Revisiting the Civilisation Question Through Nationalism: Tagore's India and Serbia, "Two Nests in the Opposite Banks"[1]

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Abstract

Rabindranath Tagore was a defender of human bonds. Thus "the state of realising our relationship with all," which he saw was being endangered by exclusive political interests, prompted him to search for harmony and justice in a strife-torn humanity. Noting the ruptures in the fabric of civilisation, he maintained that the means to re-establish allegiance to human ties in this unequal world were to introduce social practices of justice and ideas conducive to freedom, and not in enforcing power and coercive discipline. He witnessed the "carnivorous and cannibalistic" tendencies that dominated the world politics of his time; he neither could accept the narrow nationalism that pitted Indians against Europeans, nor could he accept the situation where the imaginary nation-state called India would loom bigger than the civilisational ideals of India. He also deplored the exclusive political self-centring, of the "European-style" modern nationalism which anticipates the recent development of the concept of Eastern Europe, projected as the "other" of Europe. This essay attempts to explore the negotiation and opposition of Tagore's initiative with the highly fractured times in which he lived. It will look at Tagore's literary efforts through which he tried to encourage harmony between societies and cultures in order to address the question of the lost heritage of "human civilisation." Furthermore, through focus on the responses that his talks produced in Serbia, the extent of influence of Tagore's thoughts on fostering better ties among people in different parts of the world will be analysed.

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Underscoring the significance of the interdependent world, which was being increasingly stymied by the ideology of nationalism spreading across the globe, Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), with a "vision of… the future of India and the world" (Radhakrishnan, *Centenary Volume* xvii) in mind, said:

> The East has her contribution to make to the history of civilisation…. I have great faith in human nature, and I think the [modern] West will find its true mission… of [not] thwarting its own purpose [of freedom and justice while making] herself a curse to the world. (Tagore, *Nationalism* 72-73)

This is a proclamation of the "world poet" at the height of World War I. It was in this war that he saw the "freedom" and "justice" that the West had given to the world being sacrificed on the altar of nationalism (Tagore, *Nationalism* 43). Two strands of thoughts can be discerned in the above extract: one, the difficulty of overcoming the effects of an exclusive political nationalism, which Tagore calls "bhougalik apadevata" (the territorial demon) – the artificial boundaries – geo-political or ideological; two, the problem of surmounting and/or reconciling with the "three basic sets" of contradictions: "that between the East and the West; that between tradition and modernity; and that between the past and the present" (Nandy, *The Illegitimacy of Nationalism* 1). As against the contradictions, Tagore's vision of nationalism, as he puts it, was not just "to discuss the question as it affects my own country, but as it affects the future of all humanity" (*Nationalism* 41). The "anxiety" to negotiate the basic oppositions and/or contradictions, and the connections between colonialism, nationalism and globalism/imperialism, has gained currency in scholarships on postcolonialism and the global understanding of human relationships. In this regard, the struggle against the continuous coercive politics of fragmentation of society, war and violence and Tagore's proposal of cultivating a non-violent tradition of respectful accommodation of differences, in spite of the "territorial demon" operative in society, needs to be scrutinised closely.

What follows is an attempt to analyse Tagore's ways of overcoming the "inhuman" situation in modern human civilisation, which has long been served by the "dehumanising" process of commerce and politics. Taking a postcolonial approach to what the critical theorist Homi K. Bhabha calls a required "Third space," which by exploring "we may elude the politics of polarity" (Bhaba 56), this essay attempts to explore the negotiation and opposition of Tagore's initiative within the highly fractured times in which he lived. It will look at Tagore's literary efforts through which he tried to encourage harmony between societies and cultures in order to address the question of the lost heritage of "human civilisation." Furthermore, the extent of influence of Tagore's thoughts on fostering better ties among people in different parts of the world will be part of the study, focusing in particular on the responses that his talks produced in Serbia (a nation in the southern corner of Europe), albeit briefly.

It is known that Tagore, a poet, raised his dissenting voice for the cause of humanity from the margins of the colonial world against the violence, war and armed conflicts raging throughout the world during the early twentieth century. He condemned the ideology and the "cult of nationalism"[3] that took its character from and shaped "the soul-stifling discipline and the savage greed of the modern nation-state" (Hay 446). While the term "modern" needs to be noted critically in relation to the spread of a uniform world order of nationalism, it may not be irrelevant to suggest that Tagore's vision of nationalism brings us close to Ernest Gellner's interpretation of modern nationalism: "… not all societies are state-endowed. It immediately follows that the problem of nationalism does not arise from stateless societies" (4). Partha Chatterjee, in sameness and difference, sees nationalism as the problem of the "European" centres influencing the margins; he links it with the historically determined outcome of the trends of nationalism "between the modern and the traditional" (18). For Tagore, nationalism is a combination of problems of the state influencing the society as well as an interpellation of the tradition/traditional from the dominant perspective of the West (now "First World"), to the exclusion of the "other" marginalised group/s of the constructed East (now "Third World").

The combined effects of this "continual and stupendous dead pressure of the inhuman upon the living human order which the modern world is groaning," Tagore insists, are not merely on "the subject races" (*Nationalism* 49). The pressure is also on those who live under the delusion that they are free but are in fact every day sacrificing "freedom and humanity to this fetish of nationalism" (49). Naturally, Tagore saw nationalism and war as twins, and the poet saw its vindication in the barbarity and the brutish self-interest evident in World War I. In fact, long before he condemned nationalism and its "carnivorous" and "cannibalistic" tendencies in his lectures delivered in Japan and America, Tagore voiced in Bengal/India his reservations about nationalism, which he saw was jeopardising the balance and harmony (*bhar samanjasyer abhab*)[4] of the Indian society. He offered the Indians alternative concepts of constructive work that would strengthen self-power (*atmasakti*).

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[3] "The Cult of Nationalism" was Tagore's first lecture in the US, delivered at the Sunset Club on 25 September 1916. In this lecture Tagore critiqued Nationalism as a modern western phenomenon that did not have its roots in Indian soil. For further study, Bengali readers may refer to Prosanto K. Pal's *Rabijibani*, Vol. 8.

[4] For further details, see Tagore's "Bharat Itihas Carca" (1901) in *Rabindra Rachanabali,* Vol. 13 and "Swadeshi Samaj" (1904) in *Rabindra Rachanabali,* Vol 12.

Tagore believed that "the vital strength in different civilisations is variously embodied" and therefore "the heart of a country lies wherever the people's welfare is centred" (Tagore, "Society and State" 51). In Serbia, almost in a similar vein, Tagore said in his first lecture (1926), "On Modern Civilisation":

> Something else should appear, something that will dilapidate the limits of the Nations [Tagore's term for nation-states] that will be within every man.... Everything that separates people, that nationalism of which Europe made a religion, must be cursed by God someday.
>
> But I hope that the human heart, melancholic by this pain, will cry; the One who is the same among all the differences, the One who inspires all people with song, who radiates through all deserts, will unite people's souls in wonderful harmony. (5)

War and Nationalism in the Discourse on Civilisational Modernity

Taking a cue from Tagore's lectures in Belgrade (Serbia) and his works, especially *The Home and the World*, a prominent Serbian scholar, Svetozar Petrović, in his article on the diverse responses to Tagore in Yugoslavia observes: "*Nationalism* was the most important work of Tagore for the Yugoslav twenties… [but] whether understood or not, the political thinker was generally preferred to the poet during the Yugoslav twenties" (9). However, Dusan Stojanović, another important Serbian scholar, provides a slightly different perspective in his foreword to the translation of Tagore's *Nationalism*: Tagore in Serbia "doesn't seem less sensible today than it was during the First World War" (23). What he suggests is that when imperial dissemination of knowledge and power was rife, Tagore's "quality of remarkable spirituality" offered a new dimension to exploring the nation: of moving beyond the fixed idea of the statist assumption/narrative of the Nation and the insensitiveness associated with it (Stojanović 6).

In Serbia, the insensitiveness amounted to "great human and material sacrifices" during World War I. This did not preclude future confrontations foreshadowing the fateful events of World War II in 1941 and the dissolution of Yugoslavia in 1991 (Milokovic-Djurić 85). After the Tito-Stalin breakup in 1948, Yugoslavia strove for a position of nonalignment in the cold war era, and in the 1960s it became one of the founding members of the Non-Aligned Movement; but in an atmosphere of multiple economic and political crises, with growth of separatist nationalism and breakdown of inter-republic talks, the country disintegrated amidst gruesome violence.[5]

This reminds one of the "twins" – nationalism and war – one powered by the other, serving goals of social exclusion and hierarchy and also, more dangerously, the goals of genocidal violence. Petrovic ́ rightly observes: "Tagore himself knew how to show his dislike of nationalism whenever he was aware of it and he would probably suspect the motives of the narrative we are tempted by" (310). Here, it would be useful to briefly refer to his visit to Italy because his lectures there influenced responses in Serbia. In 1925, a year before his visit to Serbia, Tagore had reminded fascist Italy (in his lecture in Milan titled "The Voice of Humanity") of the Renaissance that conquered the home and the world with its "Love of freedom, love of justice, love of truth, love of beauty." At the same time, he reminded his audience of "dehumanisation" that modern western civilisation brought forth:

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[5] For further references to Tagore in Serbia, see my "Nation and the Fairness of Justice: Tagore in Serbia." For a reading on the history of Yugoslavia in relation to Tagore, see Ana Jelnikar, "The Many Tagores in Former Yugoslavia."

> Do you not realize how a rigid ugliness is everywhere apparent – in your cities, in your commerce…? This is the creeping in of death, limb by limb, in the body of your civilization… and so, everywhere in God's world to-day, we are faced with what is called progress, a progress towards inhospitable ugliness, towards the eddy of a bottomless passion which is voracity. (522)

A similar warning is noticed again in the following statement:

> That movement is hiding a great danger to its neighbours…. I saw a lot of nice things in that country, but also a lot of victims of fascism, who came to me to tell me of their sufferings (Tagore, "On Fascism, Bolshevism, and Merging of European and Oriental Cultures" 5).[6]

Is this the modern civilisation or "what the West calls Progress?" the poet asked. Tagore was not averse to science, scientific evolution and the progress associated with it, and, as Nandy says, "In his world modernity had a place" (*Illegitimacy* 1). The poet has reiterated on several occasions that he was never against material or physical progress. At the same time, he emphasised that this modern civilisation that emerged in the West had "congested," instead of creating, the path of "intimate bond of human relationship," insisting that while "spreading its dominion" over the entire world in some way or the other, the big or imperial nations contributed negatively to endless contradictions and conflicts and greed (Tagore, "City and Village" 514).

Explaining the reasons behind the crisis in civilisation, Tagore notes:

> Man the Great appears in the drama of human history from age to age choosing different lands of birth…. Today… [the] Western nations have conquered truth by spiritual endeavour… and it is this power which sustains their triumphant position in the world….

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[6] The extract is from an interview with Tagore by *Politika*'s journalist from Zagreb, Ms. Olga Morović, before his arrival in Belgrade.

> On the other hand, the signs of imminent danger which appear today in the Western civilisations are due to the same reason…. Europe has made science the vehicle of her greed and has hurt the very spirit of science. ("Asia's Response to the Call of the New Age" 659)

Therefore, the poet cautions:

> We must not forget that the scientific organizations vastly spreading in all directions are strengthening our power, but not our humanity. With the growth of power the cult of the self-worship of the Nation grows in ascendancy; and the individual willingly allows the Nation to take donkey-rides upon his back; and there happens the anomaly which must have such disastrous effects, that the individual worships with all sacrifices a god which is morally much inferior to himself. (*Nationalism* 60)

As Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan observes:

> To Rabindranath selfishness or mere self-interest is the root of evil and what is true of individuals is true of nations. The individual wants wealth; the nation wants [the] earth. In both cases it is greed and hunger for matter. (*The Philosophy* 64)

Tagore believed that human beings were connected with the universe in fundamental ways. But he could see that this belief was on the verge of extinction. Witnessing how the coercive politics of nationalism and its anti-colonial nationalist derivatives were disrupting the life of the peasants and relationship between the neighbours, Tagore wrote to his friend Kalimohon Ghosh, "The area concentrated in itself all the problems of the Nation" [7] (*Critical Companion* 6). He involved himself as far as he could for the betterment of the lives of the impoverished and illiterate Hindus, Muslims and low-caste Namasudras on his family estates. Simultaneously, he tried to attend to the needs of "clearing injustices" and the removal of various types of "unfreedoms," to borrow an expression from Amartya Sen, which leave people with little choice and little opportunity of exercising their reasoned agency.

Martha Nussbaum, known for her work on cosmopolitanism, global justice and civilisational dialogue, reads Tagore's *The Home and the World* from a local-global perspective. She marks the imposed "unfreedom" enlivened by the forces of nationalism as the "politics of difference," and observes that Tagore understood that the substitution of the "universal values of justice and right" (that ultimately holds a nation together) with "ethnocentrism" would ultimately subvert the need of transcending these divisions (5). Tagore claimed a place of "unfreedom" for himself over and above the fact of colonial imperialism and emerging nationalism and tried to impart that through social reforms and educational efforts to existing groups in his estates and beyond. Put differently, Tagore's understanding of the freedom-unfreedom dialectic within the civilisational discourse demonstrates that "expansion of moral concern [should not] stop at the national boundary" (Nussbaum 5).

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[7] Tagore's term for nation-states is *rashtra*.

Tagore's Civilisational Ideal: Beyond the Limits of Nation and Geography

Civilisation, then, demands an understanding of justice that would be contemporaneous with the current age/generation and which would also continue to influence both the present as well as the future in different ways. But within the imperial dissemination of knowledge, within the tensions of the politics of difference, sorting of national issues could never be easy, especially when local concerns combined with global or international political perspectives. Tagore's was a determined world mind and he constantly focused on "re-membering" the absent, the distant, the past, into the present for the cause of humanity, suggesting that the historical discourse on modern civilisation need not necessarily negate questions of the changing identity of modernity or even the cultural identity of a nation. He argued that with the birth of the Nation in the linear progression of time and in spite of its aggressive ideology (in the form of imperial nationalism or colonial nationalism), "new elements have been introduced, and wider adjustments were waiting to be made" (Tagore, *Nationalism* 35). In order to strengthen his theoretical insights into the concept of the nation, Tagore had already read Ernest Renan and offered his own ideas of *desh*/nation by 1901. In his own words, nation is "a living entity, a mental construct" (*ekti sojeeb sotta, ekti manas podartho*). But he insisted that the word "Nation" was essentially an English word, without a corresponding Bengali equivalent and should thus be looked at in its English construct (Tagore, "Nation Ki" 677-78). However, his understanding evolved with his experience both at home and internationally. In 1931, he elaborated on the concept of the nation/*desh*/country while contrasting it with the Nation/nation-state/*rashtra*:

> Desh is the creation of human beings. It is not simply 'earthly' but it is also 'conscious.' If humanity is made visible, only then will 'desh' express itself.… There are some constructions that take human beings as ingredients, such as the 'rashtra' where the strength of the work is in numbers, there is always conflict in drawing people to your own group. When faith is lowered, the net is torn, the human ingredients are not fully available. (ctd. in Bagchi 210)

It is not that conflicts were unknown in India or in any other part of the world before the dawn of the modern civilisation and the birth of the Nation (at different times in different parts of the world). But the western civilisational modernity under the helm of the nation-states completely substituted spirituality with material expediency, a point that Stojanović analyses from a non-Eurocentric point of view. It demands a little elaboration:

> In Rabindranath Tagore's opinion, the chaos in which the West has found itself stems from the fact that the West has neglected the moral element in man, which is the link to the infinite. Man ceased to maintain the longstanding faith towards the infinite being; he sank into egoism that propelled him to fight against society and nature…. The battle between spirit and machines, between spirit and materialism has brought Europe into the state of chaos in which it is currently suffering, and which poses a threat to Europe's highest values. This is starting to pose a threat to the East, too. Tagore draws attention to this danger to Japan. This is the danger he refers to when talking about India… and it shall become obvious from the book [that] it is imbued with pacifism…. For Europe, the First World War was the time of the greatest distress…it brought the spirit of uncertainty and unrest, and, promises of truce didn't bring expiation…. All this leads to the fact that Tagore wants us to [cultivate] our feelings and knowledge… through acknowledgement and application of [and restoration of] the eternal truths about the nature of things, the world and man and through the improvement of relations making it corresponding to the laws of their beings. (22-23)

Stojanović's observation brings us to an important juncture of the civilisational dialogue that took place after the unprecedented human sacrifice during World War I. He brings to the fore Tagore's stringent critique of the aggressive and "organized selfishness of Nationalism" embraced by the West and its links with war and imperialism; more importantly, he reads the reason as to why the poet was uncompromising against the imitation of such nationalism, which could only end in a "conflagration of suicide;" hence the poet's caution to the people of India, Japan and later Serbia (primarily and not exclusively). Moreover, as Stojanović reasserts, Tagore, equally "a poet and a thinker," never overlooked current events and simultaneously placed emphasis on justice and eternal truths, which were also open to "exchange" of ideas (6-7). Indeed, Tagore's love of country, which he also wished to extend to others, is an engagement with the search for fairness of justice, which could be realised "in the harmony in feeling and in action," "in the truth of oneness" amidst shifting and fluctuating experiences of "common humanity" (Datta, "In Search of Fairness" 448). Tagore's perception of the truth – the "oneness" of human civilisation – is therefore not a fixed universal category. Neither is it necessarily "whole" truth; nonetheless, it is part of the contingent development of ideas of truth and justice within the complex interweaving of, in the words of Ranajit Guha, "historicality" and the frontiers of modern nationhood. It may be noted in this context that while Tagore signed the 1919 Peace Manifesto – "Declaration of Independence of the Spirit" – at Romain Rolland's behest, upholding the dignity of human civilisation, he was suspicious of the uniform rule of the "the new machine," which he insisted "will be of little advantage if it be run by the old power for the old ends."

Tagore also cautioned against the domestication of a "universal claim" of a worldwide human order on the one hand, and the hierarchical system on the other. John D. Kelly's observation on civilisational dialogues, which focuses on the Tagore-Wells' 1930 Geneva conversation against the background of nationalism from a cultural-anthropological point of view, is worth mentioning here. He critically analyses the "substantive injustice" which is increasingly becoming manifest in the "contemporary global nemesis" – the contemporary grotesque actuality – and asserts, "It is Tagore... who insists on plural civilisations in the face of Wells' prediction of a new, worldwide human order, one universal civilization as the natural destiny of mankind" (Kelly 277-78). In fact, Kelly defends Tagore's vision of the impossibility of uniformity against H.G. Wells' "polemics about future necessities" and insists that we should follow the poet who declared that "civilisations are to be cherished... not traditions creating an area of darkness" (Kelly 278).

Tagore's suggestion focused on maintaining human relationships. He knew "Western nationalism" exerted its boastful superiority of civilisation through geopolitical expansion and subjugation while hiding its secrets: trade secrets, state secrets, secrets of armaments. As a result, nationalism (and, if I may add, its double fascism, though different in its application), "as an inseparable adjunct of the modern nation-state and the idea of nationality" has erected an immovable wall (in Tagore's word, *achalayatan*) between us and them (Nandy, "Nationalism, Genuine and Spurious" 3). Broadly based on the dichotomous relationship between the West/superior and the East/inferior, and by extension, the colonised/the eastern and the inferior/lesser westerns (here Serbia) etc., the government by the Nation, in fact, underscores polarisation as its main principle. Simultaneously, while promoting the world order of uniform polarity, the "life principle of society" becomes corrupted at the root (Tagore, "City and Village" 514). The coercive force, or what Tagore calls the "motive force" of nationalism, also jeopardises the questions of the "rhythm of life."

Seeking the fairness of justice in "God's world," thus, Tagore's suggestion is to move beyond the realms of mimicking the modern nation-state and its claims of modernisation and progress. I will use, for convenience, Raymond Betts's observation on "European civilization, which is synonymous with 'forward,' the position in which the Europeans placed themselves in the march of time" (8). Referring to two terms, "civilizing mission" and "White man's burden," Betts comments:

> From our contemporary perspective such terms and the notions… are abhorrent. They are at best pretentious and at worst racist. They further express the peculiar geography of imperialism [and its binary nationalism]

> wherein Europe was the center of world affairs. In simple cultural geometry, the world consisted of two vast circles, a core and a periphery (Curzon's 'circumference'). From the core, Western Europe radiated outward those attributes we describe today as 'modern.' (7)

Tagore was particularly aware of the East-West binary that emerged from the Western European civilisational discourse on modernity and its links with the culture of nationalism. Therefore, he did not hesitate to declare, "Nationalism is a great menace." He showed "what a moral havoc it [has been] causing in a world where whole peoples are furiously organising themselves for gaining wealth and power" (*Nationalism* 74). The ugliness of competition, commercial aggressiveness and the increasingly constructed divisiveness of power, which are symptomatic of narrow nationalism and its binary imperialism, had collectively produced endless conflicts converting people and their social institutions into machines.

In Serbia, Tagore said:

> [The modern Nation] has opened a path to the great progress, but that progress hides a great temptation within itself…. Its continuous aim is to develop, more and more; [it is] an insatiable yearning; [it] requires the weapon…for it wants more from me [from the peripheral nations]…. All ideas of deity are blackened in the ambition of the modern life. Now, there is stealing, killing, robbing and hatred, like the entire world has returned to the beginning of the history, to primitivism. ("On Modern Civilisation" 5)

For Tagore, enduring the yoke of borrowed history equals the killing of self-determination, on which the ideology of imperialism and nationalism survives. This is what Bhabha calls "sly civility," a sense of civility imposed from above, "'living feeling power' which spreads from the words spoken to the things signified and forces the mind to take them in and make them conform to the formula" (102). For Tagore, submitting to the bondage of modernisation "is nothing but mimicry" (*Nationalism* 19). "What was dangerous for Japan [or India]," Tagore insisted, was "not the imitation of the outer features of the West, but acceptance of the motive force of the Western nationalism as her own" (*Nationalism* 21). In a similar vein, in Serbia Tagore warned of the dangers of imitating the exclusive political self-centring, the "European-style" nationalism of modern western civilisation, which also anticipates the recent development of the concept of Eastern Europe, projected as the "other" Nation of Europe, the "less civilised" (Wolff 91). Tagore's first lecture in Serbia, "On Modern Civilisation," certainly anticipates this predicament of the human race, suggesting that to forget or repress that past would be tantamount to a surpassing of the punishments which are meted out to the suppressed nations, leaving "a trail of miseries across a large bleeding tract of the human heart." These punishments, Tagore insists, "are dealt by a mere abstract force [the nation-states] in which a whole population of a distant country has lost its human personality" (*Nationalism* 41).

Tagore visited Serbia during the inter-war years, and he responded to the politics of polarity in Europe itself: "I tell you: do not get tempted by the spirit of progress, forget what the modern civilisation is" ("On Modern Civilisation" 5). This was indeed a paradigmatic shift in the meaning of the effects of modernity on the suppressed nations. His emphasis was on the shadows of the mere "abstract being," the soulless organisation, the Nation-states, which (with its fixed ideological authority of nationalism imbued with the idea of uniform progress through rapid industrialisation) carries with it a variety of dark traditions like "the narrowness of freedom" (*Nationalism* 40, 48). Tagore further commented:

> We cannot but acknowledge this paradox, that while the spirit [the creative life] of the West marches under its banner of freedom, the Nation of the West forges its iron chains of organization which are the most relentless and unbreakable that have ever been manufactured in the whole history of man. (49)

Therefore, the poet would not concede to the violent rule of the machine; neither did he submit to the bondage of superiority-inferiority that nation-states promote. Lyotard has described the bondage in the conception of history as a state of intoxication and as "terroristic." "It says: adapt your aspirations to our ends... or else" (63-64). The poet, with a range of experience of the ambivalent times he inhabited – of that uniform imperial world order inspired by colonialism and its binary nationalism – was aware of the difficulties of being a subject nation.

Still, he insisted that an all-encompassing process in human civilisation existed in both the East and the West which should continue to address "problems that face our common humanity" ("East and West" 347). Tagore's insights into humanity as a whole, as his life and works exemplify, therefore, could not be restricted either by "narrow domestic walls" or by time and space. He embraced classical Sanskrit traditions and India's diverse folk traditions; he cherished Serbian folk traditions alongside European classicism and the liberal Enlightenment wisdom "as we feel the sun." Yet, in utter disillusionment he said, "as for the Nation, it is for us a thick mist of stifling nature covering the sun itself" (*Nationalism* 42). The poet, therefore, refused to conform to "exclusive political interest" that binds a civilisational history within the state structure (*Nationalism* 64). It would be pertinent here to refer to Spivak's views on nationalism. Drawing on Hannah Arendt within the fold of her discussion on nationalism, Spivak observes:

> … something like nations, collectivities bound by birth, that allowed in strangers gingerly have been in existence long before nationalism came

> around. State formations change, but the nation thing moves through historical displacements and I think Hannah Arendt was altogether perceptive in suggesting that the putting together of nationalism with the abstract structure of the state was an experiment or a happening that has a limited history and a limited future. (13-14)

This explanation is enough, for now, to differentiate between what nation/desh/country/samaj and nation-states (in Tagore's term, Nation) and nationalism would mean in different phases of civilisation. It is significant that Spivak starts her discussion referring to the "inevitable" Tagore songs sung during the important event of "Partition, the division of the country" (9). What she suggests is the need "to… go beyond the [implacable forces in world politics including the] self-identity of nationalism towards the complex textuality of the international" (21). In fact, the terror and violence that became associated with the rising nationalism in British-ruled India as a consequence of Lord Curzon's partition of Bengal and its "human waste," and the uncertainty and violence of "nationalist excesses" (Dev 28), which Tagore strongly disapproved of, is being repeated in its aftermath. Tagore's literary text *Ghare Baire* (The Home and the World) represents this humane cause. Motivated by similar concerns for humanity, in 1919 he renounced the knighthood that had been bestowed upon him in 1915. One certainly cannot overlook the spread of terrorism and violence across the world, which Derrida, much like Tagore, explains as having "their origin in an aggression of the *colonial* type" (57).

Tagore's Vision of a Peaceful, Harmonious Global Society and Universal Humanity

Perhaps there is a need to revisit Tagore's words in his novel *Ghare Baire* or *The Home and the World*. Nikhil, the protagonist in the novel, says, "I am willing to serve my country; but my worship I reserve for Right which is far greater than my country. To worship my country as a god is to bring a curse upon it" (221). This is indeed a sense of shared service working within the poet-thinker to restore the lost inter-civilisational dialogue. Though Tagore knew that sharing in a deeply uneven and polarised world would never be without problems, he argued in *Ghare Baire*, as in his essays on nationalism and elsewhere, that inter-civilisational negotiation has been India's *samajic* (societal) culture and, though considered pre-historic, "it is the reconciliation of opposites which is of its essence" (*A Vision of India's History* 38). Therefore, for Tagore, the home/inside/private and the world/outside/public are not two ends of a spectrum but overlapping categories. It is interesting to note that, fascinated by Tagore's observations, particularly on nationalism intertwined with feminism, Jelena Dimitrijević (1862-1945), one of the earliest Serbian feminists, felt impelled to visit India. Dimitrijević's observations, echoing Tagore, suggest an important aspect of interchange associated with the terms, "home" and "world": "to come to India is same as going back home."

Tagore's visit to Serbia in 1926 inspired a supranational imagination that also enabled him to remain oriented to the local. Tagore saw India and Serbia as the "two nests in the opposite banks." He said:

> I am very happy that I can see people who are so different in their sensitivity from other nations/other European people. For your kindness, I do not have enough words to express my gratitude. I love you people because I can see the warmth and the spontaneous expression of joy, which amazes one. What a pleasant feeling it is to be loved and known in a world where I never expected to come! I feel like a bird that has two nests on the two opposite shores. I am happy to be here in a country which is so full of love. (Pejcicć 122)

Tagore was cognisant of the oppositional views prevalent in the imperial constructs of the East/the non-West/ the lesser West and the West and the tensions of modernity regarding the local-global, private-public links. Yet, as the above extract exemplifies, Tagore was optimistic that the ideal of human civilisation could be negotiated sensitively through warm feelings and sympathy, a point that drives home, as Arendt puts it, the discovery of "how rich and manifold the hidden can be under conditions of intimacy" (72). The question of intimacy, or what Tagore calls "intimate experience" and/or the culture of nurturing the bond of human relationship, is indeed a difficult interconnected problem surrounding and facing humanity in the twenty-first century, and the need of the time is perhaps not only in "tilling and weeding in past ages, but still needs anxious work and watching," without losing one's roots (*Nationalism* 23).

Tagore believed that a civilisational dialogue would only be possible when creative engagements with the past and moving beyond it into *pratyahik* – the "everyday world" – would surpass "the seclusion of our own national workshops" ("Thoughts from Tagore" 74). In Serbia he said:

> This morning, the representatives of your public visited me and asked me what message I can offer to your people. I was reluctant to answer…. I can compare poetry with a wonderful garden full of flowers, but without fruit…. But, I believe that most people are carrying within themselves some message with the universal significance. I perhaps have one such message – altruism…. ("On Modern Civilisation" 5)

The discursive dimension of Tagore's views on modern civilisation, therefore, suggests (im)possibilities of a consummate humane identity depending on the flux and influx of time, which in some ways are similar to what Bhabha describes as the complexity of the third space identity, of being in the "beyond."

Simultaneously, the notion of the self as opposed to other is constantly questioned in relation to the dignity of human relationship in the absence or presence of the nation-state.

Tagore searched for a civilisation where comradeship flowed across the boundaries of time and space and which, thus, "cannot be the monopoly of a particular race or country" ("The Crisis in Civilisation" 262). In the case of Eastern Europe – the East of the "civilised" West – the question of the "large nation," its ideology of nationalism qua modern civilisation is almost similar to the status of the colonised countries. It is, as Mohammad A. Quayum suggests:

> [Tagore] was always opposed to the nationalism of *Realpolitik* and hyper-nationalism that breathed meaning into Thucydides' ancient maxim that 'large nations do what they wish, while small nations accept what they must.' (33)

Significantly, in 1926 Tagore said:

> European peoples are standing one against another, they are defending against another, digging moot holes of secret between them, not to get closer, not to unite themselves. It is barbarism. True civilisation must strive to unity. It must be heroic in its faith, in a spiritually united mankind. And when it is not, then each individual [each nation, big and/or small] is against another. ("On Modern Civilisation" 5)

Addressing the harsh precincts of reality – the division of human races into the West and the rest (as backward, barbaric and hence inferior to the modern, civilised, nationally evolved superior West) – Glenda Sluga comments: "Germans and Italians were regarded as equals... and essentially Western." On the other hand, "Slavs [or the Slavic race, were endlessly looked down as] backward peasants, lacking national consciousness and Eastern" (2).

As a note of acknowledgement to the poet's commitment to human civilisation, Stojanović observes:

> He was unassumingly remarkable… precise without exaggeration… simple in his sincerity, firm in his knowledge and [he] always took a holistic approach. Tagore is an embodiment of a remarkable inner harmony – a poet whose inner, private self was in harmony with the other worlds, a poet constantly searching for the meaning of truth…. He became a household name [in Serbia] equally as a poet and as a thinker. (6-7)

The complexities of the interdependence of cultural differences and the question of national identity consciousness apart, Stojanović's observation underscores the Serbs' understanding of the fact that "The poet could see": "he sees, therefore he allows us to see."

Compelled by a similar state of anxiety, pushed by the challenges of Serbia's struggle with borders and boundaries and propelled by the contestation of "plural voices" and "dialogic imagination," Ljubica Miletić, a foremost poet of contemporary Serbia, takes examples from Tagore's work and observes: "Tagore in the last song of the *Gardener* leaves us with a question, which will probably last for centuries to come… 'Who are you, readers, reading my poems a hundred years hence? Open your doors and look abroad…'" (Miletić 8-9). This brings us to an important (problematic?) question of a speculative notion of the culture of universal humanity, a point that Martha Nussbaum brings to the fore for public engagement in the aftermath of September 11 (2-17). Invoking the transnational character of Tagore's understanding of social justice, or as she calls it, "poetic justice," and linking it to the forces of nationalism – the politics of difference (the construction of us, as opposed to them) – she asserts:

> Sometimes compassion even crosses [the] biggest line of all, the national boundary…. Compassion begins with the local. But if our moral natures… are to live in any sort of harmony we must find devices through which we can extend our [love] and our ability to imagine the situation of others to the world of human life as a whole. (ix-xiii)

From our frightening current vantage point, when East/non-West/Balkan East or West, North or South (the First World or the Third World) is under a constant threat of fragmentation, terrorism and in the face of narrow sectarianism, Tagore's vision of peace and harmony and his voice for human identity beyond the fragment of narrow domestic walls seems more urgent than ever. "Human civilisation," he said, "can never sustain itself upon cannibalism of any form" and must be sustained through compassion within the bounds of "love and justice." For Tagore, love of the country could be addressed by fashioning the self through "sadhana" – a striving towards "the state of realising our relationship with all" in a disinterested way (*Sadhana* 105). This "love of humanity" sans boundaries challenges the spirit of violent conquest and terrorism and can perhaps offer a non-hierarchical dialogue between civilisations (*Sadhana* 155). His deep insight into the dynamics of "an understanding of literary culture" and of an inter-civilisational dialogue "goes beyond or perhaps stands behind or beside the governing assumptions of ethno-nationalist exclusivity" (Gibson 230).

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