
Assessing Cosmopolitanism through Tagore's Critique of Nationalism

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Abstract: The construction of Nation-states and the concept of nationalism are preconceived with the notion of establishing a homogenous identity. In the history of Indian Nationalistic discourse, the debates regarding the politics of 'others' vs 'self' ruled out the possibility of peaceful co-existence of both communities. The formation of a Nation-state is characterized by crushing and discriminating the non-aligned and assimilating the aligned. Thus the specificities of such organizations lead to distancing others and creating irreconcilable differences as noted by Tagore who states that "Nationalism is a great menace". The great thinker and intellectual Tagore deplored Nationalism on the grounds of breeding violence, suspicion and anger. The whole concept of Nation and Nationalism was absurd for Tagore for it was driven by the force of greed and self-interest. Tagore acknowledges the true spirit of India of being tolerant of different races but failed to recognize that mutation is the order of life. The degrading impulses of the West stand on the pillars of greed, hatred and competition and therefore they fail to visualize the harmony of reconciliation. Political freedom does not necessarily entail freedom of mind and commercialism destroys all aspects of humanity. Tagore advocates the ideals of spiritual content and social cooperation devoid of economic exploitation and self-interest.

Keywords: Rabindranath Tagore, Nationalism, Nation-State, Cultural Identity, Social Harmony

The terms nation and nationhood are associated with ethnicity or ethnic identities. The modern approach of this term rejects the ethnic associations and links them with industrialization, development and bureaucracy or in other words as a byproduct of modernization. The gradual transformation of the term relates its meaning to the place of

origin, blood-related group and inhabitants of a country. The objective definition of Nation is formulated on the grounds of ethnicity, religion, territory, language, history and culture. People living in fixed territories, worshipping similar Gods, belonging to similar ethnic groups sharing language and culture form a nation. Stalin's definition of Nation includes all the objective elements:

A nation is a historically constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life and psychological makeup manifested in a common culture. (Online)

Other scholars muted on the abstract connotations. Ernest Renan defined a Nation as “a soul, a spiritual principle” (19). He argued that a state cannot be formed on a geographical or lingual basis. The most commonly accepted definition of a Nation was given by Benedict Anderson in his seminal work *Imagined Communities*: "a nation is an imagined political community and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign." (1991, 6)

The process of nation-building encompasses brutal extermination of values, traditions and people. A Nation can be defined on varied terms- its motive lies in the formation of building a homogenous identity. Such cultural oneness and commonalities tend to exclude and shift the minorities on the periphery. This unending cycle of exclusion continues to maintain a hassle-free space and thereby dividing land into multiple territories. The construction of a Nation is driven by the notion of 'self' which implies a constant shedding of other identities and groups. The other marginalized groups are considered a great threat- a separate entity meant to leave the place and even the enemy. The early discourse of Indian Nationalism has always concurred the antagonism between Hindus and Muslims as non- belligerent. However, Partition ruptured the conception of such ideals.

The construction of Nation-states and the concept of nationalism are preconceived with the notion of establishing a homogenous identity. In the history of Indian Nationalistic discourse, the debates regarding the politics of 'others' vs 'self' ruled out the possibility of peaceful co-existence of both communities. The formation of a Nation-state is characterized by crushing and discriminating the non-aligned and assimilating the aligned. Thus the specificities of such organizations lead to distancing others and creating irreconcilable differences as noted by Tagore who states that "Nationalism is a great menace". The great thinker and intellectual Tagore deplored Nationalism on the grounds of breeding violence, suspicion and anger. He defines the general idea of a Nation as:

The aspect of a whole people as an organized power. This organization incessantly keeps up the insistence of the population on becoming strong and efficient. But this strenuous effort after strength and efficiency drains man's energy from his higher nature where he is self-sacrificing and creative. (1917, 28)

The whole concept of Nation and Nationalism was absurd for Tagore for it was driven by the force of greed and self-interest. Tagore acknowledges the true spirit of India of being tolerant of different races but failed to recognize that mutation is the order of life. The degrading impulses of the West stand on the pillars of greed, hatred and competition and therefore they fail to visualize the harmony of reconciliation. Political freedom does not necessarily entail freedom of mind and commercialism destroys all aspects of humanity. Tagore advocates the ideals of spiritual content and social cooperation devoid of economic exploitation and self-interest.

The journey of Nationhood and nationality commence with the process of segregating the others. It terminates the cultural bond and values shared by the natives for centuries. One major outgrowth of modernism and radical thought in India was the construction of identity formation vis-a-vis nation formation..

Nationalism and modernism are two important ideologies that have shaped the world as we know it today. Nationalism is the belief in the importance of one's nation and the promotion of its culture and values, while modernism is the belief in progress, rationality and the importance of individualism. While these ideologies may seem unrelated, it can be argued that nationalism ideologies are, in fact, a byproduct of modernism. Tagore shows the meaninglessness of the modern concepts of nation-states and borders. His political notions are relevant even in the contemporary context because they come without any theoretical presumptions. He condemned Nationalism as a political entity, yet he is the man whose compositions and songs are celebrated anthems of two nations. Nation and Nationalism remain potent forces in society because of their cultural roots and liberating potential. It transcends and shadows other identities of caste, race, family clan and ethnicity. To develop a homogenous identity, it tries to bind and club people together. The colonized nations were able to liberate themselves from oppressive regimes due to the dominant wave of Nationalism which prevailed in the mid-20th century. On the other hand, the flipside of Nationalism is that it also led to the most destructive wars, WW I and WW II, destroying and damaging various nations indulged in narrow and selfish benefits. Tagore's ideas and views on this concept result from his extensive travels worldwide, which enabled him to reject the notion altogether.

Tagore's essay entitled "Nationalism in India" depicts the need to develop a national self-consciousness, solidarity and universal brotherhood, which can only be achieved through Indian cultural sensibilities and not through blind imitation of western ideals. Unlike other Modern Indian thinkers, he did not believe in imitating and accumulating western standards but in the re-interpretation of ancient Indian texts such as Vedas and Upanishads. He wanted

his countryman to follow the example of great sages like Kabir and Nanak, who talked about social harmony, companionship and love for each other.

Cosmopolitanism refers to the ideology that all human beings belong to a single community and emphasizes the need to conceive of a political, economic, and cultural entity larger than their nation or country to embrace all human beings on the globe. Tagore's views on cosmopolitanism flourish and emerge from one's deep engagement with his culture and tradition. Cosmopolitanism is not negating one's own culture and tradition but developing a sensibility that emerged in one's own culture and tradition, yet open to accommodate and accept the other culture. Kwame Anthony Appiah suggests the possibility of a cosmopolitan community of individuals from various geographical locations and diverse social and economic backgrounds entering into relationships of mutual respect despite their differing religious beliefs and political ideologies. Appiah's cosmopolitan ethic seeks to balance universals with respect for particulars: "A citizen of the world can make the world better by making someplace better, even though that place need not be the place of her literal or original citizenship" (241), because "one's national loyalties aren't determined solely by the geography of one's nativity" (242). The fittest people to lead the country are those gifted with the moral power of love and vision of spiritual unity, who have the least feeling of hostility against the aliens and the sympathetic insight to place themselves in the position of others.

Tagore's critique of Nationalism further invited much criticism among his countryman and the West. According to George Lucas and D.H. Lawrence, Tagore's ideas failed to interpret and solve contemporary issues. While theorists such as James Clifford, Martha Nussbaum, K. A. Appiah, Homi Bhabha, and advocate different kinds of cosmopolitanisms, other scholars such as Antonio Gramsci, Frantz Fanon, and David Harvey write against cosmopolitan ideas. In conclusion, Tagore's critique of nationalist ideologies and his ideas of cosmopolitanism provides a valuable perspective on the world. Nationalist ideologies can lead to division, exclusion, and violence, while cosmopolitanism promotes understanding and empathy for others. Tagore's ideas of cosmopolitanism provide a more inclusive and peaceful perspective on the world and can lead to more peaceful and cooperative relationships between nations.

The process of nation-building requires a constant shedding and adoption of new identities. It doesn't always demand sacrifices and bloodshed but renewal and sanctification. The barriers of religion, class and language need to be transcended to survive. The underlying humanism of Tagore's texts foretells the necessity to bind the self with the other. The narratives of memory and history play a crucial role in identifying the ritual of acceptance

and renewal. These narratives construct the nation in its own way, and the remembrance of past affairs signifies the need to provide meaning and value to the present.

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