

## Rabindranath Tagore and World Peace

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### Abstract

Throughout his life Rabindranath Tagore strongly believed that until the big and powerful nations, aided by their superiority and vast technological advancement, ceased their desire for territorial expansion and control over the smaller nations, world peace could never be achieved. Thus war was the consequence of the *necessary logic* of aggressive western materialism that developed in the early part of the 20th century, with science divorced from spirituality, by which some of those nations dragged the greater part of the world into the pit of destruction. According to the poet, peace could be achieved only when diverse races and nations were free to evolve into their distinct characteristics, whilst all would be attached to the stem of humanity through the bondage of love. He ardently believed that world peace could be achieved only if both the East and the West met on a common ground and on terms of equal fellowship: “where knowledge flows in two streams – from the East and from the West” and “in their unity is perceived the oneness of Truth that pervades and sustains the entire Universe.”

### Keywords

Tagore, war, nationalism, Fascism, Nazism, peace

Since the dawn of human history, mankind has been involved in both coexisting in harmony and in conflict, debating the rights and wrongs of both war and peace. With the advance of civilisation and emergence of different religious groups, the genesis of war invariably lies within factors such as identity, ethnicity, power struggles, inequality of resources and oppression – one factor is often exacerbated by the other. When conflict is resolved, people immediately

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sit together to search for a solution to peace. War and peace are a recurring and recycled phenomenon.

The International Peace Congress held in Paris in 1849 was the first peace conference organised through the personal initiative of Victor Hugo, a French litterateur and a human rights activist. Addressing the Congress, Hugo said, “the day will be coming soon when cannons, arms and ammunitions will be things of exhibit in a museum. The viewers will be amazed thinking how barbarous the people were at that time, as we now think looking at the torturing instruments used in the past” (Majumder 9). He didn’t want peace under any despotism; the first and foremost condition of peace, according to him, was to be free from torture. Hugo’s statement was overambitious as he had no concrete idea of how being “free from torture” could lead to the establishment of peace in a “war-free” world.

According to Lenin: “The war is a product of half a century of development of world capital and of its billions of threads and connections. It is impossible to escape from the imperialist war at a bound; it is impossible to achieve a democratic, non-oppressive peace, without the overthrow of the power of capital and transfer of state power to another class, the proletariat” (Majumder 11; translation mine).

Surprisingly, the basic principles of peace advocated by Rabindranath Tagore were close to what Lenin had suggested. Without studying in detail the political and socio-economic aspects of war, he easily came to the conclusion that until the bigger nations, aided by their superiority and vast technological advancements, ceased their desire for territorial expansion and aggrandisement, exploiting the smaller and weaker nations, world peace can never be achieved.

Tagore’s sensitive poetic mind, in his late thirties, was very disturbed as he witnessed such aggrandisement by the British during the Boer War in South Africa (1899-1902) and the Western missionaries at the Boxer uprising in China (1899-1901). This loathsome attitude of the imperialists worldwide was vehemently condemned by the young poet in some of his political essays published in the journals *Bharati*, *Bangadarshan* and *Sadhana*, and also in some of his poems in *Naivedya*. In his essay “The Eastern and the Western Civilization,” published in *Bangadarshan* (May 1901), he wrote:

When the national interest, which is the foundation of European civilisation, is inflated to such an extent that ignores righteousness of all kinds, eventually a crevice is formed through which the evil makes its way in. The nature of self-interest is such that it always leads to hostility. At present this hostility becomes evident like thorns at the edge of European civilization. That is an early indication that the European nations will quarrel and fight with each other for their share on earth....” (Majumder 11; translation mine)

In another essay, “Antagonistic Ideals,” published in the same journal, he wrote in September, 1901:

Antagonism of interest is inevitable. Conflict of interest makes a man blind. If the English manages some kind of opportunity in Asia, French will immediately think the English are gaining strength. Even if they are not involved in war on this issue the very thought will poison their mind. The rising strength of one nation always concerns other nations. As a result, a blind hostility and malice, and the suppression of truth will inevitably happen. (Majumder 11)

Though renowned throughout the world as a creative artist, Tagore’s concepts on war and peace were confined to his writings within the boundaries of his native land. It was only after he was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1913, that he gradually emerged onto the international stage more and more as a pacifist and promoter of peace – and less and less as a literary figure.

In America, Canada and Britain, pro-peace organisations such as Quaker Societies (also known as Societies of Friends) were formed. Their objectives were to promote peace through pacifism and though Tagore was never an active Quaker, he had contacts with the Societies of Friends and faith in their ideals.

The Austrian pacifist Bertha von Suttner, the first female Nobel Prize winner for Peace, invited Tagore at the Peace Congress held on 15 January 1914, at the Great Concert Hall in Vienna. Tagore did not attend, but sent a message supporting the peace movement, quoting from *Atharvaveda*. In addition, Tagore’s poems were read out at that congress. Her book *Maschinenzeitalter* [The Machine Age], published in 1889, was amongst the first in the West to forecast the outcomes of exaggerated nationalism and armaments which became Tagore’s strong conviction in later years.

Nearly seven months after the Peace Congress, on 1 August 1914, World War I broke out. In Tagore’s sensitive and visionary mind, he had realised that it was only a matter of time before an event of such great and tragic proportions would befall on humanity. The poet expressed his ominous prophesy to Charles Andrews. Weeks before the war began, he wrote a poem, *The Destroyer*, in which he expressed his concerns. Tagore wrote:

Is it the Destroyer who comes?  
For the boisterous sea of tears heaves  
  in the flood tide of pain.  
The crimson clouds run wild in the wind, lashed by lightning,  
  and the thundering laughter of the Mad is over the sky.  
Life sits in the chariot crowned by Death.  
Bring out your tribute to him of all that you have. (Das, Vol. 1, 224)

Amidst his overwhelming anxiety caused by the beginning of the war in Europe, he wrote a series of poems published simultaneously in India and England. The first one of the series was titled "The Boatman" (*Fruit Gathering*; poem 41), the inner meaning of which he explained later to his friend, "that the woman in the silent courtyard, 'who sits in the dust and waits' represented Belgium" (Andrews 46). Next was "The Trumpet" (poem 35), the theme of which was the invocation of war by the Almighty against the sins and injustices in the world. The third one was entitled "The Oarsmen" (poem 84), the outlook of which was beyond the war; for it revealed the daring venture of faith that would be needed by humanity if the old world with its dead were to be left behind and the vast uncharted and tempestuous seas were to sweep away leading to the world anew.

On 15 July, 1915, in the middle of the fierce war, the grieved poet wrote to Andrews:

Will Europe never understand the genesis of the present war, and realize that the true cause lies in her own growing scepticism towards her own ideals – those ideals that have helped her to be great? She seems to have exhausted the oil that once lighted her lamp. Now she is feeling a distrust against the oil itself, as if it were not at all necessary for her light. (63)

Tagore visited Japan in the middle of the war which created the basis of his argument in *Nationalism*. In it, the poet declared:

A nation, in the sense of the political and economic union of a people, is that aspect which a whole population assumes when organised for a mechanical purpose.... But when with the help of science and the perfecting of organisation this power begins to grow and brings in harvests of wealth, then it crosses its boundaries with amazing rapidity. For then it goads all its neighbouring societies with greed of material prosperity, and consequent mutual jealousy, and by the fear of each other's growth into powerfulness. The time comes when it can stop no longer, for the competition grows keener, organisation grows vaster, and selfishness attains supremacy. Trading upon the greed and fear of man, it occupies more and more space in society and at last becomes its ruling force. (Das 421)

Tagore firmly believed that peace was not just about a scenario where war didn't take place. War is the consequence of the *necessary logic* of aggressive western materialism, of science divorced from spirituality, by which the nations will drag the greater part of the world: "down into the bottom of destruction. Whenever Power removes all checks from its path to make its career easy, it triumphantly rides into its ultimate crash of death" (Das, Vol. 2, 426). *The Cult of*

*Nationalism* emphatically carried this message of Tagore's, which he addressed nearly forty times during his lecture tours in the US, straight after his visit to Japan in 1916:

The war, to my mind, is the outcome of overgrown materialism, of an ideal based on self-interest and not based on harmony. There are differences between capital and labour because both are working in the interest of their own selves – peace is but temporary, and other clashes are bound to come. The self-interest of nations is the same. A new readjustment of things is necessary, a new age, when the idea of nationalism will be discarded, when colonies, the storm centres of the world, will be discarded. I think the war has proved this quite conclusively. (*The New York Times* 6)

The alternative path suggested by the Poet in his message was the path of individual liberation and an acquiring of self-esteem through creativity, love, beauty and harmony with nature, and a spiritual aspiration. This message struck a chord amongst the liberal and pro-peace American people, as evident from their personal correspondence with the poet – still preserved in the archives of Santiniketan. However, it was rejected by the mainstream, general-newspaper reading masses, as a utopian concept of a poet.

On 11 November 1918, at the “eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month,” the armistice was signed which marked the cease fire in the Western front. On 28 June 1919, five years after its initiation, the Treaty of Versailles was signed between Germany and the Allied Powers to end the First World War. Apart from the huge numbers of human casualties, the War by that time had already inflicted a devastating effect on the moral, spiritual and socio-economic state of the countries which were directly or indirectly involved.

In the year 1919, Romain Rolland the French novelist and pacifist, appealed to some of the free and finest minds of the world to sign on his manifesto “Declaration of Independence of the Spirit.” Both Tagore and Rolland were very much conscious about the intellectuals’ responsibilities before and during wartime. There were altogether 21 signatories at the beginning, all from Europe except Jane Adams from the USA and Tagore from India. Within a short time the number increased into its hundreds. In the opening paragraph of the manifesto it was stated:

Toilers of the spirit, companions, scattered all over the world, separated from one another for five years by armies, by censorship and hate of nations at war, we take this opportunity, when barriers are falling and frontiers are re-opening, of making an appeal to you to re-form your fraternal union – but let it be a fresh union, firmer and stronger than the one which existed before. (Aronson and Kripalani 20-24)

Adding his signature to the Declaration, Tagore wrote to Romain Rolland (9 July 1919) in an open letter:

When my mind was steeped in the gloom of the thought, that the lesson of the war had been lost, and that people were trying to perpetuate their hatred and anger into the same organised menace for the world which threatened themselves with disaster, your letter came and cheered me with its message of hope. The truths that save us have always been uttered by the few and rejected by the many and have triumphed through their failures. It is enough for me to know that the higher conscience of Europe has been able to assert itself in one of her choicest spirits through the ugly clamours of passionate politics; and I gladly hasten to accept your invitation to join the ranks of those freed souls, who in Europe have conceived the project of a Declaration of Independence of the Spirit. (*The Modern Review* 81)

However, in his heart Tagore had some doubts about the success of the campaign, but he had immense respect for Rolland.

During 1919-20 the League of Nations, an inter-governmental organisation, was founded as a result of the Treaty of Versailles. Its concept was based on unity, in which nations would settle their arguments, put down their weapons, improve the quality of life and uphold the rights of the human individual.

Tagore was very much sceptical about the League of Nations. He was perhaps the sole voice during that time that openly criticised the organisation:

[The League of Nations] has no spiritual foundation. Humanity is not yet ready for it. A new machine will be of little advantage if it be run by the old power for the old ends. Organisation is not brotherhood.... The great war was one of the blows of God working to break down our materialism, our selfishness, our narrow nationalisms. It made a dent; but only a dent, in the crust. Other blows will fall betimes. Until we learn to live together by the real law of our nature – law of love – veil will hide the beauty and wonder of the world, leaving us to wander alone or struggle to get her in confusion and strife.” (*The Times* 9)

Soon after the war in 1920, Tagore toured extensively throughout Europe. His concern for the existence of humanity was expressed in the lectures he delivered whilst visiting these countries. “While the whole world is at war,” wrote an English weekly, “it is some comfort to hear even one voice, however still and small, persistently murmuring of peace. Amid the turmoil and shouting, one may still catch the quiet words of an Indian pleading the cause of understanding, friendliness and forbearance, as though they, and not devastating conflicts, were the most natural things in the world” (*The Nation and the Athenaeum* 49-50).

Tagore firmly believed that peace was not a non-war situation. According to the poet, peace could only be achieved when diverse races and nations were free to evolve into their distinct characteristics, whilst all would be attached to the stem of humanity through the bondage of love. He addressed this in every country he visited in Europe and later in America, “all imperialism – except the imperialism of love – is wrong. It brings little nations and various races together, like chips in a basket, but they do not unite, they are simply held together. There is no bond of union” (*The Times* 9).

When he visited France, especially the regions affected by the war, he was devastated to see the chaos it had left behind. He wrote to Andrews:

It will take a tremendous effort and also an immense lapse of time to make this [the War] a thing of the past. When the spiritual ideal is lost, when the human relationship is completely broken up, then individuals freed from the creative bond of wholeness find a fearful joy in destruction. (*Letters to a Friend* 94)

During his tour in 1920-21 his mind was engrossed with his idea of an international institution, which he later called *Visva-Bharati*. He was one of the few ardent believers who thought that world peace could be achieved only if the East and the West met together within a common fellowship; “where knowledge flows in two streams – from the East and from the West” and “in their unity is perceived the oneness of Truth that pervades and sustains the entire Universe” (Tagore, “Meeting of the East and the West”). That conviction was behind the foundation of Visva-Bharati where he wanted the best minds from all over the world to exchange creative ideals under one setting. His institution would be a model to the world, showing the true path of salvation and peace. From Europe he moved to America, hoping the new world would respond to him more agreeably than the people of Europe, who were still caught up in their national prejudices and provincial boundaries. He wrote:

We must prepare the grand field for co-ordination of all the cultures of the world, where each will give to and take from the other; where each will have to be studied through the growth of its stages in history. This adjustment of knowledge through comparative study, this progress of intellectual co-operation, is to be the key note of the coming age. (*Letters to a Friend* 99)

Tagore’s growing doubts about the League of Nations was becoming apparent when Mussolini invaded Abyssinia. The League ultimately proved incapable of preventing the onslaught of aggression by the Axis powers in the 1930s. In May 1933, the League was powerless to convince Hitler that Franz Bernheim, a Jew from Upper Silesia, was protected under the minority clauses established by the League in 1919 (that all minorities were fully human and held

equal rights amongst all men). Hitler claimed these clauses violated Germany's sovereignty. The Nazis began to systematically strip Jewish communities based there, of their civil rights. Germany withdrew from the League, soon to be followed by many other totalitarian and militaristic nations.

During 1931 to 1939, political stability in Europe and South East Asia was in turmoil. With the rise of Fascism in Italy and its territorial expansion into the Mediterranean; Nazism in Germany which moved into Czechoslovakia, plus the military support of Spain, and the invasion of China by Japan, it became clear that the League of Nations was becoming redundant and ceased to function at all.

In 1935, under the leadership of Henry Barbus and Romain Rolland, the World Peace Congress Committee was formed in Paris. A branch of the committee was also formed in India where Tagore and Gandhi were joined by other leading Indian figures. However, in Europe and South East Asia, the fever of militarism was at an all time high. During this crisis the Poet's internal thoughts and feelings were in total revolt against the violent and aggressive spirit of this age. He wrote in a poem:

She-serpents hiss everywhere, exhaling poison-breaths,  
Soft words of peace will sound like hollow jests.  
Before I take my leave  
let me invoke  
those who, in human homes, are preparing themselves  
to wage war against the monsters. (Dyson 211)

On 5 September 1936, The World Peace Congress held its first conference in Brussels. The poet sent a message where he warned delegates, "we cannot have peace until we deserve it by paying its full price, which is that the strong must cease to be greedy and the weak must learn to be bold" (Home 103).

In 1938 (30 September), the infamous Munich Pact was signed by Germany. It was an agreement permitting German annexation of Czechoslovakia's Sudetenland. The agreement was negotiated at a conference held in Munich, amongst the major powers of Europe – Germany, France, Britain and Italy – without the presence of Czechoslovakia. Tagore was so perturbed that he sent a message to President Edvard Beneš of Czechoslovakia expressing his deepest sympathy on behalf of India. A week later he wrote another famous poem:

Those crushed and trodden lives of the meek and the weak  
which are sacrificed as food offerings for the mighties.  
Those human flesh-eaters, snatching and scrambling,  
tearing the gut,



scattering everywhere pieces of flesh bitten by sharp teeth,  
 Stained the lap of the mother earth with the muddy blood.  
 From the thrust of that fierce destruction  
 one day, peace will emerge in the end with a great power.  
 We will not fear,  
 overcoming the distress, victory for us at the end. ("Prayaschitta" 9)

A year after the Munich pact, 1 September 1939, the Nazis invaded Poland and that marked the beginning of the Second World War. The frail, frustrated and helpless poet became a silent witness to the atrocities that followed. His heart torn apart, he sent a message to President Roosevelt of America, pleading for his intervention to stop another cataclysm. He wrote:

Today we stand in awe before the fearful destructive force that has so suddenly swept the world.... All our individual problems of politics are today merged into one supreme world of politics which I believe is seeking help in the United States of America as the last refuge of spiritual man, and these few lines of mine merely convey my hope, even if unnecessary, that she will not fail in her mission to stand against the universal disaster that appears so imminent. (*The Times* 5)

That appeal was in vain. The feeble voice of a poet from a subjugated country was unheeded by the head of the most powerful nation on earth.

In his last message delivered on his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday, a few months before his death, he wrote his immortal essay, still relevant to this day, "Crisis in Civilisation," in which he condemned the West saying:

The failure of humanity in the West to preserve the worth of their civilization and the dignity of man which they had taken centuries to build up weighs like a nightmare on my mind. It seems clear to me that this failure is due to men's repudiation of moral values in the guidance of their national affairs and to their belief that everything is determined by a mere physical chain of events which could be manipulated by man's cunning or might. The consequences of this belief are proving terrible to man. (*The Manchester Guardian* 6)

Even a pacifist-poet in his final hours of life on his deathbed, was intently following the course of the war, hopeful that Russia could stand up for itself, as he could not bear the disgrace of Fascism and Nazism in human history.

Tagore once wrote to Margaret Wood in the middle of the First World War, "It seems to my mind that Goethe's drama of *Faust* is being acted in your history. When Man enters into a contract with Mephistopheles for enlarging his sphere of enjoyment and possession, he ends by killing his very object" (*The Times* 5).

Nearly seventy years have passed since Tagore's death and we still witness insane orgy of violence and destruction around us – the repetition of *Faust* enacted upon humanity. Territorial issues, differences in faith, religious extremism, overpowering Western influence, and issues around money and power have caused grave problems and heartache for all sides involved in the Arab-Israeli conflict, the war in Eastern Europe, civil war in parts of Africa, and tensions between Indian and Pakistan. The rise of religious extremism, with terrorist groups destabilising and influencing young minds, and the invasion of Iraq by US and its allies, which has split even the West – all of these are happening as a result of hatred, greed, power struggle and supremacy in the name of democracy and human rights. One can only hope that Rabindranath Tagore's continued faith and expectation in the final recovery of man's lost heritage of moral worth that would lead to peace and harmony everywhere, is something that we can all adhere to, now and for many years to come.

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