

## **Self and the Other and the Issue of Cosmopolitanism**

This lecture will focus on the issue of the self and the other to understand the notion of cosmopolitanism.

Cosmopolitanism is the ideology that all human ethnic groups **belong to a single community** based on a **shared morality**. Under this ideology individuals from different nation-states i.e. with varying physical and economic locations **form relationships of mutual respect** despite their differing religious and political beliefs hence in any discussion of cosmopolitanism **the concept of the other is an inseparable component**.

### HUMAN UNITY

1) Tagore said in his acceptance speech that the spirit of unity of all races is the message of the East to the West and quoted Upanishads to establish his point:

**“He who sees all beings in his self, and his self in all the beings does not hate any one, and knows the truth”**

2) In 1922 in Pune in the Kirlosker Theatre he gave a lecture

on Indian Renaissance, elaborating the same idea as was mentioned in his acceptance speech, the Bengali version of that is titled: ‘shikkharmilan’, he said that **a man who is alone or one is meaningless because there is no unity in one. The one with many is truly one because in that one can see the unity and this unity gives the message of truth**

3) Tagore wrote in his essay on ‘Nationalism in the West’:

“Neither the colourless vagueness of cosmopolitanism, nor the fierce self-idolatry of nation-worship is the goal of human history. And India has been trying to accomplish her task through social regulation of differences, on the one hand, and the spiritual recognition of unity, on the other.”

Tagore never had any narrow approach related to humanity. In his novel ‘Home and the World’ Tagore justified this view: **“I do not think that it is the spirit of India to reject anything, reject any race, and reject any culture. The spirit of India has always proclaimed the ideal of unity..... We must discover the most profound unity, the spiritual unity between the different races. We must go deeper down to the spirit of man and find out the great bond of unity, which is to be found in all human races....**

**Man is not to fight with other human races, other human individuals, but his work is to bring about reconciliation and peace and restore the bonds of friendship and love.”**

And so he could ‘In creative Unity’ end his essay with a rebuttal of the imperialist notions of incompatibility voiced by Rudyard Kipling: **Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet,**

“It is true that they (East & West) are not showing any real sign of meeting. But the reason is because the West has not sent out its humanity to meet the man in the East but only its machine. Therefore, the poet’s line has to be changed into something like this: **Man is man, Machine is Machine and never the twain shall wed”.**

## **THE OTHER**

The idea of the East as some shadowy, threatening ‘other’ with which the West is in sharp conflict, and the **essentialising of East and West into two simple and contrastive categories** has a long history and can be traced back to the time of Herodotus but that history is now a past history. Sartre’s famous statement **‘hell is the other’** carries a strong echo of Hegel, who always defines one’s

identity as identity against the other **either to be appropriated or to be destroyed.**

But the Western mind knows well that if he succeeds in completely subjugating the 'other', the identity of his own self becomes dubious. He wants to become whole by destroying the other but without the other, he becomes nothing. **For Tagore the 'other' was never a source of reference to define one's own identity as it was for the Europeans. The self was always accepted as self referential, the other was never a threat to their identity, nor a source of confirmation of their uniqueness.**

The concept of human unity so assiduously nurtured by Tagore is now at the centre of philosophical discussion in the West.

Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida, the most celebrated philosophers of the contemporary world, discuss this issue of the self and the other in detail. Levinas says, **'The foundation of ethics consists in the obligation to respond to the other.'** **'In being for the other only the sense of responsibility (goodness, mercy, charity) calls forth.'**

**For Derrida, the foundation of ethics is hospitality, the readiness and the inclination to welcome the other into one's home.**

**Levinas's and Derrida's theories of ethics – responsibility and hospitality- no doubt, reveal a new consciousness emerging in the West about its relationship with the East but the view of the West is still just a broad view of particularism(belief that God bestows grace individually) and is still linear and binary and so Huntington writes about the clash of civilizations between Western and Muslim civilizations each forcefully confronting the other and hence they are confused by Tagore's own description of his Bengali family as the product of a confluence of three cultures:**

**Hindu, Mohammedan and British.**

**The spirit of India believes in the ideal of unity – it does not reject – comprehends all with love and sympathy.**

**Here the spirit is to acknowledge the whole world as one's family as conceived in the Vedic discourse: *vasudhaivakutumbukam*. This is definitely different from what the Greek philosopher Diogenes of Sinope, said in 412 BC, 'I am a citizen of the world' because it does not in**

**any prove one's identity as a member of a family. This is India's all-embracing age old vision of human unity or universal humanity.**

A belief was created during the colonial time and still continuing in the post-colonial time that **progressive West is universal and the regressive East is particular.** This kind of a notion of cultural uniqueness goes against the concept of human unity so assiduously nurtured by Tagore by introducing the notion of universal humanity in his poem 'Bharattirtha'

'Oh my mind, awake heroically on the shores of the ocean of universal humanity.'

**Tagore's opinion was clear that first try to understand what is good in others and that would help in regaining one's selfhood and hence in his lecture '*purba o paschim*'(The East and the West) he said,**

**“At every turn - in her laws and customs, in her religions and social institutions – India today deceives and insults herself. Meeting of East and West on our soils will succeed when there will be inner harmony between the two is achieved.**

“In Indian history, the meeting of the Musclem and the Hindu produced **Akbar**, the object of whose dream was the unification of hearts and ideals.”

## COSMOPOLITANISM

Martha Nussbaum (American Philosopher), Amartya Sen, Isaiah Berlin (British of Jewish-Russian origin) and Ashis Nandi (Social scientist) they all argue on this issue of cosmopolitanism but differently. Nussbaum thinks that Tagore's understanding of universality (here Nussbaum uses both the notions, universalism and cosmopolitanism, interchangeably) is of an abstract Stoic and Kantian sort (in the ethics of Kant the unconditional moral principle that one's behaviour should accord with universalizable maxims which respect persons as ends in themselves; the obligation to do one's duty for its own sake and not in pursuit of further ends based on some moral reasoning. It is known as categorical imperative).

In discussing Tagore's political philosophy, Isaiah Berlin invoked the allied notion of internationalism. In fact, Berlin's essay is devoted to developing a sophisticated account of Tagore's vision of internationalism.

Amartya Sen has almost a similar idea but he is, at the same time, convinced that it is, indeed, to Tagore's everlasting credit that his great cosmopolitan vision never

sacrificed the richest possible sense of tradition. His actual words are, ‘The main point of cosmopolitanism, which is taken to be the world-citizenship claim, need not militate against valuing elements in one’s own tradition’ (Sen, ‘Humanity’ 112).

**The universal reach of reason** is quite consistent with the values of tradition and inheritance but at the same time universal reach of reason and moral life **do not pay sufficient heed to the play of inheritance and tradition in the constitution of human condition.** It is particular cultural traditions that can provide the bases for understanding and morally relating to others and ultimately for developing a vision of universality.

The cosmopolitan attitude here is not derived from a conception of reason that in its **universality always tends toward abstractions**; rather, **it is dependent upon reason’s articulation of the universal through an engagement with the local.** ‘When we understand this truth in a disinterested spirit, it teaches us to respect all the differences in man that are real, yet remain conscious of our oneness’, (Creative Unity, 171-172).

Tagore's one of the central preoccupations in his writings was to raise his voice against violence which he thought was a crime committed against humanity and hence his notion of humanism was not only based on any *porous* (universal) notion of reasoning but it was also *bounded* (particular) reasoning and for him it was very ease to weave them together as for him both bounded and porous are complementary to each other.

The best example of his description of violence with full of pain and suffering is to be seen in his letter to the viceroy in 1919 while relinquishing his knighthood or in his travelogue '*Parashya*' in which he relates the penchant description of a Christian chaplain, attached to a British air force division stationed at Bhagdad, as how extremely easy to kill so many people dwelling in the desert by ferocious aerial bombing without any fear of repercussion. When asked for a message by the Christian chaplain he wrote,

“Man has accepted this dust-laden earth for his dwelling place, for the enacting of the drama of his tangled life ever waiting for a call of perfection from the boundless depth of purity surrounding him in a translucent atmosphere. If in an evil moment

man's cruel history should spread its black wings to invade that realm of divine dreams with its cannibalistic greed and fratricidal ferocity then God's curse will certainly descend upon us for that hideous desecration and the last curtain will be rung down upon the

world of Man for whom God feels ashamed."

It is his complete apathy towards violence that he was so much against nationalism based on the concept of a nation-state which does not hesitate to kill in the name of sovereignty of a nation and rather goes for **universal humanism and cosmopolitanism with a difference**. The word cosmopolitanism as we perceive relates to the **discursive**( using logic rather than intuition to reach a conclusion) **level of knowledge and communication**. Universalism as Tagore explains it transcends this discursive level and includes the spiritual aspect of being as well and hence he wrote in his essay on 'Nationalism in the West':

"Neither the colourless vagueness of cosmopolitanism, nor the fierce self-idolatry of nation-worship is the goal of human history. And India has been trying to accomplish her task through

social regulation of differences, on the one hand, and the spiritual recognition of unity, on the other.”

Martha Nussbaum fails to understand that when Tagore uses the term ‘colourless’ he is hinting at the abstract and vague nature of cosmopolitanism and in no way thinking that nationalism is full of colour, intensity and passion . What Tagore’s perception was that the notion of cosmopolitan reason detached from tradition is unintelligible and this perception, in no way, related to a ‘so called’ colourful nationalism. Tagore would always address nationalism as a ‘curse’.

Ashis Nandi, by referring to the ‘real’ (my quotes) tradition of India, says that Tagore looks back to what he sees as the **real tradition of India**, which is to work for ‘adjustments of races, to acknowledge real differences, between them, and yet seek some basis of unity.’ It is this solution— unity through acknowledgement of differences— that India has to offer to the world.’ (Nationalism, 1985 p.64). This conception is the principal element of Tagore’s idea of cosmopolitan universality.

Tagore's conception of cosmopolitan universality , as Sarindranath Tagore says, does not merely yield

**postmodern toleration of alterity, but aspires to dissolve instances of otherness altogether by enriching one's own tradition through hermeneutic(interpretative) absorption and assimilation** ( S. Tagore, Tagore's conception of cosmopolitanism: A reconstruction ).But one should be very guarded to make a statement like this because in this kind of an 'assimilation' and 'absorption' there is always the risk of mixing it with the American notion of the 'melting pot' or a synthesis or amalgamation of diverse identities. Tagore always believed in the confluence of cultures and human unity.

He never believed in a monolithic structure of one culture or an **alchemical** unity of cultures but in the creation of **bridges** among cultures for better understanding of human beings so that **an edifice of human unity could be established without devaluing their local origins, culture and traditions.**

Tagore's seminal statement in this respect is, **'Perfection of unity is not in uniformity, but in Harmony,** (Creative Unity 171–72). Both Levinas's and Derrida's theories of ethics and hospitality hold out the possibility

of an acceptance of the other as different **but of equal standing but not as one and the same** that what Tagore explains as the primary ethos of India.

Emmanuel Levinas, in fact proposed a model for thinking the self-other relation in his book 'Totality and Infinity' (1961) which Derrida revisited in his own essay 'Violence and Metaphysics' (1967) which states that the philosophy seeks to grasp the other and so doing reduces the 'absolute alterity' of the other to the self-same. However, Levinas sees this operation in the work of Husserl in his book 'Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology' (**Renatus Cartesius** Descartes: "*Cogito ergo sum* (French: *Je pense, donc je suis*; English: I think, therefore I am), which **constitutes the other in terms of the self-same as an alter ego and here the ambivalence of the Western mind becomes visible because the alter ego is not the self-same.** This is further demonstrated in the present Western concept of 'multiculturalism' and the slogan that 'The world is a village' because both are handy political weapons to be used to hoodwink the minorities or to surreptitiously invite other countries to the war, an unholy war, against terror. It can never come anywhere nearer to Tagore's concept of human unity or

the age old concept “vasudhaivakutumbukam: the whole world is a family.

However there are large number of people in the West who have a true feeling of universalism and do not discriminate between people irrespective of their colour or nationality and race and also understand the spirit of multiculturalism.

All these terms universalism, cosmopolitanism, internationalism are used interchangeably by scholars and also used as binary opposite to nationalism which is, in fact, not what Tagore thought of these terms and nationalism. In spite of the fact that there are many like LoiseBlankey Williams who used the adjective ‘**new**’ with cosmopolitans, and also called it ‘**rooted**’ or ‘**realistic**’ cosmopolitans, which means those who respect the variety of traditions and nationalities, but also believe in universal values that all people in all countries should accept and that is the way to understand Tagore’s cosmopolitan universality.