

The Notion of a Nation: Tagore's Idea of Nationalism, Spirituality and Indian Society

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Abstract—The word 'nation' acquires a very different meaning in Rabindranath Tagore. Time and again, in his literary writings, essays and lectures, particularly those delivered in Japan, which were later compiled in an anthology titled Nationalism, his idea of a 'nation' has explicitly emerged as that of a necessarily lifeless, mechanical entity, an 'organization' of politics and commerce, borrowed primarily from the imperial West. It is essentially non-oriental, non-native or non-Indian. For, 'Our history is that of our social life and attainment of spiritual ideals', as Tagore observes in one of his essays. It is 'the Nation of the West', which, having intruded upon our civilization, has led to the dissolution of the personal humanity, the more organicist bonds of human relationships in a community or 'society', and has therefore, debarred us from the true realization of the unity of man – which, for Tagore, is the ultimate truth of existence per se.

It is this idea of society in favour of nationality, humanism in favour of narrow nationalism that I attempt to present in my paper, which seems particularly worth recalling, given the present socio-political conditions prevailing in India.

Keywords— nation, Nation, nationalism, society, power, unity, humanity.

The question of Rabindranath Tagore and nationalism has been a much debated one among historians, scholars and academicians alike. The various opinions prevailing about Tagore's 'anti-nationalism', 'internationalism', 'ambivalent nationalism' and the like could, perhaps, gain a different dimension altogether, by focussing on what the significance of the word 'nation' was for Tagore and subsequently, the uniquely individual ideology of nationalism that he subscribed to. It is precisely through a closer observation of Tagore's understanding of the history of Indian society and civilization at large, as also his holistic approach to humanity, that his concepts of nation and nationalism can be traced.

In one of his lectures delivered in the USA, which was later anthologised under the title *Nationalism* (1917), Rabindranath Tagore asserts:

A nation, in the sense of the political and economic union of a people, is that aspect which a whole population assumes when organized for a mechanical purpose. Society as such has no ulterior purpose.

It is an end in itself. It is a spontaneous self-expression of man as a social being.¹

Evidently, from this deliberate juxtaposition of the nation and the society, Tagore's contention of defending or preserving the natural, apolitical character of the human community in favour of an organizational power becomes clear from the very outset. Indeed, this is one of the very foundational concepts behind Tagore's discourse of nationalism. This, however, cannot be comprehended either in isolation from the contemporary socio-political conditions prevailing in colonial India under the British Raj, or without taking into account the fact that there have been significant shifts in Tagore's attitude to the Indian nationalist movement between the 1890s to 1941.² As Tagore himself wrote in a critical response to Sachin Sen's book, *The Political Philosophy of Rabindranath*, 'It needs to be taken into account that a set of political ideas did not emerge from my mind at a particular time – they developed in response to life experience and evolved over the years.'

As is known, prior to 1916-17, Tagore did participate in the nationalist movement, particularly during 1902-1905, actively supporting the cause of Swadeshi agitation against the Partition of Bengal. However, unlike the extremists, Tagore advocated a 'constructive swadeshi'. Following the massive sufferings of people during these years, which went largely unheeded by the British government, his stance of

building (or rather, re-building) a self-sufficient, self-reliant Indian society in the model of the past, instead of passively surviving at the mercy of the state or the political administrative instrument took a stronghold. This has been amply addressed by Tagore in his seminal political essay in Bengali, *Swadeshi Samaj* (1905), written primarily in the wake of a severe water-crisis in erstwhile Bengal. Tagore's fervent appeal to his countrymen to realize the potential of self-help within the indigenous community or 'samaj', the traditional Indian model of unifying a whole population of diverse peoples and races — in that, the Indian parallel of the European 'nation'— and therefore, to engage in social reconstruction has been variously addressed in his political essays of the period, be it *Bharatbarshiya Samaj* (1902), *Abastha o Byabastha* (1905) or *Swadeshi Samaj* (1905). Besides, his establishment of the Santiniketan *ashram* school in 1901 as an alternative/indigenous model of education along with support from contemporary intellectuals like Brahmabandhab Upadhyay, marked a significant step towards a 'swadeshi' education movement. As Sumit Sarkar points out:

From July 1905, reliance on selfhelp or 'atmasakti' seemed to have become for a time the creed of the whole Bengal...In retrospect, it is Rabindranath Tagore rather than the professional politicians who stands out as the most vivid and remarkable personality of those stirring 1905 days – participating in the rough-and-tumble of politics as never before and after...³

It may also be useful to note at this juncture that even before his explicit address of a social reconstruction in *Swadeshi Samaj*, Tagore expressed his scepticism about the suitability of reincarnating the European 'Nation' in the Indian framework, notably in the two essays, *Nation Ki* (1902) and *Bharatbarshiya Samaj* (1902)—the former elucidating the emergence of the Western concept of the 'nation' as discussed by the French thinker, Ernest Renan, and the latter impressing the differences in the social and political structures of India and Europe, and the futility of replicating the foreign concept of the 'nation' in India, which has been a land of 'no nations'.

Between 1907 and 1916, Tagore eventually grew sceptical of the militant course that the mainstream Indian nationalist movement often took. His political novels like *Gora* (1910), *Ghare Baire* (1916) or, *The Home and the World*, where

patriotism and humanity come into essential conflict with each other, present some of the most reflective insights of his political views during this phase. Besides, the First World War had had a deep impact on Tagore's mind, and had consequently, shaken his faith in the administration of the British government all the more. It was at this juncture that his *Nationalism* lectures, delivered in course of his visit to Japan and USA during 1916-17, had carried his message of the abhorrence of the 'Nation' as a monstrous organization and the nationalism as a narrow concept inciting moral bankruptcy. As Amartya Sen pertinently observes, 'Tagore shared the admiration for Japan widespread in Asia for demonstrating the ability of an Asian nation to rival the West in industrial development and economic progress...But then Tagore went on to criticize the rise of a strong nationalism in Japan, and its emergence as an imperialist nation.'⁴ Tagore saw Japanese militarism as 'illustrating the way nationalism can mislead even a nation of great achievement and promise.'⁵ Therefore, the central idea of nationalism in Tagore as it comes by during this period may primarily be outlined as that reflected in his own words:

I am not against one nation in particular, but against the general idea of all nations....where whole peoples are furiously organizing themselves for gaining wealth and power. Nationalism is a great menace. It is the particular thing which for years has been at the bottom of India's troubles.⁶

Post 1917, one of the most shocking events in the history of India's colonial struggle occurred, and given that we stand at the centenary of the event, it becomes all the more worthy of note – the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre of 1919. Our attention may particularly be drawn to what Tagore's ideal of achieving freedom was by taking note of one of his letters written to Mahatma Gandhi on the eve of the havoc, on April 12, 1919:

I have always felt, and said accordingly that the great gift of freedom can never come to a people through charity. We must win it before we can own it. And India's opportunity for winning it will come to her when she can prove that she is morally superior to the people who rule her by their right of conquest...Armed with her utter faith in goodness, she must stand

unabashed before the arrogance that scoffs at the power of spirit.⁷

The ghastly incident which followed the very next day, on April 13, 1919, at Amritsar, had morally upset Tagore and his faith in the greatness of the British people and civilization (as opposed to the imperial domination of the British 'Nation')—the reflection of which had been vividly expressed in his letter to the Viceroy, asking to be relieved of the knighthood he had accepted four years ago:

The universal agony of indignation roused in the hearts of our people has been ignored by our rulers...I for my part want to stand, shorn of all special distinctions, by the side of those of my countrymen who for their so-called insignificance are liable to suffer a degradation not fit for human beings.⁸

Therefore, evidently, the fact that Tagore was not an anti-nationalist or anti-patriot in the actual sense of the term, as some critics have erroneously pointed out, goes without saying. Rather, what becomes clear is his disapproval of blind nationalism in the amoral, narrowly political sense of the term, shorn of human sensibilities into a mad play of fanaticism, where 'machine must be pitted against machine, and nation against nation, in an endless bullfight of politics'.⁹

It is this idea which finds a greater place in Tagore's writings throughout the later period of his life, simultaneously upholding the moral spirit of humanity and human unity above everything else, as the highest ideal to be achieved by man. This supreme goal, Tagore argues, must be at the root of all human actions. It is only through the path to human unity that freedom in all spheres can be achieved, be it political, artistic or spiritual. To that end, all such forces as are narrow, divisive, turning man against man must be smothered, before they can engulf and destroy humanity. That is to say, a deep-seated humanism was the basis of Tagore's political and philosophical views alike. This has been lucidly expressed in Tagore's 1922 essay, *The Nation*:

...nations do not create, they merely produce and destroy...when this idea of the Nation, which has met with universal acceptance in the present day, tries to pass off the cult of collective selfishness as a moral duty, simply because that selfishness is gigantic in stature, it not only commits depredation, but attacks

the very vitals of humanity. It unconsciously generates in people's minds an attitude of defiance against moral law. For men are taught by repeated devices the lesson that the Nation is greater than the people...¹⁰

Interestingly in Tagore, the ideals of political, creative and spiritual freedom overlap and unify into one and the same entity: Man. As while expressing his views on the 'creative unity' and 'religion of man' Tagore lays stress on the 'spiritual Unity of Man', so with regard to his political ideas since the 1920s, he talks of the same as being the way to attaining independence:

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 organisations of National Egoism...If we can defy the strong, the armed, the wealthy, revealing to the world the power of the immortal spirit, the whole castle of the Giant Flesh will vanish in void. And then Man will find his 'swaraj'. We, the famished, ragged ragamuffins of the East, are to win freedom for all Humanity. We have no word for Nation in our language. When we borrow this word from other people, it never fits us.¹¹

Most of his notable literary writings of the period, including plays like *Raktakarabi* (1923), *Tasher Desh* (1933), and the novel, *Char Adhyay* (1934), revolve around this concept.

Therefore, one may as well conclude that the singular strain (if at all there is one) which runs through Tagore's concept of nationalism over the years is that of universalism or universal humanism. It is neither against the freedom of the country, nor against progressive modernism that Tagore voices his protest, but against a self-ravaging system of politics and organisation that is detrimental not only to India or the East but to the entire humanity at large. He advocates the importance of the national movement (which might as well transcend into the international) but one with a constructive ideal at its core, rather than a 'spirit of violence' which lay dormant in the 'psychology of the West' and has finally 'roused itself and desecrated the spirit of Man'.¹² Hence, the poet's final prophecy that a new dawn will emerge 'from the East where the sun rises. A day will come when unvanquished Man will retrace his path of

conquest, despite all barriers, to win back his lost human heritage.’¹³

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