

Imagining “One World”: Rabindranath Tagore’s Critique of Nationalism

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Our mind has faculties which are universal, but its habits are insular.
—Rabindranath Tagore

Introduction

In a poem entitled, “The Sunset of the Century,” written on the last day of the nineteenth century, India’s messianic poet and Asia’s first Nobel Laureate, Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), launched a fierce diatribe on nationalism. In a mood of outrage and disenchantment, tempered with intermittent hope, he wrote:

The last sun of the century sets amidst the blood-red clouds of the West and the whirlwind of hatred.

The naked passion of the self-love of Nations, in its drunken delirium of greed, is dancing to the clash of steel and howling verses of vengeance.

The hungry self of the Nation shall burst in a violence of fury from its shameless feeding.

For it has made the world its food.

And licking it, crunching it and swallowing it in big morsels,

It swells and swells

Till in the midst of its unholy feast descends the sudden shaft of heaven piercing its heart of grossness.

(*Nationalism* 80)

This anti-nationalitarian sentiment—that nationalism is a source of war and carnage; death, destruction and divisiveness, rather than international solidarity, that induces a larger and more expansive vision of the world—remains at the heart of Tagore’s imagination in most of his writings: his letters, essays, lectures, poems, plays and fiction.¹ He was always opposed to the nationalism of *Realpolitik* and hyper-nationalism that breathed meaning into Thucydides’s ancient maxim that “large nations do what they wish, while small nations accept what they must” (qtd. in Chomsky 16) and that in which, as Radhakrishnan said, “self-interest is the end; brute force, the means; conscience is taboo” (163). Radical nationalism that acted as opiate of the people, making them irrational and fanatical, blind to the senses of truth and justice, and willing to both kill and die for it, perpetuating a logic of “lunacy” and war, instead of a cycle of freedom and peace, was an anathema to Tagore. He spurned it as “a cruel epidemic of evil . . . sweeping over the human world of the present age and eating into its moral fibre” (*Nationalism* 9); a terrible absurdity that is seeking to engulf humanity in a suicidal conflagration.

Tagore was a believer in an interactive, dialogic world, given to a deep sense of sympathy, generosity and mutuality, and in which nations would not be parochial, xenophobic and centripetal, or guided by mere selfishness and self-aggrandisement, but poised towards a morally and politically enlightened community of nations through the espousal of a centrifugal outlook, multilateral imagination, principal of universality and reciprocal recognitions. In this sense Tagore stands a precursor to many of the modern critics and philosophers of post/trans-nationalism and globalism such as Frantz Fanon, Edward Said and Noam Chomsky. Much like Chomsky, Tagore believed, to put it in Chomsky’s words, that “‘another world is possible’ [by] seeking to create constructive alternatives of thought, actions and institutions,” and by bringing “a measure of peace and justice and hope to the world” (236-37). Tagore imagined of a commonwealth of nations in which no nation (or race) would deprive another “of its rightful place in the world festival” and every nation would “keep alight its own lamp of mind as its part of the illumination of the world” (qtd. in Kripalani 268).

Tagore was an avid advocate of inter-civilisational alliance; his vision was given to a symbiosis of the East and West. He was no doubt furious with the British cruelty and oppression in India during the colonial period, and felt that the West was often immersed in commercialism, “moral cannibalism” (Dutta 192), “political expediency” (Dutta 164), militarism and “war-madness” (Dutta 193), and was unduly full of contempt for the East; yet he never gave up hope for a possible union of the East and West, in which the East and the West would meet as equal partners in a creative engagement; “I believe in the true meeting of the East and the West” (Dutta 172), he affirmed in a letter to Charles Andrews. In a letter to Foss Westcott, Tagore further wrote, “Believe me, nothing would give me greater happiness than to see the people of the West and the East march in a common crusade against all that robs the human spirit of its significance” (Dutta 197). Moreover, he took exception to Kipling’s remark that the East

and the West were too divergent and “‘Never the twain shall meet” by affirming, much like in Emerson’s spirit in his essay “Compensation,” that the realisation of a unitary and stable world was contingent upon the meeting of these two opposing halves, which compensated one another:

Earnestly I ask the poet of the western world to realize and sing . . . with all the great power of music which he has, that the East and West are ever in search of each other, and that they must meet not merely in the fullness of physical strength, but in fullness of truth; that the right hand, which wields the sword, has the need of the left, which holds the shield of safety. (Dutta 213)

Tagore’s indictment of nationalism elicited furious criticisms from many of his contemporaries, especially in the West, with the Marxist critic, Georg Lukacs, and the English writer, D. H. Lawrence, leading the pack, making the duo strange bedfellows in their Tagore hatred. Lukacs, who found both Tagore and Gandhi counter-revolutionary, took the opportunity to pounce on Tagore, after the publication of his anti-nationalist, anti-revolutionary novel, *The Home and the World* (1915). In the characteristic tone of one who saw a Cause greater than a living, breathing human being, and to whom the abstract was more sanctified than the palpable, Lukacs condemned Tagore as “a wholly insignificant figure. . . [Who] survives by sticking scraps of the *Upanishads* and the *Bhagavadgita* into his works amid the sluggish flow of his tediousness” (qtd. in Desai 7).² Lawrence, on the other hand, felt outraged by what he called the “wretched worship-of-Tagore attitude” and admonished that Tagore was a “horribly decadent [figure] reverting to all forms of barbarism in all sorts of ugly ways.” Lawrence further said, creating the same us/them, West/East hierarchical binary, which Tagore had found disagreeable in Kipling’s imagination, “our European civilization stands [far higher] than the East, India, or Persia ever dreamed of” (qtd. in Kripalani 278).

Lawrence’s arrogance and contempt in the above statement only ratified Tagore’s claim that the chasm between the East and the West was created by the West’s unwarranted contempt for the East, which in return generated hatred in the East against the West. His response to such contempt was, “The blindness of contempt is more hopeless than the blindness of ignorance; for contempt kills the light which ignorance merely leaves unignited” (Dutta 209). Tagore urged the West to overcome its “logic of egoism” (Dutta 211), ignoble triumphalism, “forcible parasitism” (Dutta 210) and intentional ignorance, and seek to understand the East in a true spirit of creativity, fellowship and welfare of humanity. He reminded that the British belligerency and its singular passion for power and wealth during the colonial period turned the world into a cauldron of animosities; the way to conquer the world, Tagore said, was not war but active sympathy. In his novel *The Home and the World*, his protagonist, Nikhil, bursts out against the British atrocities in India as well as the atrocities perpetrated by the Indian nationalist terrorists:

It was Buddha who conquered the world, not Alexander—this is untrue when stated in dry prose—oh when shall we be able to sing it? When shall all these most intimate truths of the universe overflow the pages of printed books and leap out in a sacred stream like the Ganges from the Gangotri? (134-35)

However, in spite of the derogatory remarks made by Lukacs and Lawrence, and the attempts to dismiss him as a sentimental alarmist by others, Tagore’s assertive denunciation of the Nation proved prophetic with the outbreak of two world wars, costing millions of lives; UK’s war in Kenya in the 1950s, to quell the rebels against its colonial rule, costing 150,000 lives (Chomsky 183); the genocide in Bangladesh by the Pakistani junta in 1970, claiming a toll of three million lives³ (to name only a few of the gigantic evils perpetrated in the name of the familiar devil, radical nationalism, in the twentieth century), but most importantly, the nuclear arms race that pushed the world to the brink of destruction in the 1960s. The Cuban missile crisis was the most dangerous moment in human history, Chomsky reminds us. In October 1962, during the height of the crisis, he explains, it was one Soviet submarine officer named Vasili Arkhipov who saved the world by blocking “an order to fire nuclear armed torpedoes on October 27. . . when the submarines were under attack by US destroyers” (Chomsky 74). Thus, ironically, this world of pomp and finery, wealth and power, at its height of crisis, was left to the wisdom of one person; and had Arkhipov been as “insane” as some of the other nationalist chauvinists, the world would have almost surely been extinct now through a major nuclear warfare—if not the world, the Northern Hemisphere.

After humanity was plentifully gorged with the blood of some 50 million people, killed in violent circumstances in the twentieth century, mostly in wars that invoked the nation in one form or another, many had thought that peace and sanity would return to the world, especially since the Cold War was over.⁴ But that was not to be. As the world had barely crossed the portal of a new millennium, and stepped into the twenty-first century, it found itself again battered in torrents of blood and locked in a devil dance of destruction. The “jihadists” (by which I refer not only to the radical Islamists but also the ferocious jingoists, who seem equally enthusiastic in violence and to kill innocent civilians with utter abandon like the “terrorists”) have struck again and the world has suffered colossal disasters. The horrendous events of 9-11 which caused “the most devastating instant human toll on record, outside of war” (Chomsky 218); America’s military response to 9-11, defying world opinion,⁵ with massive coordinated bombings in Afghanistan, which turned “major urban concentrations [in the country] into ‘ghost towns’” (Chomsky 200)—a campaign, in which, the veteran Spanish journalist Miguel Angel Aguilar says, “we were trying to kill mosquitoes

with bombs. Innocents were killed and democracy suffered and we are no safer” (Alterman and Green 235); America’s “pre-emptive/preventive” war in Iraq, which Paul O’Neill painfully explains to Ron Suskind, America started hatching at the very first meeting of the current American president with the National Security Council, on “January 30, ten days after his inauguration” (70)⁶—such destructive events, which have changed the world, leaving humanity peering into the abyss of the future, have all been undertaken in the name of national safety and national security, whether it is the pan-Islamic religious nationalism of the militants or secular nationalism of the West. However, we are not done yet, security of the homeland has not been achieved, as President Bush has *thoughtfully* declared, “There is no telling how many wars it will take to secure freedom in the homeland” (Chomsky 207). Perhaps respite will come only when the “pious warlords” (Dutta 191) after all their calculated savagery and sacrifices to the “dark gods of war” (Dutta 191) will have successfully realised Bertrand Russell’s sombre prediction about world peace:

After ages during which the earth produced harmless trilobites and butterflies, evolution progressed to the point at which it has generated Neroes, Genghis Khans, and Hitlers. This, however, I believe is a passing nightmare; in time the earth will become again incapable of supporting life, and peace will return. (qtd. in Chomsky 237)

Nationalism and Tagore

Benedict Anderson defines the nation as “imagined community” but acknowledges that it is “notoriously difficult to define, let alone to analyse” “Nation, nationality, nationalism” (3). Hugh Seton-Watson maintains, “no ‘scientific definition’ of the nation can be devised” (5). Ernst Gellner observes that nationalism is an ‘invention,’ ‘fabrication’: “Nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness: it invents nations where they do not exist” (169). Despite its “mythical” quality, and the difficulties involved in defining it, the phenomenon still enjoys profound political and emotional legitimacy in modern society. Bill Ashcroft et al. affirm that in spite of “all its contentiousness, and the difficulty of theorising it adequately, [nation/nationalism] remains the most implacably powerful force in twentieth century politics” (151).

Nationalism as a political expression, with people sharing a common geographical boundary and some unifying cultural/political signifier is relatively new, although cultural nationalism has prevailed since the beginning of society. Anderson suggests that the nation as a political institution is the product of European Enlightenment and Industrial Revolution. He argues that the rise of nationalism in Western Europe was made possible by the decline, if not the death, of religious modes of thought, in the wake of the rationalist secularism of the Enlightenment, or the Age of Reason. The guiding principles of this intellectual movement were the glorification of reason and faith in human dignity, both of which were sufficient to break down the old belief systems that gave centrality to the church and a theocentric worldview. Thus a more pragmatic and worldly socio-political system of nationalism emerged to suit the post-religious, secular world. Anderson explains, “What then was required was a secular transformation of fatality into continuity, contingency into meaning . . . few things were (are) better suited to this end than an idea of nation” (11).

Ernest Gellner, on the other hand, attributes the emergence of nationalism to the rise of industrial-capitalism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The epochal shift of human society from pre-industrial to industrial economies, he argues, set up the conditions required for the creation of larger social units and economies that would be culturally “homogenous” and cooperative as workforce, thus paving the way for the formation of the more complex and intricate social organisation of the nation-state. Effectively, the expansion of the workforce and the market made the earlier pre-industrial, tribal societies and their structures both inadequate and obsolete.

Timothy Brennan examines the role of literature, especially the novel, in the formation of national consciousness during its early period: “the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries” (173). He maintains:

It was the *novel* that historically accompanied the rise of nations by objectifying the ‘one, yet many’ of national life, and by mimicking the structures of the nation. . . . But it did more than that. Its manner of presentation allowed people to imagine the special community that the nation was. (173)

Despite literature’s such active complicity in the formation of the institution and the global acceptance of nationalism as the only legitimate form of political organisation, India’s myriad-minded poet, Rabindranath Tagore—whom Bertrand Russell considered “worthy of the highest honour” (qtd. in Kripalani 358), and Ezra Pound deemed “greater than any of us” (qtd. in Kripalani 227) as a poet—shared not an iota of positive sentiment towards the ideology. His foremost objection came from its very nature and purpose as an institution. The very fact that it is a social institution, a mechanical organisation, modelled on certain utilitarian objectives in mind, made it unpalatable to Tagore, who was a champion of creation over construction, imagination over reason and the natural

over the artificial and the man-made: “Construction is for a purpose, it expresses our wants; but creation is for itself, it expresses our very beings” (“Construction *versus* Creation,” Soares 59).

Tagore took the view that since nationalism emerged in the post-religious laboratory of industrial-capitalism, it was only an “organisation of politics and commerce” (*Nationalism* 7), that brings “harvests of wealth” (*Nationalism* 5), or “carnivals of materialism” (Soares 113), by spreading tentacles of greed, selfishness, power and prosperity, or churning up the baser instincts of mankind, and sacrificing in the process “the moral man, the complete man . . . to make room for the political and commercial man, the man of limited purpose” (*Nationalism* 9). Nationalism, according to Tagore, is not “a spontaneous self-expression of man as social being,” where human relationships are *naturally* regulated, “so that men can develop ideals of life in co-operation with one another” (*Nationalism* 5), but rather a political and commercial union of a group of people, in which they congregate to maximise their profit, progress and power; it is “the organised self-interest of a people, where it is least human and least spiritual” (*Nationalism* 8). Tagore deemed nationalism a recurrent threat to humanity, because with its propensity for the material and the rational, it trampled over the human spirit and human emotion; it upset man’s moral balance, “obscuring his human side under the shadow of soul-less organisation” (*Nationalism* 9).

Thus, Tagore called into question both the constructed aspect of nationalism, which stifled the innate and instinctive qualities of the human individual, and its overemphasis on the commercial and political aspects, at the expense of man’s moral and spiritual qualities. Both of these limitations reduced nationalism to an incomplete, monolithic and unipolar ideology—essentially inadequate for human beings given to an inherent multiplicity and seeming contraries, that needed to be unified and synthesised, through a process of soulful negotiation and striking of an axial line between opposites, to create the whole and wholesome person.

As seen previously, Tagore also found the fetish of nationalism a source of war, hatred and mutual suspicion between nations. In *The Home and the World*, Nikhil, Tagore’s alter ego in the novel, who is patriotic but wouldn’t place nation above truth and conscience says, “I am willing to serve my country; but my worship I reserve for Right which is far greater than country. To worship my country as a god is to bring curse upon it” (29). However, Nikhil’s friend, Sandip, a charismatic but unconscionable nationalist, to whom any action in the name of the nation is right, no matter how far it may be from truth or justice, exclaims, “country’s needs must be made into a god” (61), and one must “set aside . . . conscience . . . by putting the country in its place” (224). Tagore saw this radical view of Sandip, in which the nation is apotheosised and placed above truth and conscience, as a recipe for disaster. It breeds exclusivism and dogmatism through the Hegelian dichotomous logic of self’s fundamental hostility towards the other; thus every nation becomes narcissistic and considers the presence of another a threat to itself; waging war against other nations for its self-fulfilment and self-aggrandisement becomes a justifiable and even “holy” act. Tagore explains:

The Nation, with all its paraphernalia of power and prosperity, its flags and pious hymns, its blasphemous prayers in the churches, and the literary mock thunders of its patriotic bragging, cannot hide the fact that the Nation is the greatest evil for the Nation, that all its precautions are against it, and any new birth of its fellow in the world is always followed in its mind by the dread of a new peril. (*Nationalism* 17-18)

Tagore argued that British colonialism found its justification in the ideology of nationalism, as the coloniser came to India and other rich pastures of the world to plunder and so further the prosperity of their own nation. They were never sincere in developing colonised countries/nations, as to convert their “hunting grounds” into “cultivated fields” (*Nationalism* 12) would have been contrary to their national interest. Like predators (and nationalism, as we saw above, inherently cultivates a rapacious logic), they thrived by victimising and violating other nations, and never felt deterred in their heinous actions by the principles of love, sympathy or universal fellowship. The logic is simple but cruel, and is sustained by a privileging norm, that in order to have rich and powerful nations, some nations ought to be left poor and pregnable: “Because this civilization is the civilization of power, therefore it is exclusive, it is naturally unwilling to open its sources of power to those whom it has selected for its purposes for exploitation” (*Nationalism* 13). By its very nature as an organisation, Tagore argued, nationalism could ill afford any altruism in this regard.

One might think that Tagore’s critique of nationalism is a little lofty and far-fetched—“too pious” as Pound might have said; his arguments are layered in atavistic spiritualism and romantic idealism. However, much of what Tagore said is intellectually valid and some of it is borne out by contemporary post-colonial criticism. Critics concur that nation is a necessity, it has laboured on behalf of modernity, and it helps to bolster the present civilization; as a political organisation it befits the social and intellectual milieu of present-day society, but they hardly claim its moral authority or its beneficial role in the reinforcement of human virtue.

Critics also view the constructed aspect of nationalism as a weakness in the ideology. It is vulnerable to regressing into more natural social units of clan, tribe and race, or language and religious groups. Its very formative process introduces a self-deconstructing logic in it. The process of formation/invention further makes it a potent site

of power discourse; although it is meant to stand for horizontal comradeship, exploitation and inequality remain a daily occurrence in its body, and the nation never speaks of the hopes and aspirations of its entire “imagined community.” In conceiving its overarching ideologies it often places the dominant group at the centre, pushing the minority population to the periphery. Thus, instead of a fraternity, it creates a new hierarchy and hegemony within its structure, and exposes the fracture between its rhetoric and reality. Fanon expresses this misgiving, when he says, “National consciousness, instead of being the all-embracing crystallization of the innermost hopes of the whole people [becomes] a crude and fragile travesty of what it might have been [when] the nation is passed over for the race, and the tribe is preferred to the state” (156).

Several post-colonial critics agree with Tagore’s view that nationalism begets a disquisition of intolerance and “othering.” Ernest Gellner, Benedict Anderson and Tom Nairn have pointed out the irrationality, prejudice and hatred that nationalism generates, and Leela Gandhi speaks of its attendant racism and loathing, and the alacrity with which citizens are willing to both kill and die for the sake of the nation. I have also pointed out in the introduction of the essay how nationalism is often used as a pretext for terrorism, factional or state, and war. Sometimes these wars, especially by the rich and powerful nations, are disguised with expressions of noble intent, such as “liberating the people from an evil dictator” and/or “introducing democracy.” But such rhetoric is always disingenuous. In a letter to Yone Noguchi, a Japanese writer who had asked for Tagore’s moral support for Japan’s invasion of China in 1937, in the name of “saving China for Asia” (Dutta 192), Tagore roundly criticises Noguchi for his naive acceptance of the grotesque rhetoric meant to veil an adventure of greed:

I was amused to read the recent statement of a Tokyo politician that the military alliance of Japan with Italy and Germany was made for ‘highly spiritual and moral reasons’ and ‘had no materialistic considerations behind it.’ Quite so. What is not so amusing is that writers and thinkers should echo such remarkable sentiments that translate military swagger into spiritual bravados. (Dutta 192-93)

Thomas Jefferson’s observation on the world situation of his day sums up the hypocrisy behind such use of exalted language in war, most tellingly:

We believe no more in Bonaparte’s fighting for the liberties of the seas, than in Great Britain’s fighting for the liberties of mankind. The object is the same, to draw to themselves the power, the wealth, and the resources of other nations. (qtd. in Chomsky 48)

Jefferson’s point further helps bolster Tagore’s claim that the discourse of nationalism overlaps with the discourse imperialism; the imperialist nations adopt the role of the Lacanian grand Other and seek to inscribe their authority unilaterally over the colonised nations; they are not impelled by the ideology of benevolence towards the colonised countries. Tagore describes them as aggressive people essentially driven by greed; who “go out of their way and spread their coat-tails in other peoples’ thoroughfares, claiming indemnity when these are trodden upon” (Dutta 255). According to Amy Cesaire, the imperial objective is to “thingify” the colonial subjects, and Fanon suggest that the colonisers are inherently bent upon not only plundering the wealth of the colonised nations but also to rob them of their culture: “By a kind of perverted logic, it turns the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures, and destroys it” (154). A classic example of this later instance was the introduction of English language in India in 1835 with the view of anglicising a group of Indians who would serve the colonial cause.

Tagore and Indian Nationalism

Tagore was opposed to the idea of the nation; he was even more fiercely opposed to India joining the bandwagon of nationalism. This would compromise India’s history and identity as a culture and bring it under the shadow of the West. He warned:

We, in India, must make up our minds that we cannot borrow other people’s history, and that if we stifle our own we are committing suicide. When you borrow things that do not belong to your life, they only serve to crush your life. . . . I believe that it does India no good to compete with Western civilization in its own field. . . . India is no beggar of the West. (Soares 106)

Tagore was born in 1861, a period during which the nationalist movement in India against the British rule was crystallising and gaining momentum. In 1857, only four years before the poet was born, the first military uprising for self-rule broke out in India. In 1905, the *Swadeshi* movement started on Tagore’s doorstep, as a response to the British policy of partitioning Bengal. Although apolitical by temperament, Tagore at first was drawn to the movement and started giving lectures and writing patriotic songs with such fervour that Ezra Pound quipped, “Tagore has sung Bengal into a nation” (qtd. in Desai 8). But soon after, Tagore saw the movement turning violent with the nationalists agitating against innocent civilians who were indifferent to their cause, and especially the Muslims who were in favour of the partition for practical as well as political reasons (the partition gave the Muslims of East Bengal a new capital in Dhaka). A champion of non-violence or *Ahimsa*, Tagore found it difficult to accept

the insanity of the nationalists in their burning of all foreign goods as a mark of non-cooperation, although it was hurting the poor in Bengal who found homemade products more expensive than foreign goods. He was further disheartened to see that many of the impassioned youths turned to the cult of the bomb, hoping to liberate their motherland from the yoke of foreign tyranny by violence and terror. Thus, finally, Tagore withdrew from the movement, when a young Bengali radical, Khudiram Bose (widely regarded a hero in the annals of Bengal), hurled a bomb, killing two innocent British civilians, in 1908.⁷

This sudden withdrawal of Tagore was seen as an act of betrayal by many of the nationalists, but nothing could alter his decision. He would not have anything to do with a movement that was hijacked by the Bengali *Bhadroloks* (elites) for their vested interest, and that saw the individual through the prism of a giant Cause. Tagore's response to his critics was fictionally articulated in both *The Home and the World* and *Four Chapters* (both seen as Tagore's profound testament to non-violence). In both the novels, Tagore dramatises how exploitation, violence and killing become ritual acts when the individual sacrifices his/her self to an abstraction, and nationalism is put on a pedestal, sacrificing righteousness and conscience; how the nationalist movements in Bengal and later, during Gandhi's *Satyagraha* movement, in India, often veered into terrorist movements because of the excessiveness of the nationalist leaders, and sometimes their tendency to abuse the movement for personal political gain, as, for example, do both Sandip and Indranath, respectively in *The Home and the World* and *Four Chapters*. Both Sandip and Indranath, begin as charismatic nationalist figures, but gradually become self-obsessed and vainglorious in their cause, losing sight of their *dharma* of dispassionate, disinterested action (as advised by Krishna to Arjuna in *The Bhagavad Gita*), and use violence as a fetish for personal gain; thus their early optimism is replaced later by a sense of *nada*.

Tagore and Gandhi were on friendly terms, and in many ways Tagore was a precursor of Gandhi; it was Tagore who gave the title "Mahatma" (the great soul) to Gandhi, and in return Gandhi dubbed Tagore "Gurudev" (the venerable teacher) and greeted him as "poet of the world." Romain Rolland once described a meeting between Tagore and Gandhi as one between "a philosopher and an apostle, a St. Paul and a Plato" (qtd. in Desai 7). Yet Tagore and Gandhi never saw eye to eye on the way towards India's future, as Tagore stubbornly refused to support Gandhi's nationalist movement against the British rule. Unlike Gandhi, Tagore believed that political freedom and attainment of a nationalist identity by driving the British out was not the right solution for India's problems; "I am not for thrusting off Western civilization and becoming segregated in our independence. Let us have a deep association" (Soares 106), he said in his characteristic hopefulness. In a letter to an American lawyer Myron H. Phelps, he rhetorically stated, "Must we not have that greater vision of humanity which will impel us to shake off the fetters that shackle our individual life before we begin to dream of national freedom?" (Dutta 240). Tagore took the view that what India needed was not a "blind revolution" (Dutta 240) or the "miracle of [political] freedom [built] upon the quicksand of social slavery" (Soares 115), "but steady purposeful education" (Dutta 240), or an evolution from within; "what India most needed was constructive work coming from within herself," he argued in "Nationalism in India" (Soares 108). He believed that a "thought impetus" (Dutta 240) similar to the one experienced by Europe during the Renaissance that broke up "the feudal system and the tyrannical conventionalism of the Latin Church" (Dutta 240) was the right remedy for a country languishing on the "dry sand-bed of dead customs" (Dutta 166).

Tagore maintained that India's immediate problems were social and cultural and not political. India is the world in miniature, this is where the races and the religions have met; therefore she must constantly strive to resolve her "burden of heterogeneity," by evolving out of "these warring contradictions a great synthesis" (Dutta 239). First and foremost, India must address the caste issue. The caste system has become too rigid and taken a hypnotic hold on the mind of the people; what was once meant to introduce social order by accommodating the various racial groups in India, has now become a gigantic system of cold-blooded repression. India ought to come out of this social stagnation by educating the people out of their trance; only when the immovable walls of society were removed, or made flexible, will India regain her vitality and dynamism as a society and find true freedom. What is the purpose of political freedom when the elites in society are exploiting the lower classes, especially the untouchables⁸ so ruthlessly?

In his short story, "Purification," he exposes the absurdity of Gandhi's *Satyagraha* movement and the hypocrisy of the Indian nationalists by showing how selfish and superficial the nationalists were in their quest for freedom; they were fervently opposed to the British oppression, but oppressed the poor as well as the untouchables themselves; they wanted dignity and respect but wouldn't allow the same to their less fortunate brethren. Kalika, a young wife and a nationalist dogmatist, who badgers her husband, a moderate but sensitive person, for not being fervent enough, refuses to come to the aid of an old municipal sweeper, who is being assaulted by a group of orthodox Hindus for accidentally touching someone in the crowd, just because he is an untouchable. Such "mendicant politics" (Dutta 167) that fails to tear down the customary barriers between people, was of little worth to

Tagore. His hope was that if India could establish equanimity between the various races and religious groups, through a basis of social co-operation and regeneration of the spirit, then she could hold herself as a model of unity for the rest of the world.

Tagore emphasises racial and religious unity persistently in his writings. In a beautiful hymn to India, entitled *Bharat Tirtha* (“The Indian Pilgrimage”), he urges all Indians to unite across race, class and religion, shedding their differences, to fulfil the noble destiny of their homeland, standing above the whirlwind of dusty politics:

Come, O Aryans, come, non-Aryans, Hindus and Mussulmans—
Come today, O Englishmen, come, Oh come, Christians!
Come, O Brahmin, cleansing your mind
Join hands with all—
Come, O Downtrodden, let the burden
Of every insult be forever dispelled.
Make haste and come to Mother’s coronation, the vessel auspicious
Is yet to be filled
With sacred water sanctified by the touch of all
By the shore of the sea of Bharat’s Great Humanity!

(qtd. in Quayum, “Touched by a Divine Afflatus 14)

Tagore was of the view that such unity and plurality of consciousness could be achieved only through proper education of the people, eradication of poverty through modernisation and cultivation of freedom of thought and imagination; “Freedom of mind is needed for the reception of truth” (qtd. in Sen 95), he said. It was education, and not adulation for the *Charka* (the spinning wheel) that Gandhi suggested, which could liberate India from the tyranny of the past and the towering misery of unreasoned, unbridled orthodoxy. When Gandhi chastised Tagore for his disregard for the *Charka* as well as *Swaraj* saying, “Every one must spin. Let Tagore spin like the others. Let him burn his foreign clothes; that is his duty today. God will take care of the morrow” (qtd. in Kripalani 72), Tagore respectfully replied, “The charka does not require anyone to think; one simply turns the wheel of the antiquated invention endlessly, using the minimum of judgment and stamina” (qtd. in Sen 74).

To break the spell of stasis through intellectual/cultural revival and find freedom, India ought to keep itself open to the West and not become insular from the rest of the world through the appropriation of a provincial nationalism; “We of the Orient should learn from the Occident . . . to say that it is wrong to cooperate with the West is to encourage the worst form of provincialism and can produce nothing but intellectual indigence” (qtd. in Kripalani 294). The West could in fact help liberate India from its “mind-forg’d manacles” and lift the dead weight of tradition from its soul through a constructive engagement and inducement of energy, strength, elasticity, tolerance, resolve and courage among its people—qualities that the West possessed but India lacked. Tagore’s vision of a free India—free from the fetters of materialism, nationalism as well as religious and racial orthodoxy—actively seeking a common destiny with the rest of mankind, constantly evolving towards a global society, is most ardently and expressly expressed in the following poem in *Gitanjali*, written in the form of a supplication:

Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high;
Where knowledge is free;
Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls;
Where words come from the depth of truth;
Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection;
Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into the dreary desert sand of dead habit;
Where the mind is led forward by thee into ever widening thought and action—
Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake. (27-28)

Tagore could perhaps be faulted for impracticality; his vision for India was too sublime and unrealisable in an imperfect world. His wish that the West could help India in her mission was also impracticable, especially since he knew that the West came to the subcontinent, as he recounted in his essay “East and West,” “not with the imagination and sympathy to create and unite, but with a shock of passion—passion for power and wealth” (Dutta 206). West had its own axe to grind; in spite of their “superior force of character” (Dutta 128), they were not interested in the “nest-building of truth” (Dutta 214) but in money, machine and matter. Yet his transcendent thought provides a testament to his noble and beautiful mind, and strikes a cord in the moral person in each of us.

Moreover, the on-going violence in the subcontinent vindicates his position.⁹ India has since been broken up into three countries: India, Pakistan and Bangladesh; ten million people were made homeless in the aftermath of the independence of India and Pakistan in 1947, one million of which also lost their lives in inter-religious riots (Wolpert 348); two major wars have been fought in the subcontinent, with border skirmishes and threats of further wars, including a nuclear war, casting a shadow of desperation on the people; several riots have also broken out

between the Hindus and the Muslims, claiming thousands of lives.¹⁰ India still remains a poor country, with political corruption rife, and plights of the downtrodden a daily reality. Tagore's prediction that joining the bandwagon of nationalism would make India a beggar of the West has also come true. Although India is a free country now (ironically broken up into three fragments), the appropriation of nationalist ideology has erased the sense of India's difference as a society, capable of standing on its own; forging of links with the West on unequal terms (since India has merely copied the Western thoughts and has nothing to offer of her own) has allowed neo-colonialist controls to operate over the country both explicitly and implicitly, spelling political and cultural doom for its people. Finally, India's assumption of a separate identity by driving the British out has also dealt a blow to the possible realisation of Tagore's vision for "one world," at least for the time being, since anti-colonial nationalism also carries the seeds of provincialism and cultural particularism.

Conclusion

In *My Reminiscences*, Tagore humorously recollects that when he was young he was brought up under the rule of the servants, who were not only negligent but also oppressive. To avoid their responsibility, they would often put the young Tagore at a spot in the servants' quarter, draw a chalk line around him, and warn him "with a solemn face and uplifted finger of the perils of transgressing the circle" (Dutta 57). Tagore, aware of the fate of Sita in *Ramayana*, for overstepping a similar circle by her husband, would accede to the forceful confinement, but would feel a defiant wish to wipe out the chalk line and find the horizon. This childhood experience became the poet's lifelong companion; he would feel muffled by any confining circle and challenge it with utmost vigour. The national boundary was another such arbitrary "circle" for him that circumscribed his wish to be one with the rest of mankind. He would not accept such thorny hedges of exclusion or the labels and divisions that stood on the way to the formation of a larger human community. He said that if nationalism is something imaginary, humanity has to readjust their imagination by being more inclusive and encyclopaedic, or by extending the horizon of their mind's eye, so that the fellowship of the species does not stop at a geographical border, like commodities. He affirms:

Therefore man will have to make another great moral adjustment which will comprehend the whole world of men and not merely the fractional groups of nationality. The call has come to every individual in the present age to prepare himself and his surroundings for this dawn of a new era, when man shall discover his soul in the spiritual unity of all human beings. (Soares 104-05)

Tagore's process calls for a two-way ambiguous negotiation so that nations or communities can flourish and find their own fulfilment and yet rise above exclusivism and provincialism to forge an international community. It is like finding an axial line or a middle ground by shunning excesses, somewhat similar to the Emersonian "double consciousness," where the individual is required to keep his independence and yet not lose his sympathy; or the Whitmanesque celebration of the "self" and the "en-masse," or "I" and "you," in one breath. The moment we spurn national narcissism or chauvinism, and rise above the dichotomous reasoning of self/other, we become part of the Tagoresque "one world," through a recurrent dialogic process.

But to attain that stage, a more fundamental change is required. Currently, the nation is but an organisation of "politics and commerce," focused on power and wealth. As an institution, its chief interest lies in the material well being of its people but not their moral or spiritual health. It reckons the individual's head and stomach but not his heart, where the soul dwells. This will need to be altered through the restoration of the soul to its rightful place. Without the soul, the individual is like a torn-away line of verse looking for the other line that could give it fullness through a rhyme but has been smudged. Soul is what brings creativity and sympathy to the self, and makes the individual human and humane. In an interview with Einstein, Tagore said, "My religion is in the reconciliation of the supernatural man, the universal human spirit, in my own individual being" (Dutta 233). This three way reckoning of the self—in the individual, in humanity and in god, all connected by an invisible thread—brings the world together in one nest. This is the higher unity of humanity, which is different from corporate globalisation or what Tagore calls, the "mere political or commercial basis of unity" (Soares 105) between nations. His vision is given to a "magnificent harmony" that he believes is the ultimate destiny of humankind: the enlightened individuals and nations coming together to form an enlightened global society. Tagore explains this process, using a metaphor similar to Whitman's "grass" in "Song of Myself":

As the mission of the rose lies in the unfoldment of the petals which implies distinctness, so the rose of humanity is perfect only when the diverse races and nations have evolved their perfect distinct characteristics but all attached to the stem of humanity by the bond of love. (qtd. in Quayum, "In Search of a Spiritual Commonwealth" 32-33)

Tagore's vision might seem idealistic but it is not unattainable. It calls for a humanitarian intervention into present self-seeking and belligerent nationalism, through the introduction of a moral and spiritual dimension in the

institution. It also requires us to step out of history to reinvent a new future for ourselves that respects human dignity and sees every individual and nation as equals, in a true democratic spirit.

The risks for us not to take up Tagore's trajectory are too high. The current form of nationalism that works rationally within a "lunatic" doctrinal framework is threatening our very survival. Violence is spreading around the world like virus. Our vast killing power is multiplying everyday with the introduction of yet more sophisticated ammunition in our arsenal. Paul Hirst, a leading international social theorist, has predicted that with the prospects of climate change that might attenuate our resources and result in mass migration from a loss of "habitable land in highly populated areas like Bangladesh or the southern coast of China," or "desertification or water shortages in the Middle East or Southern Europe" (2); increase in the global income inequality; accretion of human rights violation worldwide; America's quest for global dominance and challenges from "new 'beggars' armies" to the military hegemony, as well as the general selfishness of the developed nations, threatens the world with a "conflict ridden international environment" (2) in the twenty-first century, with the prospects of several conventional wars, "to limited nuclear war" (2). Such a prospect casts gloom and doom on humanity. Perhaps it is not too late for us to wake up from our horrific moral slumber and accept the path of international solidarity, peace, harmony and justice paved by the Indian enlightened humanitarian poet, Rabindranath Tagore; by challenging the reigning ideological system of self-seeking nationalism and jingoism, we could still avert the all-consuming nightmare before us and alter the damning course of history.

Notes

*An earlier draft of this paper was read as the Second Visiting Professor Lecture at the State University of New York at Binghamton in March 2004. I wish to thank Professor John Chaffee, the Director of Asian and Asian American Studies, for inviting me to the program.

¹In spite of Tagore's anti-nationalist stance, he was a highly patriotic poet. This is evident in the many patriotic songs and poems he wrote. Two of his poems were later chosen for national anthems of, respectively, India and Bangladesh (making him thus the only poet in the world to have the honour of authorship of two national anthems).

Tagore, however, never placed patriotism above soul, conscience and love for humanity. In "Nationalism in India," he explained, "Even though from childhood I had been taught that idolatry of the nation is almost better than reverence for God and humanity, I believe I have outgrown that teaching, and it is my conviction that my countrymen will truly gain their India by fighting against the education which teaches them that a country is greater than the ideals of humanity" (Chakravarty 200). Responding to a criticism by Abala Bose, the wife of the celebrated Indian scientist, Jagadish Chandra Bose, Tagore further wrote, "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" (qtd. in Sen 86). Tagore denounced patriotism that, like religious formalism, "breeds sectarian arrogance, mutual misunderstanding and a spirit of persecution" (*Letters to a Friend* 85). In a letter to C.F. Andres, written from New York, he explained, "This is the ugliest side of patriotism. For in small minds, patriotism dissociates itself from the higher ideal of humanity. It becomes the magnification of self, on a stupendous scale—magnifying our vulgarity, cruelty, greed; dethroning God, to put up this bloated self in its place" (*Letters to a Friend* 98).

Tagore was acutely aware of the distrust of his people for his indifference to Gandhi's *Swaraj* or nationalist movement. He wrote to C.F. Andrews, in the letter cited above, "I am afraid I shall be rejected by my own people when I go back to India. My solitary cell is awaiting me in my motherland. In their present state of mind, my countrymen will have no patience with me, who believes God to be higher than my country" (*Letters to a Friend* 98). In spite of such rejection, Tagore never sacrificed his global vision for mankind or his sense of "creative bond of wholeness," and he did so fully aware that "It is the sense and craving for wholeness [which] has been the cause of [his] separation from others and also their misunderstanding of [his] motives" (*Letters to a Friend* 91).

²For a fuller discussion of Lukacs's views on Tagore, see Chatterjee.

³This is an estimated figure only, frequently proclaimed by the post-liberation Bangladeshi government.

⁴For an estimated figure for the number of deaths in wars and other forms of political violence in the twentieth century, see <users.erols.com/mwhite28/-atrox.htm>.

⁵There was worldwide good will for America after 9-11 but support for military intervention in Afghanistan was low. Chomsky comments, "World opinion strongly favoured diplomatic-judicial measures over military action. In Europe, support for military action ranged from 8 percent in Greece to 29 percent in France. Support was least in Latin America . . . it ranged from 2 percent in Mexico to 11 percent in Colombia and Venezuela" (200). According to Alterman and Green, a Gallup poll after the operation in Afghanistan on nine Muslim countries showed "77

percent of the respondents judged U.S. actions in Afghanistan to be unjustifiable; only 9 percent expressed support” (236).

⁶Alterman and Green as well as Chomsky argue on similar lines in their respective works. Alterman and Green suggest, “The planned neoconservative war against Iraq had been brewing since 1991, when President George H. Bush, together with Generals Powell and Schwarzkopf, halted U.S. forces on the way to Baghdad after bloodying the Iraqi Republican Guard on the so-called Highway of Death. . . . Personal considerations were added when the CIA claimed to have detected an Iraqi plot to assassinate ex-president Bush while he was on a visit to Kuwait, though the evidence for this alleged attempt looks a great deal sketchier in retrospect” (275).

⁷For further information on this historical event, see Wolpert (281-82).

⁸Untouchables are the fifth caste in the hierarchy of Hindu society and are often treated as pariahs or social outcasts. The Indian writer, Mulk Raj Anand, addresses the issue of untouchability, and the injustices and prejudices associated with it, in his novel *Untouchable*. Both Gandhi and Tagore were lifelong crusaders against this practice of social discrimination and fought fiercely against it in their respective ways.

⁹On hearing the news of Tagore’s death, Jawaharlal Nehru wrote in his prison diary, “Perhaps it is as well that [Tagore] died now and did not see the many horrors that are likely to descend in increasing measure on the world and on India. He had seen enough and he was infinitely sad and unhappy” (qtd. in Sen 61). In hindsight one sees how true Nehru was in his prediction of the violence that was to follow in the aftermath of the independence of India and Pakistan, only six years after Tagore’s death.

¹⁰Schoeff, Jr. reports that in February 2002, more than 2000 lives were lost in less than eight days in a Hindu-Muslim riot in Gujarat. See <www.csis.org/-press/ma2002_1022.htm for details>.

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