

# Beyond Nationalism: The Significance of Rabindranath Tagore's Concept of Nationalism in the Colonial Era and the Postcolonial Era

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## Abstract:

Rabindranath Tagore, the multifaceted Indian poet, philosopher and artist, critically investigated the origin and evolution of [Western] nationalism and surmised the dangers of its adoption in the Indian anti-colonial struggle. Thus, he developed a unique perspective on nationalism that challenged the prevalent nationalist ideas of the prominent political thinkers and provided with a nuanced understanding of the intricacies of India's struggle for Independence and the subsequent nation-building processes. His concept of nationalism immediately became a matter of great controversy and many people even started regarding him as 'anti-nationalist.' This paper aims to investigate and tackle the controversy regarding the relevance of Tagore's nationalism both in the colonial period and the post-colonial period. It will try to emphasize how his concept of nationalism contrasts with that of Mahatma Gandhi regarding its role as an anticolonial force, and also with that of Benedict Anderson regarding its importance in shaping national and cultural identities, and international relations in the post-colonial era. By focusing on his essay on 'Nationalism' and his three renowned political novels, such as, Gora, The Home and the World, and Four Chapters, the paper intends to analyze the value of Tagore's ideas in the context of the anti-colonial struggles and their validity in the context of the contemporary socio-political and cultural movements, and give an insight of his philosophical conception on the discourse of nationalism.

**Keywords:** Nationalism, Colonialism, Anti-colonial Struggle, International Relations, Politics

## Introduction:

In the present era of globalism, internationalism and transnationalism, Rabindranath Tagore's idea of nationalism, though propounded in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, is extremely pertinent to critically examine the construction of individual and collective identity, the operation of global trading and the relationships among the countries across the world. There is much difference between the time he was pronouncing his ideas of nationalism and the contemporary time which is marked by the high technological and digital development that seems to 'deconstruct' the demarcations among the cross-cultural communities. The world has turned into a "global village" by the means of technological and digital development. Tagore too, at that point of time, proclaimed that "the world is becoming one country through scientific faculty." But the question that seems to arise is that 'is this the world structure Tagore had envisioned?' It seems that Tagore's critique of the extremism of anti-colonial nationalism and his vision of 'internationalism' which were misunderstood and criticized during his lifetime, not only challenge colonialism but also neo-colonialism- a phenomenon that arose in the aftermath of

decolonization. It appears apparent that the visible branches of colonialism have been cut down but a critical investigation will show that its seeds are still active and are sprouting new brunches, invisible in nature, which are spreading across the world more extensively and more effectively. It leads us to another question ‘is globalization but a façade of neo-colonialism whose “invisible hands” (e.g., international politics and policies) are controlling and colonizing our lives?’ Capitalism whose heinous naked stature was exposed through colonialism now seems to have disguised itself beneath the fancy cloths of neo-colonialism. Tagore rightly sought to find the trunk (the root being the result of the scarcity of natural resources) of Western nationalism by looking at it as a product of the Enlightenment Era- indicative of early industrialization and capitalism. The Western nations, dominated by capitalist ideologies, in order to improve their infrastructure and prove their superiority, started colonizing different parts of world. This way, Western nationalism gave birth to the rise of colonialism and the sustenance of colonialism eventually gave birth to the rise of anti-colonial struggle and resistance which, in turn, espoused ‘West-influenced’ different approaches of nationalism in the [post]colonial countries. In order to resist colonialism, while most of the political and nationalist thinkers were interested in tearing off the branches of “colonialism”, Tagore, the humanist, was of the opinion of uprooting the seeds of greed, envy, hatred and violence which foster all sorts of evils like parochialism, colonialism, cultural hegemony and communal disharmony. A thorough study will show how Tagore’s notion of nationalism was not only relevant during the time of anti-colonial struggle but also is becoming more and more relevant in the present world scenario.

#### **Tagore’s Nationalism in the Colonial Period:**

The time period Tagore was born and lived in was highly influenced by the socio-political upheavals in India. His family members were actively associated with the socio-political activities of the period. Thus, Tagore was more or less influenced by the socio-political events from his childhood till the arrival of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. But he became most actively concerned about and associated with the political issues when he got himself engaged with the Swadeshi Movement. He initially wrote patriotic poems and songs to inspire the participants of the movement. But he eventually dissociated himself from it and started criticizing it. The spirit of violence and animosity under the influence of the Swadeshi Movement made Tagore intensively disturbed and critically think about the effectivity of nationalism, originated in the West, which, to him, appeared to be a threat to the modern civilization. He began to be extremely skeptical about the effectivity of the adoption of Western nationalism in the Indian anti-colonial movement and engaged himself with the tenacious task of critically investigating the origin and evolution of Western nationalism, and seeking to find out reasons why this type of nationalism should not be adopted by the Indians. After understanding and analyzing the pitfalls of Western nationalism, he endeavoured to propound his own unique brand of nationalism through his essays on ‘Nationalism’ and his political novels and plays, whose validity is not limited within the colonial period and transcends this particular time frame and becomes perpetual in all times.

Tagore considers “the spirit of conflict and conquest” as the base of Western nationalism which is imperialist and parochial in nature. According to him, “the cult of the nation”, as practised by the European countries, has led to the formation of a world condition in which “machine must be pitted against machine, and nation against nation, in an endless bullfight of politics.” He discusses the “nation” as a political organization of a whole people that seeks power to proclaim its superiority by mechanical means and requires distortion of morality for its maintenance. He further argues, as rightly pointed out by Kiran Agawane, that nationalism “has created a mindless quest for material wealth and political power,

abolishing the fundamentals of democracy and humanity.” It is a “great menace” that destabilizes co-operation and unity, and instead, promotes competition and mutual fear among people across different cultures.

Tagore is of the opinion that the spirit of nationalism was derived from the construction of the European nation-state which was the embodiment of capitalist and parochial ideologies. Thus, he believes that this conception of nationalism is intrinsically inimical to the Indian tradition of self-autotomy, pluralism and religious tolerance which one would find in what he calls the “Samaj”. Tagore is so indignant about the tyrannical aspects of Western nationalism that he calls it “the worst form of human bondage... which keeps men hopelessly chained in loss of faith in themselves.” Through his essays on nationalism, what he seems to do is, in the words of Mohammad A. Quayum, “to imagine of an interactive, dialogic world, filled with sense of sympathy, generosity, mutability, in which nations would not be xenophobic, centripetal or guided by selfish interests or self-aggrandisement but poised towards a morally and spiritually enlightened communion by the espousal of centrifugal and multilateral outlook, and principles of universal and reciprocal recognitions.”

Tagore’s critique of Western nationalism and irrational patriotism is most explicitly evident in his three novels- *Gora* (1910), *The Home and the World* (1916), and *Four Chapters* (1934). Through these novels, he shows how thousands of young men and women joined several nationalist groups without even knowing the proper reason of their joining. They started blindly following charismatic leaders like Gora in his former self in *Gora*, Sandip in *The Home and the World* or Indranath in *Four Chapters* whose fiery and ostensibly idealistic speeches attracted them. They lost their sense of judgement and independent thinking and fell prey to the misdirection of these leaders.

Gora, a young man born of Irish parents but ignorant about it, proliferatively propounds the ideas of extremist Hindu nationalism and is antithetical to other’s faiths. He does not eat food from his mother Anandamoyi’s hands because she does not believe in the conventional Hindu practices and keeps Lachmiya, a Christian servant, at the household. He warns his friend Binoy not to have any connection with Lalita, a Brahmo girl. However, he himself falls in love with Sucharita, her elder sister, but feels too guilty to commensurate any commitment. He is too adamant to accept other’s views and always keeps adhering to his rigid ideologies with the use of which he influences his followers. Sandip and Indranath both are similar in respect to their attitude towards nationalist ideology. Their action glaringly shows their contradiction they are involved in due to their distorted use of political power. All their ideas of nation and nationalism which they use for the attainment of freedom are borrowed from the West which Tagore rigorously has pointed out as hostile to the Indian context. Sandip provokes his followers and threatens poor sellers to burn all of their foreign clothes in the markets. Leaders like him, Tagore claims, are responsible for the plight of the poor people who cannot buy high-priced indigenous products. They are also responsible for having misled young students like Amulya to drop out from school and join the nationalist project without even properly understanding the veracity and validity of its purpose and goal. Bimala is depicted as representative of Mother India, namely, the Indian mass who could easily be misdirected by the garrulous preachers like Sandip into the entrapment of falsehood and propaganda.

Indranath, too, like Sandip, is popular among young people. He cunningly introduces Ela, a young lady, to his nationalist group, with the intention of attracting young men to join the group. Atin, Ela’s lover, also joins the group solely because she has joined. Indranath is not very much bothered about whether Independence is gained or not. But what he seems solely worried about is the appraisal for his contribution, no matter how vague it is, to the nationalist enterprise. When the situation turns out to be intense and

problematic, he even orders Atin to kill Ela for the safety of their group. Ela, however, accepts to die not because of the higher goals of sacrifice for the country which have been internalized into her but solely for her love for Atin.

Tagore, however, emphatically pronounces his message of humanity and disillusionment in these novels by significant means. No sooner is his true identity revealed to Gora than he drastically changes his ideology and worldview. He no longer wishes to stick to orthodox Hindu nationalism and proposes "...Today I am really an Indian! In me there is no longer any opposition between Hindu, Mussalman, and Christian. Today every caste in India is my caste, the food of all is my food..." Nikhil, Tagore's mouthpiece, contradicts Sandip in all his ideological beliefs. He is against Sandip's idolization of India as the divine mother and all the violent activities for the safety of the mother: "To worship my country as a god is to bring curse upon it", "to tyrannize for the country is to tyrannize over the country." It is Nikhil, however, the conscientious landlord, who sacrifices for his people in the turbulent situation while Sandip, the opportunist leader, runs away. Nikhil represents Tagore's sharp criticism on the irrational and violent activities of the political leaders and their followers who have been blinded by narrow nationalist ideologies. It represents the idea that people are not for the state but the state is for its people.

Among the most influential thinkers of the age with whom Tagore's ideas clash most polemically is Gandhi. Though the two had tremendous respect for each other; Tagore called Gandhi "Mahatma" and the latter called the former "Gurudev", their political and philosophical ideas regarding the Swadeshi Movement in particular, and nation and nationalism in general, have created endless controversy and thus, require a special attention. Even though there are some similar goals of Gandhi's 'Swaraj' and Tagore's 'Samaj' regarding the welfare of people, their approaches of achieving a free state are quite contrary to each other. Gandhi did not want to adopt the implementation of technology and machinery because he thought that it would make people dependent, making them attached to bodily comforts and detached from religion and morality. On the contrary, Tagore supported the implementation and advancement of technology and machinery because he thought that it would help people indulge in greater pursuits of life. However, here, it must not be considered mistakenly that Tagore wanted to promote greed for materialism. What he truly wanted is the growth of mind and the enlightenment of soul through the means of modern education. One must not confuse it with the Western colonial tutelage which was introduced to make Indians servants of the British empire. The crucial difference between Tagore and Gandhi is in regard to their approaches of attaining freedom and building the free 'nation.' Gandhi proposed "Boycott"-the act of renouncing foreign goods as the motif of the Swadeshi Movement to fight the British colonial power. This approach was absolutely unacceptable to Tagore because it would put the poor into great plight, as is pointed out in *The Home and the World*. Tagore was in no way ever open to any sort of negotiation of the deprivation of the lives of the poor, the untouchable or the minority for attaining Independence. As it seems apparent in his writings that even the sacrifice of a single person for the sake of the entire nation is not acceptable to him. For him, freedom at the cost of the lives of people, no matter, whether be they rich or poor; Hindu, Muslim or Christian; native or foreigner, would be a calumny to the heart of humanity. Gandhi's "it is impossible to be internationalist without being a nationalist" is contrasted with Tagore's "Neither the colourless vagueness of cosmopolitanism [used in a negative sense], nor the fierce self-idolatry of the nation-worship is the goal of human history."

Tagore critically condemns Western colonialism but, unlike radical Swadeshi nationalists, is in favour of internalising elements of essence from the West. Ashis Nandy in *The Illegitimacy of Nationalism* argues that "Tagore was a patriot but not a nationalist...He was seeking to clearly separate patriotism from

nationalism so as to create an intellectual and psychological base that would allow the natural territoriality of a political community to avoid European-style nationalism.” Tagore envisions an India, free from the influence of Western nationalism, materialism as well as religious and racial orthodoxy, that actively seeks a common destiny with the rest of the mankind, constantly evolving towards a cosmopolitan society where “will East and West unite..., country with country, race with race, knowledge with knowledge... will the history of India... [be] merged with the history of the world...”, quintessentially thwarting Rudyard Kipling idea of “East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet.” Thus, Jawaharlal Nehru in *Discovery of India* rightly remarks that “[Tagore] has helped to bring into harmony the ideals of the East and the West, and broadened the bases of Indian nationalism. He has been India’s first internationalist par excellence.”

Tagore’s notion of nationalism, now comparable to ‘humanitarian internationalism’, seems to transcend the boundaries of imperialist nationalism and anti-colonial nationalism both of which demanded means of violence and hatred. Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* has argued that “decolonization is always a violent event.” If, for Fanon, subjectivity can be recovered and liberation can be acquired by the use of violence which seems, however, necessary at many points; for Tagore, the culture of violence only leads to the loss of self-worth, and moral degradation. Tagore did not support the mode of resistance, undertaken by nationalist extremists, which, he thought, was an adoption from Western nationalism. Furthermore, Tagore, unlike Gandhi and Fanon [both of them differ extensively] who were directly associated with politics and wanted political result, was a poet and philosopher who had faith in the essence of humanity and wanted philosophical and moral development of human hearts. He was against anything that he thought as a threat to humanity, even to a single person. Thus, his nationalism challenges the ideals of utilitarianism and promotes humanism. His vision of the world is immensely idealistic but not impossible to achieve. It calls for a ‘humanitarian enterprise’ to uproot all the seeds of hatred and violence from the discourses of nation and nationalism. The day it is achieved, the shackles of parochialism shall shatter and a “heaven of freedom” shall emerge.

### **The Relevance of Tagore’s Nationalism in the Postcolonial Era and Beyond:**

The dynamics of the contemporary [post]colonial world are dominated by the tension between nationalism and internationalism, between cultural exhibition and cultural exploitation, between national identity and regional identity, between the need for modernization to secure progress in the future and the desire to revive the [un]attainable vague pre-colonial or even pre-imperialist past. The prevalent issues in the contemporary context that need to be addressed here are about globalization being supported by the ideology of notorious neo-colonialism and nationalism being supported by the ideology of eccentric exclusivism. Both of these issues have already been addressed by Tagore whose idea of inter/nationalism is free from the influence of both the ideology of neo-colonialism and the ideology of exclusivism. He strongly rejects the supremacy of one/few nations over others in the inter-national sphere and the supremacy of one identity over others in the intra-national realm. He is in favour of establishing harmony among all cultures existing in each part of the world without the tendency of homogenizing their distinctive qualities and against the abolishment of one by the hegemony of the other. This way, he proposes the creation of a world-system in which each and every nation will build mutual relations with each other, not with any political intention but with a humanitarian approach, and each and every part within the nation will operate harmoniously without any predominance of one over the other.

The rise of modern theories and ideas has complicated and multifaced the discourse on nation and nationalism. Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1983) has given the discourse on nationalism a new dynamism for endless discussions. He considers the invention of the printing press in the late 15<sup>th</sup> Century and the beginning of the spread of books written in native languages, at a cheap rate, in the 1500s as the founding pillars of nationalist sentiment. Anderson looks at nationalism as a positive idea because he believes that the sense of belonging to a particular 'imagined community' forms solidarity and brotherhood among people in the particular geo-political territory who never have got to or will ever know each other personally. The problem in this idea lies in the fact that same nation that is 'imagined' by the majoritarian group may be differently 'imagined' by the minority group. The majority or the politically powerful have a chance to impose their ideologies on the minority or the politically less powerful or powerless. Thus, instead of solidarity, it may create animosity between these groups. On the other hand, as it seems, the deficiency in Anderson's idea lies in the fact that, in the era of globalization and technological development, a person, rather than having the sense of belonging to one 'imagined community,' may belong to multiple 'imagined communities' simultaneously.

Anderson stresses the role of nationalist sentiment that encourages people to kill and die for the sake of their nation. According to him, no other sentiment like religious or political-ideological would be able to do it better. However, it is really not true in all cases. There are a lot of instances which show that people have been/ can be influenced by religion or political ideology to kill and die for its sake. However, looking at the role of nationalism in encouraging people to engage in the acts of violence from Tagore's point of view, it would suggest that what is most important is that engagement in any sort of violence, be it inspired by nationalism, religion or political ideology, should be discouraged, avoided and condemned at any cost.

### **Conclusion:**

Amartya Sen has argued that "it would be wrong to see nationalism as either an unmitigated evil or universal virtue. It can be both, boon and curse—depending on the circumstances two sides of the same coin." Nationalism, in the present era, is a complex myriad phenomenon whose positive impact cannot be only emphasized without addressing its negative impact or the vice versa. There are endless debates and discussions regarding its different roles (positive or negative) in different contexts. While Eric Hobsbawm shows how 'invented customs and traditions' play an important role in the formation of national consciousness and John Breuilly emphasizes the importance of political institutions and geo-politics in shaping and maintaining the foundation of nation and nationalism, Benedict Anderson argues that nation should be considered as an 'imagined community' which is perceived and conceived in a shared imagination through a 'common print language.' As it suggests, Anderson is more interested in the positive power of nationalism of uniting people of a particular geo-political territory than its tendency of provoking conflict with other nations or within its own boundaries. The intricacies underlying different views on nationalism shed light on the essence of Tagore's nationalism that offers philosophical ideas to resolve the issues related to the binary role of nationalism. His nationalism opposes any sort of violence and hatred, be it nationalistic, political or religious in nature. The pages of the history of the world are written with the blood of violent events. Tagore's ideas of 'nationalism-humanism', pronounced through a variety of his writings, not only encourage us to refuse and reproach any sort of violence but also inspire us to strive for a moral and peaceful world- "a heaven of freedom" where "the mind [would be] without fear and the head [would be] held high."

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