of conformity, mutual trust and friendship amongst themselves by exercising moral zeal. The latter group, will survive and remain imperishable in the coming ages.

Despite being located in the West, Tagore presents his optimistic view on America for having the potential to refine, redefine and appropriate the Western civilisation to the East. He thinks so on the basis of a fundamental difference between Europe and America. Europe has its own traditions – she has taken excessive pride in her imperialistic expansion and materialistic gain, “lost faith in humanity, and has become distrustful and sickly” (ibid. 68). This arrogance generates in her a mentality to debase other countries, devalue their uniqueness. For example, British can never understand India as they are apathetic to reading Indian literature, and knowing her history and philosophies. Europe mocks “not only at our modest household lamps but also at the eternal stars. But let us not or that provocation be precipitate in our desire to dismiss our lamps. Let us patiently bear our present insult and realise that these fireworks have splendour but not permanence, because of the extreme explosiveness which is of their power, and also of exhaustion” (ibid. 72). That's why, Europe has nothing concrete to give her best to the East nor does she want to receive the rich knowledge that the East, especially India, has been nurturing and culturing for ages. America, on the other hand, is a newly independent country who has no rich tradition or history behind it. People of different cultures from different parts of the world start settling in this 'new world'. He equates this “melting pot” America with the diversity in India. That's why, America has the possibility to detach herself from the aggressive European nationalism and set a futuristic, humanistic vision of civilisation of the West.

Tagore has traced that the concept of nation is essentially restricted to geographical periphery which has dismantled the possibility of universal brotherhood, creating an invisible wall of animosity, competition and hatred among nations. This situation can be altered by showering love, showing sympathy and exercising moral power. Tagore has stressed on historicity to state that "India has never had a real sense of nationalism" (ibid. 70). Every country's strength lies in her history and following its traditions. Indeed, he presents an observation. Because of the spread of Western education in India, the educated Indians are attempting to follow and borrow the history of western nationalism. Here, he gives a warning, "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" (ibid. 71). We have to realise the history in general is the history of humans, the history of both the West and the East. It is the West who has come to the East and India has contributed significantly in shaping the history of human civilisation. That's why, we, the Indians shouldn't succumb to Western civilisation nor should we indulge ourselves in competitive nationalism with the West. It's the preaching of Europe that keeps the idea of Nation higher than humanism, and Tagore has discarded it. Moreover, the civilisation of the West has embittered him because of her mission of colonising less powerful countries, making them her slaves. The West has abandoned spiritual ideals and cherished greed, materialistic greed.

This essay is a strongly worded critique of nationalism reflected in Tagore's statement, "I'm not against one nation in particular, but against the general idea of all nations" (ibid, 73). A 'Nation', according to him, is an institution representing materialism, power and destruction. This institution insists its whole population to become powerful, materialistic. This insistence injects in them a desire to dominate others, deprive others of their fundamental rights as a means of increasing power, resources and prestige. Thus, nationalism repels humanity's efforts which are creative, and selfless.

The idea of a nation which is completely 'political' in nature has shaped many movements against British Raj in India. Although most of the political leaders and intellectuals in India regarded nationalism as a positive force that could help the country to liberate itself politically from the shackles of England, Tagore saw it as a dangerous idea that could impact negatively not only on India but humanity as a whole. He believed that the Western model of nationalism is an imposition on the Indian spirit that might result in the emergence of conflicts, and even the obliteration of individual liberties. Instead of political power, we have to be morally powerful. We have to prove to the West, which is politically superior to us, that we have power to undergo constant suffering only for the sake of truth. Instead of depending on the West, we have to be self-dependent otherwise there's no meaning of getting political freedom from England. His insistence on the idea of self-sufficiency paves the way for "atmashakti" or self prowess. This concept of "atmashakti" or inner strength is elaborated in his book of essays named *Atmashakti*. However, he refers to the caste system in India which equally establishes the hierarchy of dependency of the lower caste people on the upper three castes for livelihood. Practising such age old authoritarian customs within India is anachronistic in the present era.

Tagore has discarded the idea of 'nation' developed in the West and prescribed the idea of 'Samaj' (society) for India. In fact, he wants to replace the ideology of Nation with the idea of "Swadeshi Samaj" (Self-sufficient society). According to him, a nation is "the political and economic union of a people" assembled for "a mechanical purpose"- it is devoid of humanity and spirituality (ibid 37). In the essay *Bharatbarsya Samaj*, Tagore stressed that we need to understand 'samaj' as of utmost importance in our country. Samaj does not believe in self-absorption nor does it prioritise 'our' happiness; it thinks in terms of the well-being for 'all',

creating a sense of unity amongst countrymen. Society encourages countrymen to embrace humanity, spirituality and morality. In *Nationalism in India*, he goes further to compare society to healthy food that is responsible for a sound body and sound mind; but he compares nationalism to wine that makes people intoxicated with lust for power and money. It is indicative of the fact that samaj is constructive and nationalism is destructive.

The twentieth century was a period when European colonialism made its world-wide expansion and anti-imperial movements in India reached its height. In this context, Tagore has conceptualized the idea of 'freedom'. Political freedom, he argues, does not provide the essence of freedom if we can't come out of the narrowness of mind. The social prejudices, superstitions and orthodoxy are the narrow domestic walls that don't let ourselves be free mentally. Moreover, political freedom is merely a machine that can't generate "freedom of movement" (ibid. 81). We, using our free mind, can operate this machine for achieving freedom. Indeed, political freedom makes people powerful but not free; it's a jailhouse which in the name of freedom actually turns them into its slaves. Even in the so-called free states, the minority has enslaved the majority of people. Nationalism of the West teaches and preaches this political freedom to the East. Therefore, those nationalists in India are thinking of getting political freedom, will actually end up becoming slaves to the West and cut off from humanity. Tagore has traced the reason why majority of his countrymen are inclined to political freedom. As we have been taught that our great forefathers have formulated the concept of 'society', many of us blame this social system for all the defects, agony and failures still pervaded in Indian society. That's why, we want to replace "social slavery" by "political miracle of freedom" to eliminate the existing demerits of society (ibid 82). Tagore emphasises 'moral freedom', 'spiritual freedom', 'freedom of education' that can lead us (the entire humanity) to achieving higher ideals. This notion of freedom is also elaborated in Poem No. 35 of his book *Geetanjali* ("Song Offerings") in the following manner:

“Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high;  
Where knowledge is free;  
Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls;  
Where words come out from the depth of truth;  
Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection;  
Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into the dreary desert sand of dead habit;  
Where the mind is led forward by thee into ever-widening thought and action—  
Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake.” (Tagore, 117)

Tagore gives a befitting reply to those nationalists who want to justify nationalism in India by referring to Switzerland where people, despite being divided into multiple races, embrace nationalism. He argues that in Switzerland people of different races intermarry, feel to have the same blood, share a sense of unity among themselves. But in our country, people are divided into castes and subcastes, practice endogamy, and don't believe in single birthright. Here, people of

different races shed blood for each other not for any sacrificial mission, but for ethnic clashes or monetary purposes. This notion of discordance among races, even in choice of food, has been a deep rooted social practice cum evil and stands as a social barrier for attaining political union.

In the age of scientific innovations and commercial advancement, the spread of nationalism poses a threat to humanity. Tagore argues that the concept of nationalism has the underpinnings of not only politics but of commerce. This commercial aggressiveness propels people to maximise profit, material prosperity and greed, delimiting every product to active production and passive consumption. Thus, the enormous lust for materialistic gain defies the laws of magnificence, tramples the beauty of nature and crushes the worthy values of humans. The instinct that makes man different from animals is that his power is invisible, instrumental for constructive works and creative ventures. But the "commercial civilisation of man" is shamelessly showing its ugly, destructive and violent movements, preferring the exercise of power over perfection (ibid. 86)

Explaining the commercial implications of Western nationalism, Tagore hinges on Indian mythology. According to Indian myths, Indra, the God of Immortality, takes every possible means to tempt a man who through *tapasya* (the spiritual practice of physical mortification and austerities) wants to attain divine grace or immortality. If he surrenders to such temptations, he will be damned. In the present-day context, it seems that the West desirous for attaining deathlessness is lured by the "temptation of wealth" sent by Lord Indra and therefore, her "civilisation of humanity has lost its path in the wilderness of machinery" (ibid, 86). It will be a part of our incompetency if we don't take any initiative to change such economic exploitations imposed upon us by the West.

Tagore advocates that India must usher in defining a new kind of nationalism which ensures the harmony among people of different races, religions and communities. In Poem no.106 (*Bharat Tirtha*) of his book *Geetanjali* ("Song Offerings"), he invites the Aryans, non-Aryans, Hindus, Muslims, Englishmen, Brahmin, Oppressed to come by the sea shore of India's Great Humanity! His novel *Gora* has grounded on these ideals. The protagonist Gour Mohan, also called Gora because of fair complexion, is a fanatic Hindu, who considers revivalist Hindu nationalism as the basis of Indian nationalism. He uses his caste and religion as weapons of Indianism against British colonialism and the reformist movements of the Brahmo Samaj founded by Raja Ram Mohan Roy. As soon as Gora comes to know that he is neither a Brahmin nor an Indian by birth, rather a child of an Irish-English couple who was murdered in the Indian Sepoy Mutiny in 1857, he loses and finds his 'true' identity at the same time. He no longer remains an intolerant militant Hindu, but finds himself as a Bharatiya above caste, creed, religion and race. At the end, Gora discovers a secular, inclusive identity of himself — "the mantra of that deity who belongs to all - Hindu, Musalman, Khrishtan, Brahmo - the doors of whose temple are never closed to any caste or race- the deity not only of Hindus but of Bharatvarsha" (Tagore 1997,476). His transformation

from a religious orthodox to a spiritually emancipated man invokes Tagore's idea of universal humanism. In his another novel, *The Home and the World*, Tagore simultaneously presents two male protagonists and their contradictory views on nationalism in the context of India. Sandip is an extremist, aggressive and chauvinistic, wants to fit western nationalism in India. Though Nikhilesh is a product of western education, he cherishes sympathy, sensibility, compassion and cooperation. His nationalism is based on humanity. Many critics believe that the portrayal of Nikhilesh typifies Tagore's own persona.

The first Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru in his book *The Discovery of India* refers to two dominant figures of the century - Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore - who have inspired him to develop a theory of nationalism for the newly independent country. Nehru wrote about Tagore, "Not Bengali only, the language in which he himself wrote, but all the modern languages of India have been moulded partly by his writings. More than any other Indian, he has helped to bring into harmony the ideals of the east and the west, and broadened the bases of Indian nationalism. He has been India's internationalist par excellence, believing and working for international co-operation, taking India's message to other countries and bringing their message to his own people" (Nehru, 340). In today's global political context, as nationalism has come out to be influential in international politics and national politics, Rabindranath Tagore's *Nationalism in India* is as relevant as ever. Therefore, Tagore's apprehension of nationalism and nationalism causing violence, exclusion, and authoritarianism can be associated with contemporary forms of populism, xenophobia, and wars associated with nationalistic principles.

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