

Reading Tagore: Seductions and Perils of Nationalism

Satish C. Aikant¹

Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla, India

Abstract

Nationalism, implicated as it is in the modern imagination, is a deeply contested idea. So is nation – also referred to as an “imagined community” – which evolved as a socio-political institution, fairly recently, and which is characterised by either a unifying cultural signifier or an overarching ideology. Empirical studies reveal that the idea of nationalism often originates with the elite or with an aspiring middle-class, the rest of the society are appropriated into it. Tagore dismissed such nationalism as “the organised self-interest of a people,” which is “least human and least spiritual.” He saw it as a constant threat to humanity.

This paper argues that Tagore’s diatribe against nationalism is a recurrent motif in all his writings and lectures. For him the nation is distinctively and exclusively Western. He developed an alternative conception of modernity which would take into account inclusive and synergic interaction between cultures that can take the world towards harmony and global fellowship.

Keywords

Colonialism, Gandhi, Tagore, nationalism, *swadeshi*, universalism

- There is only one history – the history of man. All national histories are merely chapters in the larger one.

Rabindranath Tagore, *Nationalism*

“Nation” and “Nationalism” as contested categories are notoriously difficult to define, let alone to analyse. There have been vigorous debates about them all over the world with perhaps no conclusions or half conclusions reached. As Hugh Seton-Watson maintains, “no scientific definition” of nation can be devised (5). According to Mariategui, “The nation... is an abstraction, an

¹ Satish C. Aikant, currently Fellow of the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla, is Professor and Chair, Department of English at H.N.B. Garhwal University, Pauri. He has been a Visiting Professor at Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, Paris. He is a critic and a translator, and his writings on postcolonial literatures, literary theory and contemporary culture have appeared in a wide range of journals and books. His publications include *Critical Spectrum: Essays on Literary Culture* (2004).

allegory, a myth that does not correspond to a reality that can be scientifically defined” (187-88). Anthony D. Smith maintains that “The nation-state is the almost undisputed foundation of world order, the main object of individual loyalties, the chief definer of a man’s identity. It is far more significant for the individual and for world security than any previous type of political and social organization. It permeates our outlook so much that we hardly question its legitimacy today. We tend to regard nation like skin-colour – a natural attribute of man” (2-3). Indeed, the communities that are imagined by the nationalists often invoke a shared past or a cultural essence that is regarded as synonymous with a religious or racial identity. It obviously makes out that nations are in a sense “natural” or even “essential,” for the world order to exist. Ernest Renan in his essay “What is a Nation?” (1882) had stressed a similar position that “a nation is a soul, a spiritual principle” (Renan 19).

For Anderson nation-ness is the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time. He defines the nation as an “imagined community,” born with the demise of feudalism and the rise of capitalism. For postcolonial critics this definition, however, is not unproblematic since while referring to constructions of nation² and nationalism with regard to third world countries Anderson underlines their dependency on the European models with the contention that the American and European experiences “were now everywhere modularly imagined.”³ Following Anderson, it is widely believed that “Nationalism is a doctrine invented in Europe at the beginning of the nineteenth century” (Kedourie 9).

Nationalism is not a sporadic sentiment that suddenly appears, but gradually evolves when a nation’s survival becomes threatened by an external power and thus, in an overreaction, harks back to its heritage through a variety of means. Thus Lawson suggests “Nationalism is a reaction of peoples who feel culturally at a disadvantage” (Lawson 169). Indeed, in a colonial context, the definition of political identities fitting neatly over cultural identities becomes much harder to maintain. To take the case of India, it was hardly ever a homogenous country – and, indeed, it was only during and since British rule that it became united as a country in a formal way. Until then the main

² Recent scholarship has witnessed a turn from the invented/constructed element of nationhood without being ensnared in myths of a continuous nation. It has pointed to the element of process embedded in nationhood and argues that although “nationalism” is a modern phenomenon closely related to the idea of a sovereign nation state, nationhood is rooted in sentiments derived from a longer history, in emotions, identities and ideas.

³ Benedict Anderson views nationalism as modular, amenable to transplanting it to various social formations, which makes Partha Chatterjee to comment that western concepts have imposed themselves on non-Western people, and colonial nationalisms, even in their assertion of independence from European domination, have remained at best a prisoner of European, post-Enlightenment rationalist discourse. See Anderson (1991), Chatterjee (1986).

determinants of cultural nationhood,⁴ at least based on the European model, were either not present in India or took the form of various affiliations. Unlike European nation states it did not have a major single language to unify its populace – and even after two centuries of unification under a single sovereign government, it has to contend with several hundred languages that often causes acrimonious debates among communities, threatening national unity. It is often maintained that British education helped forge nationalism in India. But surely that was not the avowed aim of colonial education. During colonial domination nationalism was consolidated in the third-world countries, not just on account of the acceptance of western liberal tradition in these countries, but mainly because of a fiercely anti-imperial stand.

Nationalism in the political sense was possible only within the context of specific aspects of Western modernity such as the regulatory power of the state, and discourse of science, set within a wider framework of commercial and military competition between individual national units. Nationalism, thus, became part of the history of “modernity” and “progress,” marked by rapidly expanding economic activities, the growth of liberal political institutions and the emergence of “rational” cultural practices. However, cultural nationalism⁵ in one form or another has prevailed in different societies since the beginning of history. Herder has advanced the idea that every historical age and culture has its own character, underpinned by the belief that humanity has not one form, but many, and these forms find expression in the many different societies and nations of the world. Thus the conception of nationhood pivoted on the development of a cultural identity. If cultural nationalism remains perhaps the most vexed, the most problematic and therefore the most vigorously debated of all the forms of nationalism, it may be precisely because it represents the most intangible and yet the most hegemonic constituent of the nation-state. It is also true that in many colonies in Asia and Africa, cultural nationalism substantially reinforced political movements for freedom and provided a major impulse for them. Ali Behdad goes to the extent of saying that “every culture is first and foremost national” (Behdad 72).

Tagore’s perspective on the Western nation was that it constituted neither a universal model nor a necessary path of convergence. He contended that nationalism was one of Europe’s “most pernicious exports,” for it is not a child of reason or liberty, but of their opposite: of fervent romanticism, of political messianism, whose consequence, inevitably, is the annihilation of freedom. He developed an alternative conception of modernity which saw the ideas, politics

⁴ “Nationhood” may be understood to mean the ontology of being and becoming a nation, highlighting the element of continuity in the imagining of identity.

⁵ Though inchoate ideas about *samajik* unities had existed in the past, it was only from the middle of the nineteenth century that such ideas entered into a structured discourse on nationhood.

and technology of the West as only one aspect of a developing historical process, rather than its core movement. Taking this view we need to think more critically about modernities and the kinds of categories we deploy to make sense of the modern and the counter-modern.

For Tagore, humanity is indivisible and societies such as India's could redeem themselves by adopting the principles of *sarvadharmā samābhava* (deference to all religions) or the Upanishadic dictum of *vasudhev kutumbakam* (the entire world as one family) which can be extended to political domain for a state of peaceful coexistence among all nations, and also within the national boundaries. It is in this spirit that he envisions a world "which has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls" (Tagore, *Gitanjali* 27). This is one lesson that India can teach the world: "If India can offer to the world her solution, it will be a contribution to humanity" (Tagore, *Nationalism* 78).

Tagore, of course, firmly held the view that India never had nationalism:

India has never had a real sense of nationalism. Even though from childhood I had been taught that idolatry of the Nation is almost better than reverence for God and humanity, I believe I have outgrown that teaching, and it is my conviction that my countrymen will truly gain their India by fighting against the education which teaches them that a country is greater than the ideals of humanity. (*Nationalism* 83)

The dangers of nationalism had become evident to Tagore in the wake of the First World War which was then raging. He believed that the horrors of war should have opened people's minds to explore the possibility of a universal movement that would promise a better future to mankind. He felt strongly against the idea of Nationalism derived from the European paradigm and internalised by Asian societies, often as chauvinistic assertion. He was particularly concerned that India must resist the rising tide of nationalism that was sweeping through Europe, which, he feared, would compromise India's history and identity as a culture and bring it under the shadow of the West. So he warned:

We, in India, must make up our minds that we cannot borrow other people's history, and that if we stifle our own we are committing suicide. When you borrow things that do not belong to your life, they only serve to crush your life.... I believe that it does India no good to compete with Western civilization in its own field. (*Nationalism* 84)

Tagore was critical of imperial arrogance and its capacity to inflict misery and injustice on the world, and he was convinced that the misplaced notion of nationalism only fomented parochialism and chauvinism. In their self-righteous

arrogance the British came to India and other countries to convert their “hunting grounds” into “cultivated fields” with the sole purpose of plunder and exploitation (*Nationalism* 59). He found it ironical that the myth of the advancement of civilisation was predicated upon keeping down the bulk of humanity and denying it its human rights. Tagore expressed these ideas in his essays “Nationalism in the West,” “Nationalism in Japan,” “Nationalism in India,” collected in his book, *Nationalism* (1916), based on his lectures in the West and Japan. His novels notably, *The Home and the World* and *Four Chapters*, carry the same refrain. In his view nationalism was only an “organisation of politics and commerce,” that brings “harvests of wealth,” or “carnivals of materialism” (*Nationalism* 92). Nationalism, for him, is not “a spontaneous self-expression of man as social being,” but rather a political and commercial union of a group of people formed to advance their material benefits. It is based on the organised self-interest and not altruism, which, therefore detracts from humanity and the spiritual nature of man. When the self-serving pursuit becomes the be-all and end-all of political and economic organisation, the personal and moral is sacrificed, the living bonds of society break up and the relationships of men become utilitarian.

The overtly nationalistic tendencies focused more on the political and commercial aspects to the detriment of the spiritual nature of man. Tagore’s foremost objection to nationalism came from its very nature and purpose as an institution. He decried the very ideology behind it. As Mohammad Quayum comments: “The very fact that it is a social institution, a mechanical organisation, modelled on certain utilitarian objectives in mind, made it unpalatable to Tagore, who was a champion of creation over construction, imagination over reason and the natural over the artificial and the man-made” (25).

As a matter of fact there is no single criterion that can be used to *objectively* define a nation since none of the assumed features on which nationalities are supposed to be based, such as race, language, religion, geography and history, can account for how they were formed and delimited from each other. The lack of an objective criterion only reveals the constructed, and hence the subjective, nature of the nation. It further implies that though the nation has its roots in the past it clearly does not evolve organically from it as, often, disparate historical events mediate it.

The constructed aspect of nationalism is also seen as a weakness in its ideology, which makes it vulnerable to regressing into more natural social units of clan, tribe and race, or language and religious groups. The process of formation further makes it a potent site of power discourse; the nation never speaks of the hopes and aspirations of its entire “imagined community.” In conceiving its overarching ideologies it often places the dominant group at the centre, pushing the minority population to the periphery. Thus, instead of a

fraternity, it creates a new hierarchy and hegemony within its structure, and exposes the fracture between its rhetoric and reality. Even Fanon, the champion of freedom and nationhood expressed his misgiving when he says, “National consciousness, instead of being the all-embracing crystallization of the innermost hopes of the whole people [becomes] a crude and fragile travesty of what it might have been [when] the nation is passed over for the race, and the tribe is preferred to the state” (121). Nationalism leads the people to ignore the moral law which is universal and uses it only within the bounds of its narrow sphere. This, in an important sense, is the crux of Tagore’s critique of the modern nation. He is an insistent universalist in his belief that moral truth is one, indivisible and omnipresent; hence, any external organisational form which seeks to contradict that truth is a moral offence. He advocated the creation of a culture common to all people, instead of separate national cultures.

In Tagore’s critique, the nation is always the nation-state, which has largely been instrumental in dividing humankind. Expressing his concern over the subjecthood of India under the British rule he felt at the time that before standing up to the colonial power, one needed to set one’s own house in order, and get rid of the internal divisions and hierarchies. He concurred, of course, with Gandhi’s view that freedom would have no meaning if one oppressive power was replaced by another, replicating the structures of hierarchy. The issues of caste and gender discrimination had to be tackled first, to promote social and religious harmony among the various sections of Indian society.

While Gandhi made a distinction between virulent nationalism and non-violent nationalism, for Tagore any form of it was an anathema. Gandhi maintained that “Violent nationalism, otherwise known as imperialism, is the curse. Non-violent nationalism is a necessary condition of corporate or civilized life” (Gandhi 369). India is at a crucial juncture, Tagore believed at the time, when it can and must resist the temptation towards nationalism, and to what he called “the fierce self-idolatry of nation-worship.” His reflections on non-cooperation and cooperation are basically inspired by spiritual and humanistic concerns. In a letter addressed to C.F. Andrews he wrote: “Our fight is a spiritual fight, it is for Man. We are to emancipate Man from the meshes that he himself has woven round him – these organizations of National Egoism.... We have no word for Nation in our language. When we borrow this word from other people, it never fits us” (Bhattacharya 55).

Ashis Nandy points to the fine distinction between nationalism and anti-colonialism, writing that “Tagore rejected the idea of nationalism but practised anti-imperialist politics all his life... at a time when nationalism, patriotism, and anti-imperialism were a single concept for most Indians” (Nandy 80). Tagore’s work elucidates that distinction, in particular, in his fictional portrayal of Bengal during the *swadeshi* movement. Tagore’s love for non-violence was central to his

imagination, and in many ways he was a precursor of Gandhi in introducing and popularising the ideal of non-violence on the Indian political stage. His novel *The Home and the World*, which was published in 1915, had championed the doctrine of non-violence in his protagonist Nikhilesh, well before Gandhi embarked on his *satyagraha* movement, with non-violent non-cooperation as the main strategy to withstand the imperial might.

Subsequently, the Tagore-Gandhi debates provide us with a crucial historical and textual source for an interpretation of Tagore's thinking on nationalism. The debates centred on the freedom struggle and India's stance towards the West, and towards Britain as the colonial power. These debates took place within a wider setting of Indian arguments about modernity in the Indian context, and in Tagore's case represent the fruition of years of intellectual struggle from Rammohan Roy through Debendranath Tagore and Keshub Chandra Sen. Tagore stuck to his concept of nationalism being extraneous to the spiritual nature of man which violated humanity. Gandhi, too, agreed with his moral position but argued that Indian nationalism was not aggressive or destructive. Tagore maintained that passive resistance was a force which is not necessarily moral in itself since that can be used either to adhere to truth or subvert it. He refused to see the idea of non-cooperation in a positive light simply because it was non-violent. Instead of it, he placed his emphasis on the subjective orientation of those carrying out the act. This position was entirely consistent with his idealism. *Satyagraha* was not an end in itself, its moral value depended on the ends to which it was directed and, crucially, the motivations for its invocation. Of course, for both Tagore and Gandhi, the ideal of love, equated with and intimately linked to notions of God and Truth, was central to their ideas of social agency.

Both Gandhi and Tagore agreed that freedom was the ultimate aim, but in Tagore's eyes, Gandhi's *swaraj* placed too much emphasis on politicised forms of nationalism as the means by which it would achieve this end. Tagore's argument was that despite naming freedom as his ultimate aim, in essence, Gandhi's *satyagraha* was motivated by negative intentions, even hatred in some cases, that would inevitably lead to violence in thought as well as in action. He attacked imperialism because he believed that there was a close alliance between imperialism and violence. In an interview to the Russian newspaper *Izvestia*, he remarked: "Violence begets violence and blind stupidity. Freedom of mind is needed for the reception of truth; terror hopelessly kills it. The brute cannot subdue the brute. It is only the man who can do it" (Dutta and Robinson 125).

Tagore maintained that the central problematic of Gandhi's movement was the instrumentalisation of the ideas of *ahimsa* and *satyagraha* which found their ill-advised way into the boycott of education and the burning of cloth. He then goes on to question the very meaning of *swaraj* in what he deems to be its Gandhian sense. His answer is that Gandhi's idea of *swaraj* is only *maya*: "it is

like a mist, that will vanish leaving no stain on the radiance of the Eternal... we may delude ourselves with... phrases learnt from the West, [but] swaraj is not our objective” (Bhattacharya 55). The idea of non-cooperation was, according to him, nothing but “political asceticism.” “Our students,” he said, “are bringing their offerings of sacrifice to what? Not to a fuller education but to non-education” (Bhattacharya 57). For Tagore, withdrawing students from the educational structures that existed and offering them no education at all represented the anarchy and purposelessness by which, he said he was not tempted. Tagore’s break with the *swadeshi* was only a reawakening of his earlier muted protest against nationalism. In his novel *Gora* (1910), for example, he joins issue with the idea of “pure” national identity. Even though the sudden withdrawal of Tagore from the *swadeshi*⁶ movement was seen as an act of betrayal by many of the nationalists, nothing could alter his conviction. He would not have anything to do with a movement that was hijacked by the Bengali *bhadrolok* (elites) for their vested interest, and that saw the individual through the instrumentality of an uncertain Cause. His critics, however, overlooked Tagore’s patriotism in his renunciation of his knighthood after General O’Dwyer’s massacre of innocent civilians at Jallianwalla Bagh in 1919. Tagore’s response to his critics was fictionally articulated in his novel *The Home and the World* (*Ghare Baire* in Bengali)⁷ which narrates the latter phase of the *swadeshi* movement (1905-1911) (ostensibly for self-sufficiency) bringing out its contradictions.

The novel dramatises how exploitation, violence and killing become ritual acts when the individual sacrifices his self to an abstraction, and nationalism is put on a pedestal, sacrificing righteousness and conscience. The movement which had begun as a reaction to Curzon’s decision to divide Bengal, ironically ends up in creating fault-lines between Hindus and the Muslims. He points up the pitfalls of the nationalist movements which very often veered into terrorist movements because of the overzealous tendencies of the protagonists who became so unscrupulous that they did not hesitate to abuse the movement for personal and political gain, as, for example, does Sandip in *The Home and the World*. Beginning as a charismatic nationalist figure, he gradually becomes self-obsessed and vainglorious in his cause, losing sight of the *dharma* of

⁶ Initially a large-scale boycott of British goods, *swadeshi* movement eventually took on several, often contradictory, incarnations, involving several indigenous initiatives and revolutionary societies. Sumit Sarkar believes that the *swadeshi* period provided the major context for the development of such identity (See Sarkar, *Writing Social History* 22). Tagore had initially supported the voluntary and small-scale version of *swadeshi* over the more popular industrial projects and enforced boycotts that came to dominate the *swadeshi* movement.

⁷ *The Home and the World* takes place around 1908. It originally appeared in Bengali in 1915 as *Ghare Baire* and was translated into English in 1918 as *At Home and Outside*. The translation was done by Tagore’s nephew and frequent collaborator Surendranath.

dispassionate, disinterested action. He can even dispense with social and ethical considerations to achieve his personal goals. His nationalism, coercive and aggressive, is but an extension of his individualism, in the Western mould, that Tagore was critical of. The plot develops through three characters: Nikhilesh, the idealistic landowner/reformer whom many readers see as Tagore's alter ego; Nikhilesh's old but untrustworthy friend Sandip, leader of the violent *swadeshi* movement; and Nikhil's wife Bimala, who must choose between the two men and their respective visions for India. Gradually, we find her obsessively drawn toward Sandip who, with his flamboyance and jingoistic rhetoric appeals to her own sense of patriotism.

Nikhilesh is patriotic but wouldn't place nation above truth and conscience as he 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 curse upon it" (Tagore, *The Home and the World* 221). Sandip retorts that country's needs must be made into "a god," and one must "set aside... conscience... by putting the country in its place" (*The Home and the World* 382). Tagore saw this radical view of Sandip, as a sure recipe for disaster.

Perhaps the most significant theme of the novel is the danger of iconography. Throughout the narrative Tagore tracks the symbols, phrases and icons employed towards nationalist ends, and the harm they can do. The novel identifies several of those emblems of nationalism: bonfires; the image of Bengal or India as a woman and a goddess; and most frequently of all, the phrase "Bande Mataram." When Bimala tells Nikhilesh of her intention to burn all her foreign-made clothes, a common ritual of early *swadeshi*, Nikhilesh asks sceptically, "Why burn them?... You need not wear them as long as you please... do not wear them for the rest of your life, then. But why this bonfire business?" (*The Home and the World* 219). Along with Tagore, Nikhilesh doubts the value of nationalist symbolism. Sandip's justification for it is that symbolic acts provide "an appeal to the imagination" essential for "patriotic work" (*The Home and the World* 229). They perform the necessary task of realising the country in a "visible symbol." Whether such symbolism in fact creates or destroys, gives energy to a movement or robs it of reason, is the central question of the novel. Nikhilesh ultimately proves right, but we never know whether his objective succeeds, for, as the novel closes, he has been wounded and perhaps killed in a communalist conflagration. Sandip's bonfires, which began as symbolism, erupt into violence. As Ashis Nandy notes, "The violence is a natural by-product of the strategy of mobilization employed by Sandip and his enthusiastic followers. Such a mobilization requires, Tagore implies, symbols embedded in an exclusivist cultural-religious idiom" (14). Even more than bonfires, that "exclusivist cultural-religious idiom" consists of the image of country as Mother-Goddess. Sandip argues that "True patriotism will never be roused in our countrymen unless they can visualize the motherland. We must

make a goddess of her” (*The Home and the World* 330). Tagore vehemently opposes the idea of turning the nation into a goddess for it was a superfluous deification of nation. It was also an insidious act since invoking the nation a visual image can appeal to the minds of the Hindus only. It would have no appeal to the vast Muslim population, which goes to illustrate the exclusivist and sectarian nature of the movement.

Throughout the novel, the use of the single phrase *Bande Mataram* inevitably serves to foreclose any kind of dialogue or exchange of ideas. From the outset, the precise danger of *Bande Mataram* lies in its ability to dominate over any other forms of expression. As Bimala describes it, her first-ever *swadeshi* meeting consists almost exclusively of the talismanic repetition of the phrase: “Triumphant shouts of *Bande Mataram* come nearer: and to them I am thrilling through and through... *Bande Mataram! Bande Mataram! Bande Mataram!* It seems as though the skies would be rent and scattered into a thousand fragments” (*The Home and the World* 222). Returning from the meeting, her aural universe now reduced to two words, Bimala dreads encountering anything that will not conform to what she has just heard: “When my husband came home later, I was trembling lest he should utter a sound out of tune with the triumphant paean which was still ringing in my ears” (*The Home and the World* 224). So the singular refrain of “*Bande Mataram*” shuts out the possibility of any other point of view.

The Home and the World is a tragic narrative of the frustrations of a reasonable and principled cosmopolitanism by the forces of nationalism and ethnocentrism. Tagore analyses how at bottom nationalism and ethnocentrism coalesce to ultimately subvert even the values that hold a nation together, because it substitutes a colourful idol for the substantive universal values of justice and right. A nationalist chauvinist is prompted to declare himself as “an Indian first, a citizen of the world second,” which would then lead to other corollaries invoking caste and creed and so on. Only the cosmopolitan stance of the landlord Nikhilesh, even though it does not appeal to his young wife Bimala and his passionate nationalist friend Sandip, has the promise of transcending these divisions, because only this stance asks us to give our first allegiance to what is both just and not bereft of moral propriety. One might even suppose that in Tagore’s novel, the appeal to world citizenship *apparently* fails because patriotism is full of colour and intensity and passion, whereas cosmopolitanism seems to have a hard time gripping the imagination. And yet in its very failure it would seem that it succeeds. For the novel is a story of education for world citizenship, since Bimala, understands, if too late, that Nikhilesh’s morality was vastly superior to Sandip’s empty slogan-mongering, which could only arouse passions.

Disavowing his own earlier forms of activism, thus, Tagore registers his absolute disapproval of the iconographic phrases that drive nationalism. He

had, indeed, done the most to popularise the poem “Bande Mataram,” by setting it to music after it had appeared in Bankimchandra Chatterjee’s novel *Anandmath* (1882). But once Tagore turned away from both nationalism and *swadeshi*, he began to distrust the phrases and icons that powered those movements. In *The Home and the World*, “Bande Matarm” evokes in Sandip and his followers the battle cry of the *sanyasis* (Hindu ascetics) in *Anandmath* as they clash with a Muslim Nawab backed by British forces. The *sanyasis* pledge themselves to demolishing mosques and constructing temples in their place.

Indeed, by 1910 Tagore had moved away from nationalism in order to promote a “world humanism” which would ultimately transcend all ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic distinctions, influenced by Rammohan Roy and the reformist tenets of the *Brahmo Samaj*. Tagore imagined of a commonwealth of nations in which no nation (or race) would deprive another “of its rightful place in the world festival” and every nation would “keep alight its own lamp of mind as its part of the illumination of the world” (Kripalani 268).

Tagore’s particular brand of universalism required the radical rejection of liberal individualism and a utilitarian, positivist rationality in favour of collective social life and spiritual truth. He replaces the ideology of nation with the idea of *swadeshi samaj*,⁸ of social relations that are not mechanical and impersonal but based on love and cooperation. He espoused an internationalism which was inherent in the culture of diversity and co-existence in which the Indian civilisation had evolved through the ages. He became an avid advocate of inter-civilisational alliance, and his vision was of a symbiosis of the East and West. He saw cultures interacting with and recharging each other. He was no doubt furious with the British cruelty and oppression in India during the colonial period, and felt that the West was often immersed in commercialism, “moral cannibalism,” “political expediency,” militarism and “war-madness,” and was unduly full of contempt for the East; yet he never gave up hope for a possible union of the East and West, in which the East and the West would meet as equal partners in a creative engagement. In a letter to Foss Westcott, Tagore wrote, “Believe me, nothing would give me greater happiness than to see the people of the West and the East march in a common crusade against all that robs the human spirit of its significance” (Dutta and Robinson 197). Tagore consistently believed that imperialism and nationalism were only passing phases in the development of human community. Humanity was too good for such

⁸ As Swarupa Gupta writes in “Colonial Bengal: *Samaj*, *Jati* and *Desh*: Reflections on Nationhood in Late Colonial Bengal,” there were three conceptual sites of identity formation – *samaj* (social collectivity); *jati* (a multidimensional term implying birth, caste, race, tribe and nation); and *desh* (sub-region/region/ province/country). *Samaj* was deployed to mediate the fragmentations of *jati* and *desh* in the literati’s agenda of recreating a collective self and approximating nationhood. The ideas about nationhood drew on pre-existing indigenous unities embedded in past *samajs*. So the assumptions about the modernity of colonial nationalisms and their borrowed, derivative and political nature must be qualified by situating *samaj* in its context (Gupta 177-203).

narrow, exclusive, and erratic principles, which patronised social hierarchy, exploitation and reckless injustice.

Very often there is a tendency to glorify the “pre-modern.” However, one should remember that the much trumpeted romantic past, with its pluralism and traditional ways was hardly egalitarian in practice, and was based on discrimination and pernicious hierarchies of caste and religion. Tagore, on the other hand, envisions a society which enriches one’s tradition through inclusion and assimilation of other traditions and cultures. In his own words:

If in the spirit of national vaingloriousness we shout from our house-tops that the West has produced nothing that has an infinite value for man, then we but create a serious cause of doubt about the worth of any product of the Eastern mind. For it is the mind of Man in the East and West which is ever approaching Truth in her different aspects from different angles of vision; and if it can be true that the standpoint of the West has betrayed it into an utter misdirection, then we can never be sure of the standpoint of the East. Let us be rid of all false pride and rejoice at any lamp being lit at any corner of the common illumination of our house. (Qtd. in Bhattacharya 61).

It was Tagore’s belief that to be truly modern, we need to liberate ourselves from the constraints of nationalist ideology so that we can express ourselves freely in the process of becoming full spiritual beings. This alternative vision of peace, harmony and the spiritual unity of humankind seems more relevant now than ever before.

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