

## **Tagore: At Home in the World**

The theme of the chapter, 'Tagore: At Home in the World', can have different significances. It may denote that Tagore looks at this world metaphorically sometimes as the West or else philosophically as Western modernity, linking it with so-called progress or otherwise ideologically as antithetical to tradition.

As for the metaphorical meaning of the theme for Tagore, the world is just like a home, comfortable and congenial, that is, the world or the West and the home or the East are not in opposition but are in harmony with each other.

It can also mean philosophically that the world or the West is happily at home or is at ease in a different cultural environment. That is, in the writings of Tagore, Western modernity and traditional India are properly blended together and Tagore handles this issue, says Ashis Nandy, within the format of India's 'high' culture, within her classical Sanskrit tradition, leavened on the one hand by elements of European Renaissance and modernity and on the other by India's own diverse folk or little traditions (Nandy 1994: 1).

But did Tagore really look at these two sets of opposition as binary opposites or did he attempt to reconcile these contradictions by negotiating these two sets of opposite as one whole and gave new modes of meaning of East–West relationship and Western modernity and Indian tradition?

There can be a third ideological purport of the theme. In his own novel *Ghare Baire*, or 'The Home and the World' (1916), Tagore describes the

clash between the traditional Indian and the Western ways of life, between nationalism and universal humanism, and the past and the present and gives his own meaning to Indianness and nationalism. The heroine Bimla once said, 'I could not think of my house as separate from my country' or in other words it means that for Tagore the home is India. While the entire novel centres on the Swadeshi movement (the denotative meaning of *swadeshi* is 'home rule', but the common meaning is the nationalist movement, which began more as an economic than a political one, having as its main object the encouragement of indigenous industries), the author of the novel is not advocating it but rather warning the audience of the dangers of such a movement.

## II

The chapter will take up the following three issues related to the theme:

1. The East–West relationship: conflictual or complementary
2. Western modernity and Indian tradition of continuity
3. The issue of 'Nationalism'

The theme has also a 'fourth meaning' that it actually reveals Tagore's integrated vision of life where the 'home' (self) and the 'world' (Universe) are one and the same.

## III

Nirad C. Chaudhuri has said in his book *Thy Hand, Great Anarch!* that

... historically he is the greatest product of the interaction in India of the 19<sup>th</sup> Cen., between European and Hindu life and civilization, and it remains equally significant in his life as in his works. In one sense, he may be regarded as the victim of the interaction, and in another as its prophet and even that image—fantasized in age very soon lost its tenor.

His own life was caught in the conflict which this interaction brought about and his writings stand for its achievement.

Although Tagore had crossed over the sea even in early manhood he never learned to regard the English people as anything but 'they' [author's quote], and taken in the mass, as a very unpleasant 'they'.



During his short second stay he took a positive dislike to English life. In a letter to his niece, Indira, Bibi/Bob Tagore, by quoting the *swayambar* of Indumati from Raguvansa of Kalidasa, he clearly displayed his apathy towards the egocentricity of the Western women:

Suddenly with the blasts of conch shell and bugle sound Indumati, in bridal finery supported by Shundada, enters and stands between the rows of the suitors. What a superb picture! Then she is introduced by Shunanada to the princes one by one, and to each of them Indumati makes a courteous *namashkar*, and passes on. How beautifully she does it! Though she has her individual power to reject each one, at the same time she is so respectful that her gesture seems like reverence. This is far superior to the haughty vanity of an English miss. (Dutta and Robinson 1997: 33)

Elsewhere, he said again, ‘I want nothing else if only I can remain unknown to the entire civilized world and sitting in a corner of my country collect her love like a bee to fill my hive.’ On one side he had this truly unsocial nature, and on the other he had to visit England and Europe again and again for recognition and appreciation. This duality became the supreme tragedy of his existence, though it did not affect his writings. In fact, they, the other, the West had a special place in his thinking.

For the Western world, the Orient was also the ‘other’; and our literature and philosophy were located in the context of Indian culture, especially religious philosophy. West developed a myopic vision of Indian thought as religious, spiritual and transcendental. The ‘other’, an inalienable entity external to oneself, is both a source of terror and an object of desire for the West.

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. By defining the identity of the self in this manner, however a European finds himself entrapped in his own contradiction. 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.

The Western view is linear and binary and so Huntington writes about the clash of civilisations between Western and Muslim civilisations, 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. *Tagore*:

The spirit of India believes in the ideal of unity—it does not reject—comprehends all with love and sympathy. For Tagore the ‘other’ was never a source of reference to define one’s own identity as it was for the Europeans because here the self is always self-referential.

Let us not forget that just three years before he wrote *Gitanjali* he had written the famous novel *Gora* which gives a most vivid account of the most anguished debates which were raging within the Hindu society at the beginning of the 20th century. This was no less passionate and self-searching than what Thomas Mann was to depict later in his famous novel *The Magic Mountain* concerning the dark and troubled state of European civilisation—the two novels about two destinies.

Thomas Mann broods over the threatened collapse of the civilised values, which constitute the identity of Europe. Tagore, on the other hand, reflects over the crisis of Hindu identity threatened by those ‘civilised values’ of Europe and which were being forced on a society that had no choice but to accept or reject them. This is the message of *Gora* and Tagore’s approach to Western civilisation and the realisation of India’s identity. Gora in his journey from communalism, sectarianism and religious conservatism to the ideals of humanism says at the end of the novel:

... I am Bharatiya. Within me there is no conflict between communities, whether Hindu or Muslim or Krishtan. Today all the castes of Bharat are my caste. ... For me there is nothing bigger than my country—I am not beyond the pain and happiness, knowledge and ignorance of the total India. (Mukherjee 1998: 475)

This is India’s vision of human unity. This includes the entire world in it and rejects, as said earlier, any kind of narrow nationalism. Tagore says it clearly that we have missed the character of India as one related to the world. India has always sought to find the oneness of existence through the multifariousness of the universe. Here the spirit is to acknowledge the whole world as one’s family as conceived in the Vedic discourse: *vasudhaiva kutumbukam*. 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 case prove one’s identity as a member of a family.

This idea of *vasudhaiva kutumbukam* is India’s all-embracing age-old vision of human unity. This includes the entire world in it and rejects any kind of narrow nationalism. Tagore says it clearly that we have missed

the character of India as one related to the world. India has always sought to find the oneness of existence through the multifariousness of the universe.

Tagore posits the idea that the history of the growth of freedom is the history of the perfection of human relationship, and hence, (a) freedom and (b) unity of mankind are the two voices of Tagore, which were two very important aspects of India's civilisational values.

#### IV

Let me here present my first thesis by rejecting a well-entrenched view about Tagore that his main contention was to bring a synthesis between the West and the East for a true resurgence of India and a well-meaning message of spirituality to the West.

On the contrary, his theory was that there is no other way open to us in the East, but to go along with Europeanisation and to go through it. Only through this voyage into the foreign and strange can we win back our own selfhood. Going through does not mean acceptance but understanding it. Tagore further justifies this view while giving the Nobel Prize acceptance speech on 26th May 1921 at Stockholm.<sup>1</sup> In this speech, Tagore said:

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. ... Now, when in the present time of political unrest the children of the same great India cry for rejection of the West I feel hurt. ... 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. (Quoted in Das 1996: 966)

The voyage into the foreign creates a space where one can talk to another tradition, feel it, touch it and then realise one's own power, own self. It is a radical departure from an approach arising from colonised consciousness, where the encounter was always conceived between the spirituality of the East and materialism of the West. Thus, he could end the essay 'East and West', included in the book of essays *Creative Unity, Tagore*:

with a rebuttal of the imperialist notions of incompatibility voiced by Rudyard Kipling:

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. (Das 1996: 536)

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.<sup>2</sup>

By using the term 'buffered' and 'porous', Charles Taylor (2007: 40–41) asserted that one remains a bounded and buffered self if one remains suspicious of the porous self of the enchanted world or the enchanted East. Buffered self always has an anthropocentric identity which makes one blind and insensitive to whatever lies beyond this ordered human life and its instrumental-rational project and makes one a part of the complex modern-European concept of 'civilisation'. The 'buffered self' is blind and insensitive to the porous self, who is open in his thought and lives in freedom and also lives outside with nature and even beyond. Imitating our poet–philosopher Tagore, one can add that 'where knowledge is free' and 'where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way in the dreary desert sand of dead habit', there and then the 'buffered self' is demolished to allow the porous self to enter, and flower.

This is the meaning which Taylor accepted when he said that recognising the otherness means accepting the inner meaning of his (self) experience, thought and culture as making sense of itself from its self-interpretation, and not receiving it from a foreign judgement.

The concept of human unity so assiduously nurtured by Tagore is now at the centre of philosophical discussion in the West. 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), that states that the philosophy seeks to grasp the other and in 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 'Cartesian Meditations', 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.

In fact both Emmanuel Levinas, the most-celebrated philosopher of the contemporary world, while discussing the issue of the self and the other, 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 Jacques Derrida, another very celebrated philosopher, says, ‘the foundation of ethics is hospitality, the readiness and the inclination to welcome the other into one’s home’. Levinas’ 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. It holds out the possibility of an acceptance of the other as different but of equal standing. This is nowhere nearer to the Upanishadic idea of oneness, as referred to by Tagore in his Nobel Acceptance Speech delivered on 26th May 1921 at Stockholm:

Yastu sarvani bhutani aatmanyevanupashyati

Sarvabhuteshu chatmanam tatonavijugupsate (Isopanishad)

[‘One who perceives all the beings in his own self and own self in all the beings does not hate any one anymore.’]

This notion of complete identity, although a reality for India and Tagore is still a distant hope for the West.

The present Western concept of ‘multiculturalism’ and the slogan that ‘The World is a village’ are not simple concepts or statements but are cleverly employed for use as handy political weapons to hoodwink the minorities or to surreptitiously invite other countries to the war, an unholy war, against terror. It is not an invitation to be a member of the village, but to conscript one as a part of the unholy war. If one refuses to be conscripted, one cannot be a member of the village. These concepts can never come anywhere nearer to Tagore’s concept of human unity. Tagore says:

When the science of meteorology knows the earth’s atmosphere as continuously one, affecting the different parts of the world differently, but in a harmony of adjustments, it knows and attains truth. And similarly, we must know that the great mind of man is one, working through the many differences which are needed to ensure the full result of its fundamental unity. 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; and to know that perfection of unity is not in uniformity, but in harmony. (Tagore 2001: 171–172)

Tagore always conceived of the self as an individual, as a part of humanity and also one with the Universal Self. This threesome way of reckoning brings the humanity in one nest and is the higher unity, which is different from corporate globalisation or what Tagore called the 'mere political or commercial basis of unity'. A meeting of races for Tagore is unity of man.<sup>3</sup>

## V

On the issue of modernity and Indian tradition of continuity both Tagore and Gandhi warned us in the beginning of the 20th century about the danger of developing a colonial mentality or mental colonisation. Tagore said in those days that true modernism is freedom of mind and not slavery of taste. It is independence of thought and action, not tutelage under European school masters (Tagore 1917: 446). He observed:

You must apply your Eastern mind, your spiritual strength, your love of simplicity, your recognition of social obligations in order to cut out a new path for this great unworldly car of progress shrieking out its loud discards as it runs. (Tagore 1917: 439)

In the same essay, Tagore said:

Once you did solve the problems of man to your own satisfaction, you had your philosophy of life and evolved your own art of living. All this you must apply now to the present situation and out of it will appear a new creation and not a mere repetition, a creation which the soul of your people will own for itself and proudly offer to the world as its tribute to the welfare of man. (Tagore 1917: 439)

By redefining the terms of discourse, in terms of the creative expression of Asian autonomy and individuality in the pursuit of 'true or other modernity' in all fields, Tagore and Gandhi were setting, as it were, a fresh agenda to understand our modernity. Tagore even went further to define other modernism in 1924 in Beijing, and said, 'The impertinence of material things is extremely old. The revelation of spirit in man is modern. I am on its side, for I am modern.'

One can realise that the ethic of 'authenticity' or 'expressive individualism' of modernity has shifted the place of the spiritual in human

life, at least as lived by many, even during Tagore's time. Tagore had the impression that the present age suffered from a threatened loss of total meaning. So the need for meaning, for Tagore, could be met by a recovery of transcendence or by our own depth of sense. In one such attempt, which has had a great impact on the history of modernity, 'Nature' becomes (and always was in Indian tradition), not just the ensemble of natural reality, but a profound source in us where man and nature are in mysterious harmony. This model of unity with nature, as Tagore explains, became the revelation of spirit of man. Tagore attempts to gather together the scattered moments of meaning into some kind of whole. So deep is Tagore's love of nature that to him every aspect of nature becomes a symbol of beauty. He does not love nature for its own sake, but because he views it as an attribute of the divine; not for the abundance of joy that it brings into life, but for the intimations it gives of a higher spiritual life. To him even a blade of grass or an atom of dust brings a message from unknown. In fact for Tagore nature and man or society are revelations of the divine spirit.

It is generally understood in the West that the nation as a political institute is the product of European Enlightenment and Industrial Revolution, which resulted in the decline of religious modes of thought and rise of Western mode of secularism and also face-off between modernity and tradition and also humanism and spirituality. Tagore always looked at it as one and the same.

## VI

In Western terminology, modernism is a breaking away from established rules, traditions and conventions, and implies fresh ways of looking at man's position and functions in the universe, and inheres in some cases remarkable experiments in form and style.

In 1784, Immanuel Kant, in a short essay, *Enlightenment*, speaking in the same vein, was talking about the way the present was different from the past. In this difference he was trying to draw out the meaning of Enlightenment, or the definition of modernism.

All the major moderns of Europe—James Joyce, Ezra Pound, Stravinsky, Picasso—have built on romanticism, but at the same time tried to break away from it. Breaking away from established rules, traditions and conventions imply fresh ways of looking at man's function in the universe. *Tagore:*

For Tagore, any great art is the expression of both the tradition and the actual. To be uprooted from tradition is tantamount to alienation from one's own self. Tagore's everlasting credit is that his great cosmopolitan vision never sacrificed the richest possible sense of tradition.

May I now here present my second thesis that for Tagore what India needed was to regain her selfhood through a process of decolonisation of the self itself, which no outside agency but only their own tradition could have set in motion. West sought to colonise India's sense of time and establish its present being merely as a corruption of the past.

In India, modernism as a phenomenon or value is not an absolutely unrelated one—without reference to the past or the future. It absorbs in it traditional values as well as new innovations and is indicated by the term 'continuity'. It is essential to do that because the spirit of India, as says Tagore or as the writers have observed over the ages, is not to reject anything. Everything has a place here as an alternative. India lives with many alternatives which become part of the continuity of thought and creativity and hence the choice which Gandhi or Tagore offered to us was not tradition versus modernism, but the choice of both versus the forced acceptance of one. This is the Indian way of thinking. Our thinking is not logo-centric and exclusive, but symbolic or inclusive. Hence, India has no problem to live with many life choices and this is possible, as said by Tagore, when one has the freedom of mind; and also as he mentions in his essay on 'Modernity in Literature', when an element of universality as well as permanence and profundity of aesthetic joy prevail.

But for all practical purposes, one can say that whatever is Western is modern. This kind of an idea is based on a counterfeit concept very cleverly designed by the colonial masters that Westernisation is modernisation.

There is no doubt that the largest corpus of ideas, thoughts, modes and methods, etc., of our life in the present and recent times are admittedly Western by origin. Yet, the fact remains that in the process of our becoming modern something was happening within ourselves—that is, in spite of our acceptance of Western modernisation, we were doubtful about its value and results, and were constantly searching for our own modernity.

The West develops through substitution, and it writes itself again and again. India develops through accommodation. A belief was created during the colonial times and still continuing in the postcolonial era that the 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 and is assiduously nurtured by Tagore by introducing the notion of universal humanity: 'Oh my mind, awake heroically on the shores of the

ocean of universal humanity.’ It is, as says Tagore, the spirit of Bharat which is like a sea of great humanity where all are merged in one body (*Bharat Tirtha*).

Here new ideas may supplant older ones, but the older ones linger on. They are allowed to coexist with what is new. Here one does not reject to create one’s modernity. When Tagore said that modernity is freedom of mind and not slavery of taste, he was actually hinting at a critical openness that allows one to retrieve, rediscover and redefine elements of culture in a creative way, by a return of pride in one’s roots, while looking ahead. Hence, in the modern times, Tagore could still write:

Thou hast made me endless

Such is Thy pleasure

(First song of English *Gitanjali* or *Song Offerings*)

Yeats could not but talk of a particular historical strain in the Western modernist movement:

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;

(W. B. Yeats, *The Second Coming*)

Yeats’ line of the poem reveals that Europe with all its materialist advancement and prosperity seemed to be haunted by a T. S. Eliot–wasteland feeling of inner desolation, so prominent in her poetry and art, what Heidegger was to call the feeling of homelessness? Tagore’s poems speaks of the spiritual bond between the self and the universal self and rejects any kind of narrow approach related to humanity. This brings us to the issue of nationalism.

## VII

Tagore said in his essay on ‘Nationalism in India’ (*Nationalism*, 1917) that those of us in India who have come under the delusion that mere political freedom will make us free, have accepted their lessons from the West as the gospel truth and lost their faith in humanity.

Tagore, once in his letter to C. F. Andrews said very clearly that ‘I love India but my India is an idea (*chinmaya*) and not a geographical expression

(*mrinmaya*)'.<sup>4</sup> He further says, therefore, 'I am not a patriot—I shall ever seek my compatriots all over the world' (Tagore 1917). He would further elaborate that the word 'nation' is not in our language. India has never had a real sense of nationalism. Society is in the core of India's civilisation. Politics is in the core of Western civilisation and hence the importance which Europe gives to freedom we give to liberation of the soul.

While talking about nationalism, he deviated both from colonialist historiography and the nationalist ideology and spoke of that vision of India's history where nation is spelled with a small 'n', which meant society and which was relevant to humanity. He avoided using the term 'nation' with a capital 'N' which meant a nation state or the 'Nation' of the West. The 'Nation'—that has a self-destructive tendency and turns violent, snatches one's freedom and spreads homogenised universalism, makes one selfish and exclusive-oriented person and also violent. It will be interesting to note that every year 80 per cent of the killing in the world is committed by the states. To name only a few of the gigantic evils perpetrated in the name of nationalism by the nation states are, one, by the British colonial rulers in Kenya, who, for quelling the rebels against its colonial rule killed about 150,000 Kenyans in 1950s; and the other was the genocide in Bangladesh by Pakistan in the 1970s, claiming three million lives. 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.

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 Baghdad. In the travelogue, he explains how extremely easy it was 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.

## VIII

Tagore was for non-parochial, inclusive nationalism relevant to humanity where the difference between home and what Bimala (female protagonist in the novel *Home and the World*) says ‘country and the world melts away and borders between the two disappear or blurring of frontiers becomes a reality’.

Tagore did not reject nationalism, but formed his own understanding of it by studying what was authentic in his country’s history. Tagore said:

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. ... India is no beggar of the West. (Soares 1970: 106)

Tagore was convinced that

1. it was essential for us to fight against social injustice rather than political freedom;
2. to work for an adjustment of races, to acknowledge the real differences between them where these exist, and yet seek some basis of unity. The basis for this tradition has been built in India at the social level, not the political, as explained by Tagore, through saints like Nanak, Kabir, Chaitanya and others. It is this solution—unity through acknowledgement of real differences between them where these exist—which India has to offer to the world. He made the following clear:
  - (i). ‘Patriotism cannot be our final spiritual shelter; my refuge is humanity. I will not buy glass for the price of diamonds, and I will never allow patriotism to triumph over humanity as long as I live’.<sup>5</sup> One can further refer to Nikhil of *The Home and the World* who refuses to change his views about patriotism: ‘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 a curse upon it.’ It is no wonder that his motto for Viswabharati was *yatra viswam bhavet eka nidam* where the world meets in a nest.

- (ii). To accept the concept of nationalism from the West would mean selling our own inheritance. He was opposed to the idea of the nation or of the Indian nationalists who wanted India to join the bandwagon of nationalism, because it would have compromised India's history and identity as a culture and bring it under the shadow of the West (Soares 1970: 106).
- (iii). The idea of the Indian nation should at no cost supersede the idea of Indian civilisation. Tagore was probably encouraged, as further mentioned by Ashis Nandy (1994: 7), by the entry into Indian politics of a person who openly declared that his (a) nationalism was intense internationalism and (b) it was not exclusive because it recognised the eternal truth.

This new entrant was Gandhi who said that violent nationalism, otherwise known as imperialism, is the curse whereas non-violent nationalism is a necessary condition of corporate or civilised life and Indian freedom movement therefore was India's contribution to peace.

But there are many who find some kind of ambivalence in his idea of nationalism. They think that Tagore's critique of nationalism is a little lofty and far-fetched—and layered in atavistic spiritualism and romantic idealism. Tagore could perhaps be faulted for impracticality; his vision for India was too sublime and unrealisable in an imperfect world.<sup>6</sup> However, much of their query is how a person can practice anti-imperialist politics his entire life by rejecting the idea of nationalism and even patriotism? As said earlier, Tagore believed in non-parochial inclusive nationalism or, as said by many, unself-critical nationalism and also believed in patriotism which rejected violent nationalism, hence it was easy for him to denounce imperialism all through his life so much so that in his last stirring lecture 'The Crisis of Civilisation' at the age of 80 he did not hesitate to mention the impertinent challenge by the imperial ruler to our conscience. There was no politics in it. He was only talking about a universal struggle for political justice and cultural dignity and a protest against violence or any kind of narrow nationalism and spoke about a world embracing and inclusive nationalism which became the basis of Pundit Nehru for creating India's future as a liberal, secular democracy.

Tagore was sure that exclusive patriotism takes away your freedom with the help of which you can accept the total universe. It was possible for Tagore to reject the extreme form of nationalism and patriotism because for him Indian unity was primarily a social fact, not a political agenda.

Both Tagore and Gandhi created a moral universe and made it a part of politics and gave a bigger lofty meaning to nationalism. Tagore, at the same time spoke loudly about (a) living in freedom and (b) reasoning in freedom and expressed this, as mentioned above, in his letter to the Viceroy of India after the Amritsar massacre. Tagore analysed the nature of brutality and opposed the attack on humanity. It was in 1919, but long before that Tagore was always very apprehensive of ‘the naked passion of self-love of nations’, ‘drunken delirium of greed’, ‘vengeance’ and ‘burst in a violence of fury’, and wrote a poem ‘The Sunset of the Century’ on the last day of the 19th century in a mood of outrage and disenchantment:

The crimson glow of light on the horizon is not the light of the dawn of peace, my Motherland.

It is the glimmer of the funeral pyre burning to ashes the vast flesh—the self-love of the Nation—dead under it as own excess,

The morning waits behind the patient dark of the East, Meek and silent.

Tagore knew it well that unity brought by a kind of nationalism which is based on hatred against somebody or another nation can be very temporary. In India people were united against the British by spreading hatred against them. But as soon as the cause of hatred vanished, the artificial unity also fell like a pack of cards as could be evinced in the division of the country in 1947.

## IX

Today the new reading of nationalism by Tagore looks so relevant. Postcolonial critics such as Ernest Gellner, Benedict Anderson and Tom Nairn have pointed out how nationalism cultivates the sentiments of irrationality, prejudice and hatred in people. In spite of the fact that Benedict Anderson (*Imagined Communities*, 1991) defining the nation as ‘imagined’ and Ernest Gellner (*Nations and Nationalism*, 1983) as ‘invention’ and ‘fabrication’, and Tom Nairn (*The Break Up Of Britain: Crisis and Neo-Nationalism*, 1977) as a ‘militant movement by the community’, the phenomenon enjoyed and still enjoys profound political legitimacy in modern society and remains the most powerful force in 20th century politics.

But the West is now seriously thinking if the nation state has failed. Frantz Fanon has explained that although the objective of nationalism is to create a horizontal relationship and fraternity within its people, in reality the nation never speaks of the hopes and aspirations of the entire 'imagined community'. Hierarchy, factional hegemony, inequality and exploitation remain a daily occurrence in its body (Ashcroft et al. 1997: 170). In the novel *Ghare Baire*, Tagore has insightfully and shrewdly anticipated in Sandip's actions all these pitfalls of nationalism pointed out by later literary-cultural critics.

Today and in the recent past, in the name of nationalism ethnic nationalism unfolded itself resulting in two world wars, costing millions of lives. Tagore's assertive denunciation of the Nation proved prophetic with the outbreak of these two world wars.

In India, nationalism has turned into ethnic politics which is creating all kinds of problems. The violent nationalism is used by the terrorist to spread terrorism and violence. On top of it, in the name of nationalism one may find only death and conflicts in the third world countries of Asia and Africa.

The countries of Africa fought against colonialism and racism but now the net result is that these countries are the dens of corruption, cruelty and impertinency. Now nationalism looks like a dark elemental unpredictable primeval power or what Tagore said long back *bhougolic apodebata* or territorial demon.<sup>7</sup>

In his classic autobiography, *Errata: An Examined Life*, George Steiner, one of the foremost philosophers of the 20th century, wrote:

It is possible to suppose that the period since August 1914 has been, notably in Europe and Russia, from Madrid to Moscow, from Sicily to the Arctic Circle, the most bestial in recorded history. (Steiner 1997: 103)

Steiner's epitaph to the essential tragedy of the 20th century may well serve as a postscript to Rabindranath's critique of nationalism. Indeed, it would be logical to infer that much of the cause for the human grief, pain and humiliation in the 20th century, can be attributed to the conflicting claims of nation states. Far from acting as an instrument for realising collective or communitarian aspirations and welfare, nationalism has tragically led to collective despair.

If the Enlightenment voices of Voltaire and Jefferson had heralded an end to 'judicial torture, to the burning of dissenters and books', 20th-century European nationalism paradoxically led to the Holocaust. As Steiner reflects:

Perhaps there is no other instance precisely analogous to ontological massacre—this is to say, to the deliberate murder of human beings whose guilt minutely verbalized and set out by bureaucracy, was that of being. (Steiner 1997: 106)

What are the precise connections between the tragedies of the 20th century and the rise of different forms of nationalisms? What are the underlying roots or principles of nationalism that inevitably result in militancy and chauvinism? In his own time, at the height of anti-colonial protests in India and elsewhere, Rabindranath was chastised by many as a romantic who had reservations about the claims of nationalism. It is so interesting to realise now that Tagore's position on nationalism has become a potent reality.

His nationalism called for the acceptance of a radical social programme as described in his essay 'Byadhi o Pratikar' or 'Melody and Cure', (Tagore 1961: Vol. XIII, 131) and launching a movement against the divisive forces of caste, poverty and alienation between the elite and the masses. He repeated again and again that only those with the 'vision of spiritual unity' would find a 'permanent place 'in the days to come', and further said that those with any 'intolerance of aliens' would be eliminated.<sup>8</sup>

## X

William Radice (1995) makes an intelligent use of a line from *Upanishad* in respect of Tagore: 'He is far and he is near.' Further, he says that

Tagore's ideals of religion, his ideals of nationalism his culture which springs forth from his deep faith in man and in an ideal of wholeness are far from us but he comes very near us in his torments and exasperations.

But this debate of proximity and distance is too elusive. We all know Tagore tends to transcend them all. After all, his ultimate wish was to celebrate life and that is what makes a poet truly great. His modernity was different from that of the modern European, in so far as he never regarded the individual as the sole arbiter of his freedom unless it is sanctified by the presence of a supreme principle pervading in nature and the entire universe.

This brings us to the fourth issue related with the theme. This supreme principle or the unknown mystique is beautiful because it shines through the known and it is only in the unknown that we have perpetual freedom. Here the microcosm and the macrocosm, the inner (home/self) and the outer world coalesce together. This is the eternal voice of India and also of Asia and to understand this voice, Tagore would insist, the study of the past is so imperative because it is through that we could understand our present. Asian soil has mastered the trick of trapping eternity somewhere, somehow.

My last thesis is that the Asian identity is just not poverty and suffering but an endless quest for inner peace and spiritual freedom that binds mankind together. Today Asian and European traditions are seeking a sort of completion in one another not through a philosophical discourse or mutual cross-questioning but by creating a common space within which the voice of the one evokes a responsive echo in the other and hence important issues such as:

1. abandoning the narrow nationalism
2. paving the way for multiculturalism and
3. going for ecological oneness

have become very meaningful issues and a thing of concern for all of us of the East as well as the West.

This was Tagore's intense concern—concern for the relationship between the unity of the universe and uniqueness of man. This is his deepest message to mankind which has made him much relevant to people of the new millennium.

## **XI**

To conclude let me assert that Tagore did not ignore the State, but it was not a deciding factor for him. State and community (*samaj*) both were important for him and both were complementary to each other.

Tagore's concept of a nation was not nation state nor was he thinking of a federation of nations turning everything into one homogenised universal whole. On the contrary, Tagore was thinking of an alternation, a universalism which grew with its strong basis of particularism or with the help of knowledge and learning of one's own culture or a deep

understanding of the tradition and a humanistic insight. Tagore thought that a homogenised universalism based on an idea of cultural uniqueness is itself a product of the uprootedness and deculturation brought about by British colonialism in India.

Tagore never thought that real universalism is contrary to nationalism and that they pull on opposing direction. The cosmopolitan universality envisioned by Tagore, therefore, would incorporate many opposites. Because he saw no difference between the best ages of the past and present, East and West, there was no reason why a balance could not be achieved between the modern and traditional, foreign and native, religion and science, elites and masses, and local and national governments, particular and universal, finite and infinite.

It is a balance between universalism, nationalism and the traditional world that Tagore hoped to achieve in his universal nationalism or better said as universal humanism. Hence, one can conclude that Ashis Nandy or Martha Nussbaum or others were wrong when they did not consider Tagore as a nationalist. They claim that he was a patriot and anti-imperialist because he loved his country and did not want the British to rule it, but he was a universalist rather than a nationalist because he advocated the creation of a culture common to all people, instead of separate national cultures, and because he did not want independence if that also meant adopting the form of nation state.<sup>9</sup> On the contrary, Tagore states that a culture could reflect 'universal ideas', 'without a loss of national identity'. It was in fact a search of nation-ness in *bharatvarshiya samaj* or of *bharatvarshiya samaj*. If one understands Tagore's view that India's unity is a social fact and not a political agenda, then it becomes easy to understand that for Tagore universal nationalism is an inclusive plural concept of a nation which goes beyond the idea of exclusive nationalism and where the whole earth is a family.

Tagore, as many can think, suffered with some kind of irresoluteness and at the same time very definite about what he is saying. In his essay 'Tatah Kim' (So What) Tagore is critiquing Western way of thinking and using nature as a political metaphor to raise the voice of resistance against the Western civilisational values. At the same time he says in his novel *Home and the World*, '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.'

Tagore, as he sees the real tradition of India, observes (as already mentioned earlier) that it 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' (Tagore 1985: 64). This conception is the principal element of Tagore's idea of universal nationalism. His desperate search was for *ananda* (an idea of sublime bliss), which can be realised only in the unity of mankind. He lived all through his life complimenting the notion of exclusive nationalism with the inclusive plural notion of a nation and sought for human unity. Tagore says that people are greater than the nation, all those individuals all over the world who think clearly, feel nobly, and act rightly, thus becoming the channels of human unity. It is not an alternative system, it works like trees, and they spread their roots in the soil and their branches in the sky, without consulting any architect for their plans for an alternative system.

## Notes

1. See *The English Writings of Tagore*, Vol. III, edited by Sisir Kumar Das (1996: 966). On 13th November 1913, the Nobel Prize for Tagore was declared. However, Tagore could not be present at the Nobel Award ceremony on 10th December 1913, but sent a telegram accepting the Prize, which was received by the British *charge d'affairs* in Sweden on his behalf and on 29th January 1914 at a special ceremony in Calcutta, Lord Carmichael, Governor of Bengal, delivered the medal and citation on Tagore. There is no reference available of Tagore making a speech on that occasion. However, in a function after about eight years at Stockholm on 26th May 1921 he made a speech, which is recorded in the archives of Swedish Academy as his Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech.
2. Herodotus was the Greek historian (440 BC), who never visited India but wrote about India and surprisingly not at all in a laudable term. At the most, one can say his description of India was imaginary. Herodotus. *The History of the Persian Wars*, George Rawlinson (trans.), 1862.

3. See, Tagore, 'The Voice of Humanity', in *English Writings*, Vol. IV, 523; also see Tagore, *A Vision of India's History*, Reprint, Calcutta: Visva-Bharati, 1962, 31–32.
4. See, Tagore to Andrews, in letters to a friend, 22nd July 1920, 119.
5. He says this as early as 1908, and puts his position about nationalism succinctly in a letter replying to the criticism of Abala Bose, the wife of a great Indian scientist, Jagadish Chandra Bose, quoted by Amartya Sen in his article on 'Tagore and His India' (1986).
6. See 'Imagining "One World": Rabindranath Tagore's Critique of Nationalism', Mohammad A. Quayum, 2004.
7. See Uma Dasgupta. *The Oxford India Tagore*, 2009, xxiv. Tagore used this term *bhougolic apodebata* in a letter to Jagananda Ray, an early teacher of Shantiniketan school on 8 March 1921. Bengali Letters File, Visva-Bharati University.
8. 'Bharatbarshiya Samaj', in 'Atmashakti' and 'Somuha', *Rabindra Raachanavali*, Vol. XII (1961: 678).**124** Indra Nath Choudhuri

9. See Nandy, *The Illegitimacy of Nationalism*; Martha Nussbaum, 'Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism', in Joshua Cohen (ed.), *For Love of Country: Debating the Limits of Patriotism*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1996.

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