

## **TAGORE'S CRITIQUE OF NATIONALISM: A VISION OF CULTURAL GLOBALIZATION**

**SAMIT KR. MAITI**

SEVA BHARATI MAHVIDYALAYA  
KAPGARI, WEST BENGAL, INDIA

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### **Abstract**

*Born and brought up in a family historical for its 'confluence of cultures', Tagore inherited a unique consciousness of cultural harmony that he strived to realize not only through his huge corpus of writings of multiple genres but also through various activities. His acceptance of the Nobel Prize for literature in 1913 as the first Asian was a signal success more because of the fact that the phenomenon established him as the most notable cultural ambassador from the East to the West than because of the fact that it gave him a wider, international recognition outside Bengal.*

*The paper argues that Tagore was a fierce opponent to imperialism, colonialism and cultural chauvinism. He dismissed the ideological concept of nationalism as 'the organized self-interest of a people', which is 'least human and least spiritual'. His anti-nationalistic sentiment, born out of his profound faith on the religious doctrines of the BrahmoSamaj and the Upanishads, was at the root of his belief in cultural harmony and 'inter-civilizational alliance'. A vast corpus of his writings embodies most powerfully Tagore's vision of cultural globalization and 'commonwealth of nations'. Most importantly, VisvaBharati, Tagore's dream-project of synthesizing the East and the West, enshrines a philosophy of education based on multiculturalism, mutual love and fellow-feelings and civilization interactions. This Tagorean ideal of cultural globalization born out of anti-nationalist sentiment can act as an anodyne in this era of national animosity, xenophobia, cultural disharmony, cartographic division and neo-colonialism.*

**Keywords: Nationalism, culture, universalism, Tagore, East and West**

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*What is needed is eagerness of heart for a fruitful communication between different cultures. Anything that prevents this is barbarism.*

- Rabindranath Tagore

Born and brought up in a cultured and liberal familial ambience, Tagore (1861-1941) had internalized the virtues of broadness of mind, liberality of spirit and a rationality of temperament. Most importantly, an early acquaintance with the sublime heritage of world literature, especially, the poetry of the classical poets like Dante, Petrarch, Shakespeare and Goethe and a tour to England on 20<sup>th</sup> Sept., 1878 with his elder brother Satyendranath had helped the young Tagore to widen his horizon of imagination and empirical experience that had subsequently moulded his political philosophy.

Tagore was a fierce critic of the Western ideology of nationalism. He dismissed the ideological concept of nationalism as 'the organized self-interest of a people', which is 'least human and least spiritual'. On the contrary, he believed in an inter-active world of mutual co-operation and cultural harmony. Rather he believed that 'Neither the colourless vagueness of cosmopolitanism, nor the fierce self-idolatry of nation-worship, is the goal of human history.' (Tagore 9) He jeered at the motto 'East is east and West is west and never the twain shall meet'. He rather believed whole-heartedly that a commonwealth of nations is possible in which each nation will participate in a world festival by their mutuality of cultural and intellectual properties. In an essay, named 'Bangalirasha o nairashya' (The hope and despair of Bengalis), written much before his first visit to England, Tagore writes longingly:

The European idea in which freedom predominates, and the Indian idea in which welfare predominates; the profound

thought of the eastern countries and the active thought of the western countries; European acquisitiveness and Indian conservatism; the imagination of the eastern countries and the practical intelligence of the West – what a full character will be formed from a synthesis between these two. (qtd. in Dutta and Robinson 77)

Tagore was an earnest follower of the theory of inter-civilizational alliance; his imagination was given to a synthesis of the Oriental and the Occidental which are supposed to be normally radically opposites. But what is most surprising is that Tagore was not only a poet, philosopher and thinker; he was an active worker, who had strived throughout his career, through various political and professional activities, to actualize his ideal. He was not a passive dreamer living in the utopian world of fantasy. He was fundamentally a poet, but his earnestness in spreading the message of East-West synthesis through art and actual life proves his artistic and social responsibilities.

It is widely acknowledged that though Tagore's life-long ideal had been to strike a synthesis of the East and West, he was critical of both, especially of the West on various issues but fundamentally on the issue of the Eurocentric notion of aggressive nationalism. 'A nation', according to Tagore, *'in the sense of the political and economic union of a people, is that aspect which a whole population assumes when organized for a mechanical purpose...It is the side of power, not of human ideals'* (Tagore 13). His criticism of the West becomes most bitter when he goes on to trace out the effects of this heartless nationalism on the spiritual life of the people of the East. He thinks that the western nation can never lead to the betterment of the human civilization because it is born and brought up with the ideals of greed, competition, exploitation, non-cooperation and expansion of geographical territory. Tagore warns against the deadly commercial and political omnivorous nature of the modern nations:

The Nation, with all its paraphernalia of power and prosperity, its flags and pious hymns, its blasphemous prayers in the

churches, and the literary mock thunders of its patriotic bragging, cannot hide the fact that the Nation is the greatest evil for the Nation, that all its precautions are against it, and any new birth of its fellow in the world is always followed in its mind by the dread of a new peril. (Tagore17-18)

Interestingly, these ideals are also the fundamental ideals of colonialism and imperialism which Tagore abhorred so much. So, it is Tagore's firm belief that the western nation and nationalism can do no good to the East but can produce only the effects of dehumanization and moral bankruptcy at the cost of the living human ideals:

This process (nationalism), aided by the wonderful progress in science, is assuming gigantic proportion and power, causing the upset of man's moral balance, obscuring his human side under the shadow of soulless organization. We have felt its iron grip at the root of our life, and for the sake of humanity we must stand up and give warning to all, that this nationalism is a cruel epidemic of evil that is sweeping over the human world of the present age, and eating into its moral vitality. (Tagore20-21)

This anti-nationalistic sentiment has been most sarcastically expressed in a poem titled, '*The Sunset of the Century*', composed on the last day of nineteenth century. The blank verse, so deftly handled, brings out the volcano of passion of derision against the all-devouring ideal of nationalism of the poet-humanist:

The last sun of the century sets amidst the blood-red  
Clouds of the West and the whirlwind of hatred.  
The naked passion of self-love of Nations, in its  
Drunken delirium of greed, is dancing to the clash  
Of steel and the howling verses of vengeance.

The hungry self of the Nation shall burst in a  
Violence of fury from its own 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. (Tagore 131-32)

Throughout his literary career Tagore had waged a war against the 'fetish of nationalism' because it generates 'the dense poisonous atmosphere of world-wide suspicion and greed and panic' (Tagore 30).

But Tagore who had been so fierce a critic of the Western concept of nationalism is not blind to assess the role of the West on East in teaching the value of justice and discipline:

The protection of law is not only a boon, but it is a valuable lesson to us. It is teaching us the discipline which is necessary for the stability of civilization and for continuity of progress...The reign of law in our present Government in India has established order in this vast land inhabited by peoples different in their races and customs. It has made it possible for these peoples to come in closer touch with one another and cultivate a communion of aspiration. (Tagore 23)

Tagore's relationship with the West, like many other things, had been ambivalent. He is not always a blind antagonist to the West. In many occasions, he acknowledges his debt to the West. As in the essay, 'Nationalism' he acknowledges the superiority of the British culture, literature and humanistic ideals:

I have a deep love and a great respect for the British race as human beings. It has produced great-hearted men, thinkers of

great thoughts, doers of great deeds. It has given rise to great literature. I know that these people love justice and freedom, and hate lies. They are clean in their minds, frank in their manners, true in their friendships; in their behaviour they are honest and reliable. The personal experience which I have had of their literary men has roused my admiration not merely for their power of thought or expression but for their chivalrous humanity. (21)

Thus Tagore conveys his solid faith that the West is a land not only of modern technology and scientific advancement but also of benevolent humanity. But at the same time, he acknowledges impartially that these are insufficient to make a nation complete and self-sufficient. The West must come in contact with the East which is the land of spirituality to celebrate a carnival of perfect cultural unification. Hence, Tagore's final verdict is, '*West is necessary to the East. We are complementary to each other because of our different outlooks upon life which have given us different aspects of truth.*' (Tagore 19)

The harmful effect of chauvinistic nationalism on the average Bengali is narrated powerfully in his two novels, *The Home and the World* and *Four Chapters*. The novels can also be read as examples of Tagore's self-criticism. Tagore intends to give warnings to his countrymen against the blind worshipping of the western splendour of materialism and nationalism by losing the cultural and racial distinctiveness. He is also critical of China and Japan, the two great Asian nations, for their propensity to follow the path of the West by sacrificing their ancient, pre-historic tradition of spirituality and cultural heterogeneity. Needless to say, despite Tagore's criticism of the East, he had a profound love and respect for the Oriental traditions, especially the great Indian religious and cultural traditions established by the sages like Chaitanya, Nanak, Kabir, Ramakrishna and the two great Indian epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* from the time immemorial. Thus Tagore maintains a balance between the Orient and the Occident in making either criticism or wholesale appreciation.

Tagore believed in an interactive world based on deep sense of elemental humanistic sympathy, generosity, mutuality, the main objective of which would be to create a morally and politically enlightened community of nations. The concept of nation based on the ideals of mutual hatred, xenophobia, narrow-mindedness, mean selfishness, self-aggrandizement, and sense of greed is an anathema to Tagore. It is true, like all other humanists, Tagore also aspired for freedom; but mere 'political freedom' was not his ambition, his aspiration was for a spiritual freedom, intellectual freedom and moral freedom which is not curbed meanly by external compulsions or forces. The poem, 'Where the Mind is without Fear' finely illustrates his view:

Where the mind is without fear, the head held high;  
Where knowledge is free; where through the night and day  
The homestead walls have not, within their yard,  
Shut up in small space a fragmented earth;  
Where utterance wells up from the heart's spring;  
Where the stream of work with pace unfaltering  
From land to land through every quarter goes  
With a myriad fulfillments along its course;  
Where desert sands of petty rule have not  
Choked justice's stream, diffusing manly worth  
In hundred paths...

With ruthless blows from your own hand, awaken  
India, O Father, into that heaven. (Chaudhuri 170)

In fact, this ideal of freedom has much in common with Tagore's own concept of 'Dharma' which he valued as something superior to mere political freedom. This 'Dharma' has nothing to do with religious norms; it is the essence of life, independent of any outside agency. This is where Tagore's idea of 'Dharma' meets with Gandhi's.

Tagore, like Shelley, was an idealist, a dreamer, but unlike Shelley, he was not an 'ineffectual angel'; his dream was based on the solid grounds of

reality. His 'Visva-Bharati', a university set up at the heart of rural Bengal, Bolpur, Shantiniketan, was an earnest endeavour to materialize his dream of connecting East with the West. He wanted to make it a world centre for the study of humanity. He had the ambition to make his university a place somewhere beyond the limits of nation and geography. As the name suggests, the university was designed to nourish the distinctive cultures of both 'Visva', the world and 'Bharati', the Indian. Both the cultures would be nourished and nurtured simultaneously, without hampering their distinctiveness. Tagore intended the university to be a rendezvous of the East and the West. It would be a splendid example of cultural confluence, as it would be both local and global, hence post modernistic 'glocal'. But the execution of such a dream was nothing but a Herculean task. As Dutta and Robinson comment, 'From 1918 until his dying day Tagore would bear his university on his shoulders almost like the cross on the way to Calvary.' (Dutta and Robinson 219) He had to travel from one country to another, from one hemisphere to another to collect funds for his dearest International University but, most importantly, as an apostle of universal brotherhood among nations to spread the message to stop the deadly dance of death and destruction, war and carnage.

Tagore was not only a great poet and a philosopher; he was also one of the great educationists who experimented with the system of education and tried to make a permutation of the western and Indian traditional systems of education. His 'The Parrot's Tale' is a satirical exposition of the heartless, soulless, inhuman and mechanical western system of formal education that was forcefully applied to the Indian subcontinent during the colonial period. Instead, his ideal of education was based on the philosophy of reciprocal co-operation and a mutual interdependence of various cultures, a system that would bring out the best of the two worlds, the East and the West, the rural and the urban, the ancient and the contemporary. His 'VisvaBharati' was designed with that purpose of enshrining his innovative ideal of education.

Shriniketan, a rural village of Bengal, situated near Shantiniketan, offers a concrete example of Tagore's endeavor at bringing about a peaceful reconciliation of the apparently divergent cultures and practices. In this village

Tagore started a farm, the nucleus of his 'institute for rural reconstruction' with the untiring effort of Leonard Elmhirst, a young British agricultural economist which inspired many in the government of Independent India. The village was mostly populated by the 'santhals' or 'adivasis', the marginal community, living under the threat of extinction due to the onslaught of modernity. But Tagore, though he was not a professional anthropologist and an economist, he was instinctively aware of the need of preserving the marginal culture. He tried to solve the dire economic needs of the tribal people, educated them in health, scientific agriculture, and encouraged them to love their own tradition and culture without being swayed by the devastating wave of modernity.

At the heart of Tagore's ideal of the synthesis of the East and West lies his fundamental faith in the philosophical and religious belief in the spiritual unity of man. This faith had been deep-rooted in his mind from his early youth, as Dutta and Robinson admit:

The idea of India as a land with a genius for the synthesis of East and West, which had been present in his writing as far back as 1878, grew to dominate his thinking. He had never been interested in the dynastic history of India and its violent political struggles: always in writing about Indian history he stressed what he saw as its spiritual unity, incarnated in the Buddha. In Tagore's eyes, Buddha combined both contemplative spirituality and active spirituality-East and West so to speak. (Dutta and Robinson 151)

Even in 'Nationalism' Tagore writes:

India has been trying to accomplish her task through social regulation of differences, on the one hand, and the spiritual recognition of unity on the other... Towards this realization have worked, from the early time of the Upanishads upto the present moment, a series of great spiritual teachers, whose one object has been to set at naught all differences of man by the overflow of

our consciousness of God. (9-10)

So, this principle of the inter-civilisational union is the product of Tagore's staunch faith in religion. His whole corpus of writings consisting of poems, novels, dramas, songs, letters and essays is resonant with the ideals of cosmic peace, universal brotherhood, inter-national alliance, moral upliftment and an espousal of this centrifugal outlook.

We live in an era of 'globalization'. But unfortunately, the word 'globalization' instead of referring to a friendly culture of inter-civilizational alliances, has remained strictly limited to commercial, economic and political sense. The powerful Western countries are spreading the tentacles of neo-colonialism and motto of consumerism under the garb of an ear-soothing term 'globalization'. Violence and distrust among the nations are slowly but steadily swallowing the whole world ignoring the essential humanistic and spiritual unity of human beings and threatening the heterogeneity of world culture and world peace. Tension intensifies not only among the continents, not only along the Indo-Pakistan borders and Indo-China borders; the black clouds of hatred and anxiety gather not on Afghanistan or Egypt or the other Asian countries. The evil days of aggressive competition, intolerance and mutual hatred reach to our very backyard threatening the age-old Indian ideal of national, cultural, racial, social harmony in the form of demands for separate states of Telengana, Gorkhaland and many more. The days are not far off when India would be divided into numerous geographical and political territories on the basis of racial, linguistic, cultural, social and behavioural distinctiveness mocking at the ideals of unity of Buddha, Nanak, Kabir, Chaitanya, Vivekananda, the Mahabharata and the Upanishadas. Hence it is high time to adopt the humanitarian message of Rabindranath Tagore to save the world of the pernicious effects of nationalism, neo-colonialism, cultural chauvinism and jingoism and to avert the effects of forthcoming cultural doomsday.

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