

## The concept of the nation-state and Tagore's idea of Nationalism

Two things should be made very clear in the beginning: 1) all the conceptual terms like humanism, universalism, cosmopolitanism, nationalism or internationalism are not universal terms that they can give the same meaning in context of time (kala) and or space (desa). If these terms are the product of a specific culture, then its merits must ultimately be assessed by measures arising out of that culture and 2) which is a corollary of the first that Tagore's views on nationalism is formulated from the point of view of Indian civilizational values.

Freedom and secondly the unity of mankind are the two voices of Tagore which were two very important aspects of India's civilizational values. This 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 would say that the Asian identity is just not poverty and suffering but an endless quest for inner peace and spiritual freedom that binds mankind together. 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. Our self is always self referential and hence there is no problem with the other.

Let us not forget that just three years before he wrote 'Gitanjali (1912), which got him the Noble Prize in 1913, he had written the famous novel 'Gora'(1909) which gives a vivid account of the most anguished debates which were raging within the Hindu society at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, 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 civilization. Two novels about two destinies.

Thomas Mann broods over the threatened collapse of the civilized values, which constitute the identity of Europe. Tagore, on the other hand, reflecting over the crisis of

Hindu identity which is being threatened precisely by those 'civilized values' of Europe 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 civilization and the realization of India's identity.

Gora in his journey from communalism, sectarianism, religious conservatism to the ideals of humanism says at the end of the novel;

“For me there is nothing bigger than my country- I am not beyond the pain and happiness, knowledge and ignorance of the total India. In me exists both Hindu and Muslim- All the casts of India are my cast.”

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.

Hence Tagore's sustained attack on the narrow nationalism and his philosophy to become one with nature and not trying to control or win it, which in other words meant to have ecological oneness have become important issues in our lives today.

For Tagore India was not territorial (*mrinmaya*) but ideational (*chinmaya*). He said that I love India but my India is an idea and not a geographical expression.

He said that the word nation is not in our language. India has never had a real sense of western nationalism. Society is in the core of India's civilization and politics is in the core of western civilization and hence the importance which Europe gave to freedom we gave to liberation of the soul. Tagore said, form yourself into a nation (nation with a small n) to mean society which was relevant to humanity and stop the encroachment of Nation with a capital N to mean a nation-state or the nations of the West which has a i) self destructive tendency, ii) which turns violent, iii) snatches one's freedom, iv) spreads a homogenized universalism and v) makes one selfish and exclusive.

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

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

*"Man has accepted this dust-laden earth for his dwelling place, for the enacting of the drama of his tangled life ever waiting for a call of perfection*

*from the boundless depth of purity surrounding  
him in a translucent atmosphere. If in an evil moment  
man's cruel history should spread its black wings to*

Invade that realm of divine dreams with its cannibalistic greed and fratricidal ferocity then God's curse will certainly descend upon us for that hideous desecration and the last curtain will be rung down upon the world of Man for whom God feels ashamed."

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

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

In order to contest the universalist boasts of Europe Tagore on February 10, 1937( tagore died in 1941) composed his poem on another continent, "Africa" and thus

towards the end of his long and creative life in literature, as says Sugata Bose that even more than the empathy for Africa's history of 'blood and tears', what marked the poem was a searing sarcasm directed at the false universalist claims of an unnamed Europe. Even as the 'barbaric greed of the civilized' put on naked display their 'shameless inhumanity', church bells rang out in neighbourhoods

across the ocean in the name of a benign God, children played in their mother's laps, and poets sang paeans to beauty.'

It is his complete apathy towards violence that he was so much against nationalism based on the concept of a nation-state which does not hesitate to kill in the name of sovereignty of a nation and rather goes for universal humanism and cosmopolitanism with a difference.

In fact his nationalistic zeal on one side

i) called for the acceptance of a radical

Social programme as described in his essay '*byadhi o pratikar*' (Malady and Cure, 1907) against the divisive forces of caste, creed, poverty, and alienation between the elite and the masses and thus moving towards a more abiding freedom than what the political movement could attain and

ii) On the other side his approach to nation and nationalism was very different. He remained anti-imperialist all through his life but went against any kind of violent or narrow nationalism and spoke about a world-embracing and inclusive nationalism which became the basis of Pt. Nehru's vision of India's future as a liberal secular democracy.

The idea of the modern nation-state entered Indian society in the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Most nationalist leaders were unhappy about the absence of a proper nation-state and thought that it led to India's backwardness.

For Tagore India's unity was a social reality. It was not a political agenda. At the back of his participation in the Hindu mela (a fair founded by the Tagore family to promote indigenous goods, ideas and Hindu-Muslim unity in 1867) from the age of 14 to his renouncing the knighthood after the Jalianwala Bagh massacre at the age of 58 and even after that his anti-imperialist viewpoints forcefully displayed in his last stirring lecture 'The Crisis in Civilization' at the age of 80 in which he mentioned the impertinent challenge by the imperial ruler to our conscience there was no

politics. His anti-imperial disposition was a universal struggle for political justice and cultural dignity and a protest against violence.

In his classic autobiography, *Errata: An Examined Life*, George Steiner, one of the foremost philosophers of the 20<sup>th</sup> 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 20<sup>th</sup> 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 20<sup>th</sup> Century, can be attributed to the conflicting claims of Nation States. Far from acting as an instrument for realizing 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', 20<sup>th</sup> 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 20<sup>th</sup> 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.

By hindsight, at the beginning of the new millennium, it would be admitted that much of Tagore's reflections on the subject have been borne out by the unfolding of history, following his passing in 1941.

Tagore undoubtedly was a powerful critic of worshipping the Nation as God and was horrified by the crimes committed by modern nation-states. Yet he loved the land that had nurtured him and never abandoned a basic anti-colonial or anti-imperialistic stance and even gave up his knighthood for the heinous crime committed by the British in 1919 by killing the unarmed peaceful people in Jalianbala Bagh in Amritsar, India. However he simply did not want Indian patriots to imitate European nationalists. It is not without reason that Mahatma Gandhi in his obituary comment on Rabindranath Tagore in 1941 lauded the poet as 'an ardent nationalist'.

Tagore was for non-parochial inclusive nationalism relevant to humanity. It is very difficult to understand it as people did not understand how a man could bring freedom to a country by the help of salt and charkha (spinning wheel) as the medieval devotional poets brought a religio-social revolution with the help of chadar(sheet), chunari(scarf) or seeds and earth.

Tagore did not reject nationalism but formed his own understanding of it by studying what was authentic in his country's history. He thought

- i) it was essential for us to fight against social injustice rather than political freedom,
- ii) to work for an adjustment of races, to acknowledge the real differences between them and yet seek some basis of unity,
- iii) not to accept violent and exclusive patriotism as our final spiritual shelter but seek refuge in humanity and
- iv) hence his motto for Viswabharati, (the university which he founded in Shantiniketan) was *yatra*

*viswam bhavet eka nidam* where the world meets

in a nest;

v) not to accept the concept of violent nationalism

from the west which would mean selling our

own inheritance and

vi) Tagore never wanted the idea of the Indian nation to supersede the idea of Indian civilization. Tagore, as said earlier, believed in non-parochial inclusive nationalism (unself-critical Indian nationalism: Nandi) and also in patriotism which rejected violent nationalism hence he could make such a statement that I am not a patriot – I shall ever seek my compatriots all over the world (letter of Tagore to Andrews). This kind of a statement created a false impression in the minds of a large number of Indians who even attacked him and still being attacked for the ‘insufficient nationalism’ expressed in his song ‘Jana gana mana’ which became the national song of India. However, Western nationalism which became a strong basis of a nation-state became illegitimate for him as explained in detail by Ashis Nandi. Both Tagore and Gandhi created a moral universe and made it a part of politics and gave a bigger lofty meaning to nationalism.

Today the new reading of nationalism by Tagore looks so relevant because of disastrous consequences of the prevalent notion of nationalism which we witnessed in the world :

i) In the name of nationalism in the West ethnic nationalism unfolded itself resulting in two world wars;

ii) In India nationalism has turned into ethnic politics which is creating all kind of problems for India;

iii) Nationalism is spreading terrorism;

iv) In the name of nationalism one finds deaths and conflicts in the 3<sup>rd</sup> world countries of Asia and Africa;

v) The countries of Africa fought against colonialism and racialism to regain their freedom and the spirit of nationalism but now the net result of that is that these countries have become dens of corruption, cruelty and insolence;

vi) The West is now seriously thinking has nation-state failed? Post colonial critics such as Ernest Gallner, Benedict Anderson, Tom Nairn or Frantz Fanon have pointed out how nationalism cultivates the sentiments of irrationality, prejudice and hatred in people

Now nationalism looks like a dark elemental unpredictable primeval power which Tagore called *bhougholick opodevata*. Tagore but at the same time spoke loudly about

i) Living in freedom and

ii) reasoning in freedom

Tagore's attitude to politics and culture, nationalism and internationalism, tradition and modernity, and cross-cultural education, can all be seen in the light of his strong attachment to the importance of living in freedom and reasoning in freedom.

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Tagore did not ignore the state but it was not a deciding factor for him. State and community both were important for him and both were complementary to each other.

Tagore's concept of a nation was not nation-state nor he was thinking of a federation of nations- turning everything into one homogenized 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 homogenized universalism based on an idea of cultural uniqueness 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 and 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, (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, Mass., 1996). On the contrary Tagore puts it; 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, 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.

But 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' Tagore is critiquing western way of thinking and using nature as a political metaphor to raise the voice of resistance against the western civilizational values but at the same time saying 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, says 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.' (Nationalism, 1985 p.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 realized only in the unity of mankind and 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.*