

The Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore

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Abstract

This paper aims to provide a comprehensive analytic perspective on Rabindranath Tagore as a thinker, taking on board his views on metaphysics and mysticism, as well as on more down-to-earth matters such as political theory and gender relations. Starting with Tagore's well-known debate with Einstein over the nature of truth, it pinpoints the specific traits of his metaphysical idealism, refuting rival interpretations like that of William Radice. The question of Tagore's mysticism and his connection with the Bauls of Bengal is next considered in the light of the psychoanalytic theories of Sudhir Kakar. The connection between Tagore's metaphysics and his brand of feminism is explored. Finally, Tagore's critique of nationalism is explored in the light of Ashis Nandy's ideas, and by making a comparative study of Tagore and Nietzsche.

Keywords

Bauls, idealism, feminism, mysticism, nationalism, truth

I have borrowed the title from the most famous modern Indian philosopher for the simple, agonistic reason that my take on Tagore's thought is very different from his. The sheer volume of Tagore's oeuvre is staggering, and it would be quixotic to take it all on board in a brief study. I shall therefore begin by delineating the textual parameters of this inquiry. Tagore is rightly acclaimed as a synthesis of some of the finest aspects of East and West, and even if we restrict ourselves to what is available in English, five of his books, *Sadhana, or The Realization of Life* (1913), *Personality* (1917), *Nationalism* (1917), *Creative Unity*

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(1922), and *The Religion of Man* (1930) – plus a large number of lectures and essays identify him as a major twentieth-century thinker. In dealing with them, however, an analytic mind faces a problem in Tagore's use of language. Tagore's claim that he possesses "some untold mystery of unity," that "has the simplicity of the infinite" (*The English Writings*, Vol. 2, 494), can only induce instant assent to Bertrand Russell's complaint that "His talk about the infinite is vague nonsense." Russell, I should add, goes on to declare: "the sort of language that is admired by many Indians unfortunately, does not, in fact, mean anything" (qtd. in Dutta and Robinson 96.) (Today, the most deserving candidates for such a rebuke would perhaps be Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, and others of their ilk.) Russell's warning ought to have prepared me for Dr. S. Radhakrishnan's book *The Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore*, to which I turned for elucidation and instead found statements like "Man is a finite-infinite being," and pseudo-poetic flourishes like: "Rabindranath advocates life in nature and in the open as the best means of spiritual progress, for in nature the religious eye will see the infinite lying stretched in silent repose" (13). It is enough to make one dash indoors.

Other admirers of Tagore rightly emphasise his wise sense of balance in – as the *Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (Vol. 8) puts it – combining "the best insights of humanists... and of otherworldly seekers; of naturalists... and extreme partisans of spirit; of determinists and defenders of free will; of hedonists and ascetics; and of romantics and realists" (75) and seek to explain away his reputation as an Oriental sage. As Amartya Sen notes, "To some extent, this Tagore was the West's own creation, following a tradition of message-seeking from the East, particularly from India, which as Hegel put it – had 'existed for millennia' in the imagination of Europeans" (Dutta and Robinson xviii) The qualification "to some extent" is best amplified by Nirad Chaudhuri, who holds Tagore responsible for allowing himself to be seduced by the glamour of guru-hood (*Thy Hand, Great Anarch* 87).

But bracketing away Tagore's spiritual outpourings may lead us to ignore the fact that he did take them seriously. They present essential aspects of his philosophy, which is organically related to every other aspect of his vast output, and indeed the organic metaphor itself is central to his worldview, Romantic as he is in his orientation.

Tagore's idealist philosophy informs his "poet's religion," which is undogmatic, fluid, characterised by negative capability, and extends into his view of science, not with very happy results. This may be seen in the well-known dialogue with Einstein, reprinted in *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, Vol. 3 (911-16). It was an extraordinary exchange in which, as one commentary has it, they "talked past each other, when they did not openly disagree" (Dutta and Robinson 530). Einstein speaks with reticence, making tentative statements; Tagore glibly lectures his interlocutor on the mystery of

the universe. The difference in their view is most pronounced on the subject of the questions, “What is truth?” and “What is the status of reality?”

Einstein: Truth, then, or Beauty, is not independent of man?

Tagore: No.

Einstein: If there would be no human beings any more, the Apollo of Belvedere would no longer be beautiful?

Tagore: No.

Einstein: I agree with regard to this conception of Beauty, but not with regard to Truth.

T: Why not? Truth is realized through man.

Amartya Sen comments: “Some would compare Tagore’s position with certain recent philosophical works on the nature of reality, particularly Hilary Putnam’s argument that “truth depends on conceptual schemes and it is nonetheless ‘real truth’” (Dutta and Robinson xxiii).

This is quite misleading. Putnam’s “conceptual relativism” is one thing, Tagore’s conception of truth quite another. The conceptual relativist, quite sensibly, argues that since truth is a property of statements, which are dependent on conceptual schemes, what we may accept as true will vary with the conceptual scheme. To take a simple example, the statement that my body temperature now is 98.6 is true if one is using the Celsius scale. This is not what Tagore had in mind. To him, “Truth [is] the perfect comprehension of the Universal Mind,” and “The infinite personality of Man comprehends the universe. There cannot be anything that cannot be subsumed by the human personality, and this proves that the truth of the universe is human truth” (*The English Writings*, Vol. 3, 912).

This is not all. Conceptual relativism, as John Searle has shown in *The Construction of Social Reality*, is compatible with “external realism,” the belief that there is a real world independent of man or, for that matter, any other being. But Tagore won’t have it; he is one with Bishop Berkeley:

Einstein: . . . if nobody is in this house, yet that table remains where it is.

Tagore: Yes, it remains outside the individual mind, but not outside the universal mind. The table which I perceive is perceptible by the same kind of consciousness which I possess. (*The English Writings*, Vol. 3, 912)

I have discussed this dialogue only to point out that Tagore often lived happily beyond the bounds of common sense. But this statement needs to be counterpointed with another: he shows sound commonsense when he condemns Gandhi for interpreting an earthquake in India as God’s punishment for the perpetuation of the caste system (*Selected Letters* 434).

It should be acknowledged that there have been energetically argued attempts to portray Tagore as an intuitive thinker (the phrase is my oxymoronic coinage) who was ahead of his time in scientific matters, witness William Radice's lecture, "Particles and Sparks: Tagore, Einstein and the Poetry of Science," published in *The India International Centre Quarterly*. One has to be sceptical of the value of the exercise, though, for it evinces more enthusiasm than close reasoning. Let us examine Radice's take on the extract from the dialogue quoted above. Radice declares "that Tagore was not arguing for some kind of Berkeleyan subjectivism.... Tagore certainly believed in objective reality, and that the human mind had to play a part in the perception of truth. However, this was not the *individual* mind with all its vagaries and confusions, but 'the mind of the Universal Man.'" He goes on to describe "Universal Man" as "a grand, vague phrase... simply referring to the *collective* human understanding that accepts that $2+2=4$." To clarify the matter, Radice introduces a distinction – his own: "between facts and truth. It is a fact that if I have two apples in my left hand and two apples in my right hand, I have four apples altogether. But if I express this as an arithmetical equation, $2+2=4$, I am using collective human understanding to arrive at a general truth. There is no such thing as a 2 or a 4 in the physical universe" (142). Just as the works of Shakespeare or Tagore will, in a sense, cease to "exist" if there is no one to read them, "The same, in Tagore's view, applied to the truths described and defined by science, which require minds – or the collective human mind – for their realization" (143).

Radice clearly misinterprets both "Berkeleyan subjectivism" and Tagore. Berkeley did not deny objective reality any more than Tagore did, and it seems the two of them in fact have very similar views about it, even though they approach the question from very different philosophical perspectives. In Berkeley's philosophy we have an empiricist epistemology that is used as the basis for an idealist metaphysics. It has been wittily summed up in a delightful dialogue in limericks (qtd. in Russell 623):

There was a young man who said, 'God
Must think it exceedingly odd
If he finds that this tree
Continues to be
When there's no one about in the Quad.'

REPLY

Dear Sir:
Your astonishment's odd:
I am always about in the Quad
And that's why the tree

Will continue to be,
 Since observed by
Yours faithfully,
 God.

Tagore's philosophical outlook is based on Upanishadic idealism, but moving on from there he arrives at the empirical acknowledgment of external reality – the table in the example given. Tagore's "individual mind" corresponds to Berkeley's "young man," and his "the Universal Mind" (or, to use other terms used by Tagore in the dialogue, "the mind of universal Man" or "super-personal man") to Berkeley's God. But when I lock up my office and go home, it is difficult to imagine what sort of "Universal Mind" or "collective human understanding," to use Radice's phrase, keeps an eye on the furniture. Radice's distinction between fact and truth seems to be a bogus one. If there are two baskets containing two apples each, there are four apples altogether – the reason for not placing the fruit in human hands will be clear in a moment. Now, if the baskets are left where there is no one to observe them, they will still be observed, Tagore would say, by "the Universal Mind." In other words, Tagore's "Universal Mind" underwrites empirical facts and not just general truths like $2+2=4$. Besides, when on the basis of my observation of the fruit someone is holding, I write $2+2=4$, it is nonsensical to say that I have used "collective human understanding"; I have simply used my understanding of arithmetic. Further, it is worth pointing out that if it is a fact that someone with the usual complement of hands is holding two apples in each, then the proposition that this person has four apples in his hands is "true." Such, at least, is how the concept of truth operates in logic.

It is pertinent to ask if Tagore was a mystic, as Nirad Chaudhuri does in *Thy Hand, Great Anarch*. Chaudhuri addresses the question with characteristic energy and erudition, and answers that since mysticism in its pure form sought "annihilation of self," and since "Tagore, on the contrary, was preoccupied above all with the self, although as the servant of God," and "could never abolish the duality between man and God," he was not a "true mystic." Tagore, according to Chaudhuri, was a pantheist and deist, who sought self-realisation through "a closer contiguity" with the world. Agape and eros mingled in Tagore's conception on the relationship with God, who was both a transcendental and a personal deity (Chaudhuri, *Thy Hand, Great Anarch* 615).

This austere view of "true mysticism" cannot accommodate various paradoxical manifestations. Chaudhuri himself, in another essay, identifies Tagore as a combination of mystic and humanist, and explains it thus: "in the history of Hindu religious creeds, and particularly in certain folk cults, which have held sway among the Indian masses in the last three or four centuries, there is evidence of an intense faith in supramundane life going hand in hand with a child-like clinging to mortal existence. Even mendicants with their backs

turned on the world and going about with the beggar's bowl have sung with poignant conviction about the value of life, and with equally poignant regret of its transience. In Rabindranath's combined mysticism and humanism one often detects insistent notes of these folk creeds" (Chaudhuri, *The East is East and the West is West* 10).

It is pertinent to consider Tagore's mystical experiences in relation to the tradition of Indian mysticism. Sudhir Kakar thinks that the mystical proclivities of Indians stem from sound psychoanalytic reasons. Indians have underdeveloped egos, he thinks, and the "loss of a symbiotic relationship with the mother" is for them a "narcissistic injury of the first magnitude" and leads to "heightened narcissistic vulnerability," which may induce mystical longings or "the lifelong search for someone, a charismatic leader or guru." The Indian conception of "ultimate" reality (i.e. *Brahman* in its cosmic aspect and the *atman* in its personal aspect) has its origins in "Hindu infancy" (Kakar, *The Inner World* 128). Kakar identifies mysticism as "the mainstream of Hindu religiosity," so that "a Hindu mystic is... normally quite uninhibited in expressing his views and does not have to be on his guard lest these views run counter to the officially-interpreted orthodoxy" (Kakar, *The Analyst and the Mystic* 3).

Tagore's father had a mystical experience in which sudden awareness of the worthlessness of wealth was coupled with a sense of joy, and recorded it in his autobiography. Tagore himself records that his childhood was spent in a state of communion with nature:

Almost every morning in the early hour of the dusk, I would run out from my bed in a great hurry to greet the first pink flush of the dawn through the shivering branches of the palm trees which stood in a line along the garden boundary, while the grass glistened as the dew-drops caught the earliest tremor of the morning breeze. The sky seemed to bring to me the call of personal companionship, and all my heart – my whole body in fact – used to drink in at a draught the overflowing light and peace of those silent hours.... I felt a larger meaning of my own self when the barrier vanished between me and what was beyond myself. (*The English Writings*, Vol. 2, 590)

This is what Kakar would call a "mild" mystical experience of "contact with a 'sense of Beyond,'" which many "completely normal people" have; 35% of Americans in one study. Extreme mystical experiences – and the distinction is one of degree – are characterised by "visions and trances," "expansion of the inner world," "heightened intrapsychic and bodily sensations," all-absorbing joy, the sense that the world has become transparent (Kakar, *The Analyst and the Mystic* 2).

Tagore records such an epiphany at eighteen, when

a sudden spring-breeze of religious experience for the first time came into my life and passed away leaving in my memory a direct message of spiritual reality. One day while I stood watching at early dawn the sun sending out its rays from behind the trees, I suddenly felt as if some ancient mist had in a moment lifted from my sight, and the morning light on the face of the world revealed an inner radiance of joy. The invisible screen of the commonplace was removed from all my things and all men, and their ultimate significance was intensified in my mind, and this is the definition of beauty. That which was memorable in this experience was its human message, the sudden expansion of my consciousness in the super-personal world of man. The poem I wrote on the first day of my surprise was named 'The Awakening of the Waterfall.' The waterfall, whose spirit lay dormant in its ice-bound isolation, was touched by the sun and bursting in a cataract of freedom, it found its finality in an unending sacrifice, in a continual union with the sea. After four days the vision passed away. (*The English Writings*, Vol. 3, 121)

It is instructive to compare this with an account of the first mystical vision of Ramakrishna:

I was following a narrow path between the rice fields. I raised my eyes to the sky as I munched my rice. I saw a great black cloud spreading rapidly until it covered the heavens. Suddenly at the edge of the cloud a flight of snow-white cranes passed over my head. The contrast was so beautiful that my spirit wandered far away. I lost consciousness and fell to the ground. The puffed rice was scattered. Somebody picked me up and carried me home in his arms. An access of joy and emotion overcame me.... This was the first time that I was seized with ecstasy. (Qtd. in Kakar, *The Analyst and the Mystic* 10)

Kakar describes it as "an episode of 'nature' mysticism... the consequence of an aesthetically transcendent feeling" (Kakar, *The Analyst and the Mystic* 10). The same could be said of Tagore's experience, only it is less overwhelming in its impact on the nervous system, resulted in a poem, and was not succeeded by anything more intense. Ramakrishna, as we all know, went on to become a full-time mystic who could go into "Samadhi" at the drop of a hat.

Tagore was all too aware of the dangers posed by devotional cults, of which Ramkrishna's was the most conspicuous example, on the path to true self-realisation. This is pointedly apparent in the novella *Chaturanga* (1915) ("Quartet," in the *Penguin Tagore Omnibus I*), a terse and poetically resonant narrative of the intellectual, moral, and spiritual evolution of two college friends, Sribilish and Sachish, towards a position of Tagorean balance through a dramatic unfolding of conflicts between Western atheistic humanism and orthodox Hinduism, humanism and Indian devotional cults, mysticism and the demands of the life force.

Tagore himself, following his mystical experience, sought religious fulfilment in the faction of the Brahmo society headed by his father. Appointed secretary, he gave himself enthusiastically to his task, and composed hymns for the group's services, but soon found that a religious institution could not accommodate the sort of awakening that he had experienced. An institution, he complains, "represented an artificial average, with its standard of truth at its static minimum, jealous of any vital growth that exceeded its limits. I have my conviction that in religion, and also in the arts, that which is common to a group is not important." What we find in such a group is "a contagion of mutual imitation" (*The English Writings*, Vol. 3, 129).

He left the Brahmo Society, driven by what may be described as a Gnostic urge, and felt drawn to the "folk religion" of the Bauls. Drawn from the lower orders of both the Hindu and Muslim communities of Bengal, the Bauls have opted out of society, and may lead a wandering minstrel's existence, subsisting on alms. In one of their songs, which are the sole expression of their philosophy, Tagore found "a religious expression that was neither grossly concrete... nor metaphysical in its rarefied transcendentalism. At the same time it was alive with an emotional sincerity. It spoke of an intense yearning of the heart for the divine which is in man and not in the temple, or scriptures, images and symbols" (*The English Writings*, Vol. 3, 129).

Tagore was instrumental in promoting what detractors might call the cult of the Baul. The intelligentsia, looking for the living roots of an emerging national consciousness, found them in the Bauls. Later, Tagore came to portray the Baul in the highly idealised form of the lonely seeker after enlightenment, divorced from any socio-historical context, a romantic figure in his patched flowing robe, between blue sky and green earth, twanging a one-stringed guitar fashioned of guard and bamboo splints, singing his passionate melodies. Contemporary critics like Jeanne Openshaw, Sudhir Chakravarty or Shaktinath Jha, who combine textual research with anthropological field-work, have tried to amend Tagore's perspective. The Bauls are not a homogeneous group, but combine Hindu and Buddhist Tantricism, Vaishnavite devotionism, and Sufism in varying proportions. Nor are they all mendicants. Tagore describes them as questors for what he translates as "the Man of the Heart," and interprets as the divine spark in the individual. A more accurate translation would be "Person of the Heart." The phrase is often used to mean a lover, and in the case of the Bauls the partner with whom the Tantric erotic rites are performed.

Unsurprisingly, Tagore, who admitted to having been shaped intellectually and morally by the Victorian age, cannot bring himself to talk about these practices. "These Bauls have a philosophy, which they call the philosophy of the body," he acknowledges, "but they keep its secret; it is only for the initiated" (*The English Writings*, Vol. 2, 527). Actually, it has, at least in its essentials, long

been an open secret. We may safely put Tagore's reticence down to what Sudhindranath Datta described as his lifelong adherence to "Victorian decorum" (249).

Tagore relates his portrait of the Bauls to an interpretation of Mahayana Buddhism that makes it indistinguishable from Upanishadic idealism, even though it's well known that the Buddha based his teachings on an uncompromising rejection of Upanishadic metaphysics by declaring that everything is impermanent, and that there is no substantial soul (or *atman*). Asked four rather tricky questions by his disciples – namely, whether or not the world is eternal, whether the world is finite or infinite, whether or not one exists after death, whether the soul is identical with the body or different from it – he maintained a resolute silence in accordance with the very sensible policy of keeping mum about what one cannot talk about sensibly.

When Buddhism itself became overlaid with metaphysics, a radical theoretical reform initiated in the first century AD by Nagarjuna put forward the notion of emptiness or the void (*sunya*), which is a rhetorically forceful, even poetic expression of a theory of all-embracing contingency that proclaims the absence of substantiality in all entities. To realise this is to be liberated, to attain nirvana, hence Nagarjuna's startling conceit: "The limits of samsara are the limits of nirvana." Chris Gudmunsen in an astute little book, *Wittgenstein and Buddhism*, reveals startling parallels between the two, but for appreciating the Void my favoured text is an essay by Emile Cioran, least known of our modern masters.

"I am a 'being' by metaphor," notes Cioran in "The Undelivered" in the collection *The New Gods*, "we are provisional to the point of mockery" (69). He goes on to sum up Nagarjuna's response to the situation: "The void allows us to erode the idea of being; but it is not drawn into this erosion itself... the void is not an idea but what helps us rid ourselves of any idea.... The void – myself without me – is the liquidation of the adventure of the 'I' – it is being without any trace of being. (The danger is to convert the void into a substitute for being, and thereby to thwart its essential function, which is to impede the mechanism of attachment...)" (71).

The Upanishadic thinkers and Tagore on the one hand, and on the other the Buddha, Nagarjuna, and Cioran, all respond to what used to be seen as our central problem – the problem of our ontological indigence, that we dream of Being, though doomed to Becoming. The first group of thinkers (those of their ilk used to be the overwhelming majority) deny the problem and claim that if only we open our eyes we shall see plenitude of being both in the cosmos and within ourselves. The second group, always a minority, but always avant-garde and indeed postmodern, considers the first option unviable. As Cioran has it, "It is because it gives us the illusion of permanence, it is because it promises

what it cannot provide, that the idea of the absolute is suspect, not to say pernicious” (75).

If this means that we need to thoroughly revise Tagore’s metaphysics, we have Kakar’s psychoanalytic recommendation for doing so, since he thinks the Indian psyche can mature only if we “question the usefulness of ‘ultimate’ reality, bring up to awareness its origins in Hindu infancy, and firmly reject many of its social and cultural manifestations as vestiges of an archaic personal and historical past” (Kakar, *The Inner World* 187).

But however much we might like to revise Tagore to serve our own purposes, we have to respect and admire the integrity of his vision. Even the otherworldly aspects of his thought are related organically to what is utterly this-worldly. Thus, his lectures on Nationalism, where his arguments are remarkably lucid and, as E.P. Thompson enthuses, “So far from being outmoded, Tagore’s commitment to anti-politics and his concern with civil society make him appear at times to be a markedly modern – or perhaps post-modern? – thinker,” we will miss something essential if we do not take due notice of the logical application of his idealist metaphysics. Tagore defines a nation as “the political and economic union of a people... in that aspect which a whole population assumes when organized for a mechanical purpose” (Tagore, *Nationalism* 15). E. P. Thompson significantly draws our attention to the emphasis that naturally falls upon the words “organized” and “mechanical.” Let us recall that Foucault declared, “power is everywhere,” “all-pervading.” It is this power that is behind machines, organisation, structures that separate man from man. To Tagore “spirit is everywhere.” This spirit unites man and man, man and the universe; it infuses “all social relations that [are] not mechanical and impersonal” (Tagore, *Nationalism* 15). To believe that all reality is subsumed under Foucauldian power, which animates all “modern” socio-political organisations, is to live, Tagore would say, in ignorance; to realise that Spirit suffuses the universe is to be capable of entering into more vital relationships.

Similarly, Tagore’s abstruse philosophy underwrites his well-known brand of “feminism.” Tagore sees evolution as a process of refinement, of ascent from the material through the animal towards the spiritual – there is some influence coming from Bergson in shaping his thought in this regard – and thinks that just as *homo sapiens* has superseded bigger and physically stronger species, within this species a similar supercession will place women ahead of men. Since power – Foucauldian power – has so far been wielded chiefly by man, he blames them for “building up vast and monstrous organizations” – such as the nation, as he has defined it – but now, “woman can bring her fresh mind and all her power of sympathy to this new task of spiritual civilization.” Whether this is to come about or not, I was reminded of his general prophecy that women “will have their place, and those bigger creatures [men] will have to give way” (*The English Writings*, Vol. 2, 416), by a BBC TV documentary comparing the careers of boys

and girls of comparable general intelligence in a British school. The boys gradually lost interest in studies, set their sights on semi-skilled occupations and began cultivating a semi-moronic demeanour. Their female peers worked hard, went on to university or professional schools and entered lucrative careers. Here of course the girls' success is in the world of Foucauldian power rather than the world of Spirit.

Tagore's critique of nationalism deserves a place of honour in a global tradition that includes such modern intellectual titans as Nietzsche and Russell. In fact, a comparison with Nietzsche redounds to Tagore's credit. Nietzsche's rejection of nationalism is linked to his championing of "the good European" which we find in the early masterpieces *Human, All Too Human* (1878), *The Gay Science* (1882), *The Wanderer and His Shadow* (volume 2 of augmented 1886 edition of *Human, All Too Human*), *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886) and *Ecce Homo* (1888) – one of the last books he completed before his tragic breakdown. The good European is one who has transcended the modern nation-state's spiritually constricting claims to absolute loyalty and affirms the value of the broader civilisational entity that is Europe.

Significantly, *Human, All Too Human* sports the subtitle "A Book For Free Spirits," and in a section titled "European Man and the Abolition of Nations" envisages an end to "the production of national hostilities" by the vested interests of "certain princely dynasties and of certain classes of business and society." Once "this artificial nationalism" has been deconstructed, "one should not be afraid to proclaim oneself simply a *good European* and actively to work for the amalgamation of nations" (174-75).

Nietzsche may be seen as a prophet of the European Union and its welfare economy, for he clearly envisages, in *The Wanderer and His Shadow*, the emergence of a "European League of Nations within which each individual nation... will possess the status and rights of a creation," with a socio-economic system that abjures "the exploitation of the worker" and "keeps in mind the wellbeing of the worker, his contentment of body and soul" (382).

I am sure many of us will find Nietzsche's blueprint for civilisation inspiring. But a serious caveat in regard to Nietzsche's blueprint is in order, I believe. In *The Wanderer and His Shadow*, Nietzsche also exhorts his readers "to *prepare the way* for that still distant state of things in which the good Europeans will come into possession of their great task: the direction and the supervision of the total culture of the earth." Whoever opposes the Nietzschean project is "showing the peoples a way of becoming more and more *national*: he is augmenting the sickness of the century and is an enemy of all good Europeans, an enemy of all free spirits" (332). It's enough to pull us up short. Nietzsche's new Europe becomes a super-state imposing its hegemony over the rest of the globe. The imperialist nation-state is replaced by a neo-imperialist continental state.

No doubt we shall balk at this denouement to the Nietzschean dream. Not long after the formulation of the Nietzschean *Weltanschauung* as the valorisation of the western nation-state became the dharma of a large section of the newborn Indian anti-colonial movement, a critique of this political philosophy also emerged through the work of Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore. The critique has been further elaborated and enriched in our time by Ashis Nandy, whose book *The Illegitimacy of Nationalism: Rabindranath Tagore and the Politics of the Self* comes in handy at this point of the essay.

Nandy points out that early in the twentieth century scepticism regarding the value of nationalism and “a monocultural nation-state” had emerged in one section of the Indian independence movement. The critics of nationalism, however, were not homogeneous in their views. The majority of them considered nationalism as “a pre-modern concept that had reappeared as a pathological by-product of global capitalism. Once humanity overcame the seductive charms of this vestigial medievalism and owned up the Enlightenment concept of freedom, they expected this form of self-expression of nationalities to wither away. In its place they expected a new, enlightened, secular universalism to emerge as the cultural basis for a future One World, which would be free of all ethnic and territorial loyalties” (vi). Nietzsche’s good European belongs with this group of the nation-state’s opponents.

But there were others: “A small minority of Indians” who “became... dissenters among dissenters. They regarded nationalism as a by-product of the western nation-state system and of the forces of homogenization let loose by the western worldview. To them, a homogenized universalism, itself a product of the uprootedness and deculturation brought about by British colonialism in India, could not provide an alternative to nationalism. Their alternative was a distinctive civilizational concept of universalism embedded in the tolerance encoded in various traditional ways of life in a highly diverse, plural society” (vi-vii). Tagore was such a dissenter among dissenters.

Tagore opposes to the modern nation-state what E.P. Thompson describes as “all social relations that were not mechanical or impersonal.” He builds up a set of binary opposites but moves back and forth between them, eventually pointing the way towards reconciliation. Thompson lists these opposites as “spiritual and materialist, East and West, Nation and no-nation, masculine and feminine, abstract and personal” (Tagore, *Nationalism* 15). But civilisations are not lined up according to these oppositions in a simplistic manner, a point that has also been elaborated in Nandy’s works, for example in *The Intimate Enemy*. “Thus,” Thompson points out, “the West also has a great spiritual inheritance, East and West should complement each other, so also should Woman and Man, Reason and Spirit (or science and poetry) not compete but should harmonize” (Tagore, *Nationalism* 15). As we confront the problems arising from aggressive nationalism, both in this subcontinent and in the world at large, Tagore’s subtle

thought may yet help us work out a solution as good as, if not better than, that embodied in the EU.

Since Tagore's critique of nationalism – perhaps the most perceptive and humane so far – follows from his metaphysics, it will be fitting if I round off with at least a partial revision of the rather cocky criticism I subjected it to earlier on in this paper. First, let's take the seemingly nonsensical views Tagore espouses in the dialogue with Einstein. Instead of determining the truth-value of each of the statements he makes, I suggest we make a holistic appraisal. Then we shall be able to interpret his insistence on the human involvement in all discoveries of scientific truth as a safeguard against the wholesale triumph of instrumental rationality. Second, a closer look at the background to Russell's dismissive remarks about Tagore's idiom reveals a crucial psychological dimension. In October 1912, Russell published an essay in the *Hibbert Journal* titled "The Essence of Religion," where he argues that "the essence of religion... lies in subordination of the finite part of our life to the infinite part" (qtd. in Datta and Robinson 95). Tagore read it and wrote to Russell, pointing out the similarity between its viewpoint with that of the *Upanishads*, which Tagore of course shared. But Russell quickly regretted his lapse from scientific exactitude and never reprinted the essay. Asked about it, he made the dismissive remarks I have already quoted. As any pop psychoanalyst will tell you, Russell seems to have gone into denial with regard to the mystical side to his psyche, and henceforth became a somewhat fragmentary personality. By contrast, Tagore possessed a highly integrated personality that encompassed the mystical, the religious, the artistic, the political, the romantic, the rational and the scientific. Even if we do not regard him as a model, we should still find him an inspiration.

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