

Empire and Nation: Political Ideas in Rabindranath Tagore's Travel Writings

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Introduction

Empire and nation are interrelated and inseparable discourses, deeply ingrained in the modern imagination. Edward Said describes imperialism as “the practice, theory, and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan centre ruling a distant territory” (8). Hobson, on the other hand, defines it as “a natural overflow of nationality” (7). Modern European nation-states came into existence when the old feudal and imperial socio-political systems of the classical and medieval periods proved obsolete and inadequate with the advent of the Renaissance and the Reformation. The Industrial Revolution, which gave rise to a new form of machine economy and mercantile capitalism, was especially influential in their formation. In time, these nation-states created their own empires, which began to disintegrate with the burgeoning of nationalist awareness in the colonized Third World societies.

Nationalism has proven difficult to define. Foucault calls it a “discursive formation” (qtd. in Brennan 170), while Benedict Anderson characterizes it as “imagined community” (6). According to Mariategui, “The nation... is an abstraction, an allegory, a myth that does not correspond to a reality that can be scientifically defined” (187-88). On the contrary, Lawson suggests “Nationalism is a reaction of peoples who feel culturally at a disadvantage” (169). In spite of its “fictive” nature and the difficulty of defining it with any degree of precision, nationalism has become, as Anderson argues, “the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time” (3). Dipesh Chakrabarty goes a step further to claim that European imperialism and Third World nationalism have together achieved the

“universalization of the nation-state as the most desirable form of political community” (19). Empire is comparatively easy to define; it refers to the policy of territorial expansion or acquisition of foreign lands for purposes of material, cultural and political gain for the dominant or imperial nation. In the case of the more recent “classical imperialism,” it refers to European expansionist policies, or systematic Europeanization of the globe, which began with “informal imperialism,” or the “imperialism of free trade” in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

My objective in this essay is to interrogate Tagore’s ideas on the intersecting discourses of empire and nation in his travel writings, and argue that many of the pitfalls of the two institutions put forth by this inveterate champion of human subjectivity and global unity have been duly emphasized by other socio-cultural critics and thinkers before and after him. Tagore is well known for his diatribes on both empire and nation, which he saw as “hideously profane cult[s]” or “cult[s] of Devil-worship” (*Letters* 98), responsible for a “whirlwind of race antipathy” (*Letters* 139) and for turning the world into “a tower of skulls” (Dutta, *Anthology* 192). However, when we think of Tagore’s views of empire and nation, generally we turn to his more canonical writings, such as his essays on *Nationalism*, or his novels *The Home and the World* and *Four Chapters*, or the poem “The Sunset of the Century,” which are all primarily dedicated to these two themes.¹ My intention is to argue that he was equally preoccupied with the thematic of empire and nation in much of his travel writings, especially in many of the letters he wrote to family and friends during his trips within the subcontinent as well as to Europe, America, China, Indonesia, Russia and Persia, and the occasional speeches or interviews he gave during these visits.² As in his canonical works, in these letters, interviews and speeches, he characteristically dismisses both nation and empire as the twin axis of egoism and evil, and urges humanity to reach out for a cultural confederation between races/nations, attainable through a global dialogue, or a creative interlocution between the East and the West.

Tagore believed that inclusivism and synergic interaction between cultures would propel the world towards harmony and global fellowship, through the appropriation of *Santam*, *Sivam*, and *Advaitam*, principles he borrowed from the Upanishads. Elucidating this three-fold ideology, in a letter to Charles Andrews, sent from Kashmir, Tagore observes:

The first stage towards freedom is the Santam, the true peace, which can be attained by subduing self; the next stage is the Sivam, the true goodness, which is the activity of the soul when self is subdued; and then the Advaitam, the love, the oneness with all and with God. Of course this division is merely logical; these stages, like rays of light, may be simultaneous or divided according to the circumstances, and their order may be altered, such as the Sivam leading to Santam. But all we must know is that the Santam, Sivam, Advaitam, is the only goal for which we live and struggle. (*Letters* 50)

This comment immediately establishes the poetic and spiritual basis of Tagore's political ideas. He exhorts humanity to bring about inner unity of the self, by overcoming worldly distractions, so as to attain oneness with the world. It involves a two-way process, since it requires the individual to deny his mind and senses to accomplish selfhood, and withdraw into his soul to become one with the world. Only by sacrificing the duality of the *self* and the *world* or *I* and *you*, can the human individual (and by extension a nation) become part and parcel of the whole. In the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, Yagnavalkya explains this principle to Maitreyi:

As long as there is duality, one sees *the other*, one hears *the other*, one smells *the other*, one speaks to *the other*, one thinks of *the other*, one knows of *the other*; but when for the illumined soul the all is dissolved in the Self, who is there to be seen by whom, who is there to be smelt by whom, who is there to be heard by whom, who is there to be spoken to by whom, who is there to be thought of by whom, who is there to be known by whom? (89)³

Thus, the only process for getting rid of the duality of *self* and *other* is eradication of the self (ego), which immediately connects the individual with the larger world. In a letter from New York, advocating this principle of non-duality as a way of emancipation from the political and moral contortions modern man has spun around himself, and for bringing about a peaceful and united world, Tagore advises: "Let us be rid of all false pride and rejoice at any lamp being lit in any corner of the world, knowing that it is a part of the common illumination of our house" (*Letters* 111). This selfless rejoicing of things big or small, with an express feeling that they are all equal, requires the individual and nation to rise above the taints of pride and passion, or of worldly *Maya*, and appreciate that, to quote from *Chandogya Upanishad*, "What is in the macrocosm is in the microcosm" (74), and vice versa.

Tagore, Empire, and Nation

Tagore was born at a critical juncture in Indian history, in 1861 - four years after the great indigenous uprising against the East India Company was successfully crushed, and three years after “the British Parliament passed the Government of India Act, transferring ‘all rights’ that the company had hitherto enjoyed on Indian soil directly to the crown” (Wolpert 239). This transfer of power consolidated the British imperial hold on the subcontinent, creating an environment in which the Indians were enslaved by an alien power in their homeland. They became the beasts of burden for another society, toiling away so that the English could be fed, clothed, nourished and, as Tagore tauntingly suggests in a letter from Russia, “become great and do great things for mankind” (Dutta, *Anthology* 121). Being a humanitarian at heart, he could not understand or accept the rationale behind this British exploitation and injustice in India. He wondered why the Indians were used as a lamp stand to irradiate English life, while the Indians themselves remained smeared in trickles of oil. Why should the British systematically pilfer the Indian coffer and inflict the indignity of poverty and pandering on the local people? Why couldn’t the two sides seize the moment of encounter between the East and the West in a creative, constructive spirit, for establishing mutuality and equality between the races, instead of the blind and irrational contempt and corresponding hatred and vengefulness that prevailed between the groups?

Tagore’s rejection of the Empire and imperialism was deep seated in his consciousness, and he categorically expresses his outrage against this hierarchical political system in his travel writings. His basic stricture against this oppressive practice was that it was based on the binary of self and other – one race imposing its political and cultural will viciously and violently on another, giving rise to a culture of ruthless exploitation, manipulation, and prejudice. Tagore articulates his universal rejection of this repressive political structure in a letter from London, responding to a woman who had accused him of being unduly critical of the British people in one of his lectures:

I deeply feel for the races who are being insulted and injured by the ruthless exploitation of the powerful nations belonging to the West and the East. I feel as much for the negroes, brutally lynched in America, often for economic reasons, and for the Koreans, who are the latest victims of Japanese imperialism, as for any wrongs done to the helpless multitude in my own country. (*Letters* 127-28)

Tagore felt morally outraged by the fact that one nation should rule over another by brute force, and thrive on the life-blood of the victim nation. This was an insult to human dignity on both sides, as it flagrantly violated the law of autonomy of the self. Moreover, as an ideal or action, it was unscrupulous, even scandalously criminal. It created a mold of victimizer-victim, ruler-ruled, master-slave and deterred the races from growing out of this symbiotic relationship and fulfilling their true human potential. This scramble for new land was motivated by what Hobsbawm would call greed, or what Said later described as a wish for cultural dominance. Tagore saw it as a corollary of "homicidal pride of sect and lust for gain" (*Parasya Jatri* 148). To him, this hegemonism was as morally detrimental to the English as it was to Indians. In a letter to Romain Rolland, dated 19 October 1919, he cautions:

Parasitism, whether based upon power or upon weakness, must breed degeneracy.... And the time seems fast approaching when the soul will be sucked dry from the civilization of Europe also by the growing lust for gain in her commerce and politics, unless she has the wisdom and power to change her mind and not merely her system. (Dutta, *Anthology* 166)

Tagore was particularly disturbed by the inherent violence in the relationship between the colonizer and colonized nations, which he captured in a poignant metaphor, used in a letter to Charles Andrews, elaborating the long-standing struggle between England and Ireland: "It is a python which refuses to disgorge this living creature which struggles to live its separate life" (*Letters* 118). This tendency of one nation to consume another by animal force, in order to meet its own greed, unleashes a cycle of endless violence, taking its toll on innocent people. In a letter from Persia he recollects his experience of the reckless bombing of Iraqis by the occupying British soldiers, who were gleefully killing innocent children and women to establish their might and economic right over the land. Depicting an incident that is eerily and ironically similar to Iraq's current experience in the hands of the Americans, (which goes to validate Tagore's argument that the monolithic modern civilization has brought considerable material prosperity, but humanity still remains trapped in a vicious cycle of greed, lust and war for lack of a guiding moral principle), Tagore comments in utter disbelief:

A British air force is stationed at Baghdad. Its Christian chaplain informs me that they are engaged in bombing operations on some

Sheikh villages. The men, women and children done to death there meet their fate by a decree from the stratosphere of British imperialism – which finds it easy to shower death because of its distance from its individual victims. So dim and insignificant do those unskilled in the modern arts of killing appear to those who glory in such skill! Christ acknowledged all mankind to be the children of his Father; but for the modern Christian both father and children have receded into shadows, unrecognizable from the elevation of his bombing plane – for which reason these blows are dealt at the very heart of Christ himself. (Dutta, *Anthology* 127)

Tagore's reference to Christ reaffirms his allegiance to the principle of *Ahimsa* or non-violence as, like Christ, he was a proponent of human fellowship, love, and sympathetic neighborliness, and opposed to barbaric ferocity between individuals or nations. The poet's love for non-violence was central to his imagination, and in many ways he was a precursor of Gandhi in introducing and popularizing the ideal of non-violence on the Indian political stage. His novel *The Home and the World*, which came out in 1915, had championed the doctrine of non-violence in his protagonist Nikhil, well before Gandhi embarked on his *Satyagraha* movement, with non-violent non-cooperation as the main strategy to withstand the imperial might. Besides, in the wake of the Amritsar massacre on 13 April 1919, it was Tagore who made the first public protest against the heinous incident. He repudiated his Knighthood (conferred on him in 1915), in an open letter to the viceroy, published in the Indian press on 2 June, when no other Indian politician was willing to risk his career confronted by the Rowlatt legislation. Moreover, he did this well before Gandhi returned his awards to the viceroy on 1 August 1920. Tagore's message on the unholy alliance between imperialism and violence was potent but simple, cogently summed up in his *Izvestia* interview in Russia, "Violence begets violence and blind stupidity. Freedom of mind is needed for the reception of truth; terror hopelessly kills it. The brute cannot subdue the brute. It is only the man who can do it" (Dutta, *Anthology* 125).⁴

Tagore was opposed to imperial arrogance and its capacity for misery and injustice in the world, but he was equally critical of the parochialism and chauvinism fomented by nationalism. In a letter from Vienna, Austria, he affirmed: "I have said over and over again that the aggressive spirit of nationalism and imperialism, religiously cultivated by most of the nations of the West, is a menace to the whole world" (Dutta, *Selected Letters* 333). He recurrently saw an ongoing nexus between the two forces as, like Hobson, he judged imperialism as an

expression of national egoism, and both as potent sites of power discourse. He argued that the Europeans had come to India and other parts of the world driven by their love and pride for their own nation. They plundered other countries only to further the prosperity of their own land, and to establish its power and authority in the world. Their patriotism blinded them to the betterment of humanity, and they sacrificed their innate good qualities to fulfill an aberrant sense of superiority, swayed by a distorted logic, which Tagore summed up in a letter from Russia: “For if no one was down below, no one was up above... the advance of civilization depends on keeping down the bulk of humanity and denying it its human rights” (Dutta, *Anthology* 121).

Tagore’s diatribe on nationalism, or his anti-nationalist sentiment, is perhaps the single most consistent political motif in all his writings: his essays, lectures, poems, plays and fiction. He began his systematic attack on the doctrine of nationalism long before the ideal gained its political and emotional legitimacy in modern society, or became, as Bill Ashcroft and his co-writers suggest, “the most implacably powerful force in twentieth century politics” (151). In a poem entitled “The Sunset of the Century,” written on the last day of the nineteenth century, Tagore indicts nationalism as a source of war and carnage. In this poem, he depicts the political idea of the nation as a famished and ruthlessly rapacious creature that in its omnivorous greed is bent on destroying the world. In what is his first, and one of his most caustic attacks on nationalism, he writes:

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....
(*Nationalism* 80, ll. 1-5)

This same view of nationalism as a diabolical force, or “a cruel epidemic of evil” (*Nationalism* 9) as he dubs it elsewhere – which also forms the core of his lectures on nationalism in 1916, and his novels, *The Home and the World* and *Four Chapters*, published respectively in 1915 and 1934 – persists in his travel writings, especially in many of his letters sent from abroad. However, since the letters are more intimate and informal, meant for an individual friend or family

member, his message comes across in them more directly and forcefully than his other published works; they capture the poet's impromptu responses to events without any literary disguise. Moreover, the letters and his travel writings generally compliment his canonical works by giving a more complete picture of his ideas on empire and nation.

Tagore considered nationalism as a highly intoxicating and addictive sentiment that breeds radicalism and passionate excitement in people. Comparing nationalist zeal and religious fanaticism, in that they both mutilate the sense and sensibility of the individual and nations, in a letter from New York, dated 20 December 1920, he wrote: "Formalism in religion is like nationalism in politics: it breeds sectarian arrogance, mutual misunderstanding and a spirit of persecution" (*Letters* 85). Tagore also accused nationalism of exclusivism and provincialism since it creates artificial walls between nations by enclosing each in a separate "geographical cage." It eventually leads individuals to think in a narrow either/or mode of fierce separateness between one nation and another, fostering aggressive national egoism and fatal rivalry amongst nations. In a letter from Stockholm, dated 27 May 1921, he explains:

The nations love their own countries; and that national love has only given rise to hatred and suspicion of one another.... When we hear "Bande Mataram" ["Hail to thee mother" – a nationalist slogan in India that became popular during the *Swadeshi* movement in Bengal, in 1905] from the housetops, we shout to our neighbors: "You are not our brothers".... Whatever may be its use for the present, it is like the house being set on fire simply for roasting the pig! Love of self, whether national or individual, can have no other destination except suicide. (*Letters* 143)

In another letter from New York, dated 8 February 1921, Tagore recounts how he himself witnessed the sinister effect of this dichotomous sentiment in the US, culminating in emotional and sometimes physical violence towards people who were deemed as "other." He gives the examples of the Asians, who were viewed with antipathy by the mainstream white community, and the blacks, who were "burnt alive, sometimes merely because they tried to exercise their right to vote, given to them by law" (*Letters* 98). Moreover, the Germans were "reviled," and the Russians were "deliberately misrepresented." In other words, Tagore asserts that for Americans to realize their national identity as a people, they had to constantly put themselves on a higher plane and calumniate others, or see their relationships with non-whites and non-Americans in a dichotomous

light. They had to feed their individual and national egos through “a continual supply of hatred, contempt, jealousy and lies and lies” (*Letters* 98).

Tagore was a holistic thinker, who believed in the multifaceted nature of the human being; “To me humanity is rich and large and many-sided” (*Letters* 92), he wrote in a letter from New York, dated 14 January 1921. To operate efficaciously in society, any ideal would have to take into account this multiplicity in the human individual and bring wholesome nourishment for the whole being. This multiplicity included body, mind and soul, and for Tagore an ideal had to minister to each of these attributes so that each is brought to fullness. Only then would the individual’s inner unity and creative bond of wholeness be reinforced, steering the world towards a “grand harmony of all human races” (*Letters* 108). Given this multilateral outlook, Tagore naturally perceived nationalism to be a unilateral and monolithic concept, utterly indifferent to the spiritual aspect of the human individual. Nationalism required the individual and nation to sacrifice the spirit, or the higher ideal of humanity, at the altar of greed and gain, magnifying thereby, Tagore explains, “our vulgarity [and] cruelty... dethroning God, to put up [the] bloated self in its place” (*Letters* 98). This forceful displacement of the sacred element of the soul with self-love is sacrilege to Tagore, and one that upsets man’s moral balance by subjugating his inherent nobility and goodness to a worldly *Maya*.

Tagore was outraged by the idea of the nation in general but much of his criticism was directed against Gandhi’s nationalist movement in particular. He had a great personal respect for Gandhi, but he could not accept the latter’s political vision of *Swadeshi* and *Swaraj* for various reasons. He believed Gandhi’s movement had no spiritual basis; it did not fulfill the Upanishadic principle that we all belong to One Self-Effulgent *Brahman* and that we should work towards realizing that divine one identity of humanity by overcoming worldly temptations. Instead, his search for a separate identity for India helped frustrate the attainment of that Ultimate Reality by creating a world that is disunited and fractured. In one of his letters from Chicago, Tagore painfully explains how Gandhi’s nationalist program was more inclined towards the Buddhist philosophy of *dukkha* (misery) and *nirvana*, than the Hindu philosophy of *Om* (everlasting yes), *anandam* (blissful joy) and *mukti*. *Nirvana* calls on the individual to attain the truth of *nothingness* by following the negative path of destroying the self. *Mukti*, on the other hand, requires the self to reach out for *Brahman* through the positive path of purifying the soul of its worldly delusions and forgetfulness.⁵ This latter idea can be best understood in light of the following statement from *Mundaka Upanishad*:

The individual self, deluded by forgetfulness of his identity with the divine Self, bewildered by his ego, grieves and is sad. But when he recognizes the worshipful Lord as his own true Self, and beholds his glory, he grieves no more.... The Lord is the one life shining forth from every creature. Seeing him present in all, the wise man is humble, puts not himself forward. His delight is in the Self, his joy is in the Self, he serves the Lord in all. Such as he, indeed, are the true knowers of Brahman. (47)

With his intrinsically peaceful and harmonious view of humanity and god, Tagore came to believe that Gandhi's *Satyagraha* movement, in spite of Gandhi's non-violent objectives, was generating excessive negative excitement among Indians, inflaming their hatred and vengefulness against the British.⁶ Such proliferation of emotional violence could not remedy India's problems, since what India needed was the wisdom of love, acceptance and tolerance and not a spirit of hostility and persecution. Hostility would only breed more hostility, pushing the country to the brink of destruction. Besides, as Tagore points out sharply, in a letter from London, "it is hateful to hate" (*Letters* 126) – a *weltanschauung* rooted in hatred can reap no positive outcome. In another letter from Ardennes, France, dated 7 September 1920, he encourages his compatriots to disperse their negative sentiments for the sake of their self-respect and pride, "Stung by the insult of cruel injustice we try to repudiate Europe, but by doing so we insult ourselves. Let us have the dignity not to quarrel or retaliate; not to pay back smallness by being small ourselves" (*Letters* 69). In the same letter, he further reminds his fellow Indians that their true mission should be to carry out their own duties wholeheartedly and not worry about the wrong doings of others. "Let us... set our house in order. Do not mind the waves of the sea, but mind the leaks in your vessel" (*Letters* 70), he said.

The above comment brings us to the crux of Tagore's argument. He essentially believed that India ought to be more inward looking and soul-searching; that it should strive to redress its own overwhelming social problems before it could gain the moral authority to resist the injustices of the British. How could India rightfully stand up against an oppressive colonial power, when it had for centuries abused multitudes of its own people? India should first address the caste issue, which had taken a hypnotic hold on the mind of its people, creating a gigantic system of cold-blooded repression of the untouchables. It should also address the issues of poverty and gender discrimination, and work out a method to foster religious and racial harmony among its various

groups. If India could come to grips with its “burden of heterogeneity” and forge a horizontal relationship between its cross-sections of people, it would then become imperative for the British to quit India because of the moral superiority of the natives. Perhaps it would then also provide a positive lesson to the British and the rest of the world on how to live in fellowship and mutual harmony in a multi-racial and multi-religious milieu, without degenerating into physical or intellectual brutality.

Tagore believed that the real solution to India’s problems was education and the enlivening of Indian minds, and not a “blind revolution” (Dutta, *Anthology* 240) or the miracle of political freedom built upon the quicksand of social slavery. What India needed was a “thought impetus” (Dutta, *Anthology* 240) similar to the one experienced by Europe during the Renaissance. If India could get proper education and induce the spirit of sacrifice in its people, then it could rise like a giant from its “dry sand-bed of dead customs” (Dutta, *Anthology* 166). He was convinced that Gandhi could help India in this regard by kindling the fire of love and undertaking programs of cooperation among its people. He goaded Gandhi to invest his leadership genius to educating Indians and motivating them to social service, rather than exciting them with his nationalist call, which Tagore felt was not a constructive deed. In a letter from Paris, dated 18 September 1920, he wrote in a solicitous tone, referring to Gandhi: “I shall be willing to sit at his feet and do his bidding if he commands me to cooperate with my countrymen in service and love. I refuse to waste my manhood in lighting fires of anger and spreading it from house to house” (*Letters* 72-73).

Tagore rebuffed Gandhi’s nationalist movement for another reason: he reckoned that like any other movement, it glorified an abstract Cause at the expense of the individual. In consequence, many individual lives were sacrificed foolishly at the altar of the Cause. As a poet, who valued the concrete over the abstract, and a humane thinker, who deemed every single life invaluable and sacred, this practice of perceiving the individual through the prism of a giant cause, reducing him/her to a phantom, was utterly unacceptable to him. In a letter from Chicago to his friend Charles Andrews, dated 5 March 1921, Tagore complains how many Indian college students were taking up Gandhi’s call to boycott the British education system and sacrificing their learning and future, without any alternative provision planned for them by the leaders. This negligence of the leaders would inflict serious injustice on the students, as their passionate response to the call would deprive them of a possible better future, which they could have otherwise accomplished through proper education. Tagore expresses his fury in the letter at such unscrupulous victimization of helpless

youths for an ideal that, in itself, was ill advised and flawed – and a practice he saw was becoming rather too commonplace in the modern world. In a tone of mockery, mixed with lamentation, he writes, “I wish I were the little creature Jack whose one mission was to kill the giant abstraction which is claiming the sacrifice of the individuals all over the world under highly painted masks of delusion” (Dutta, *Anthology* 171).

Conclusion

Tagore was a highly conscientious and optimistic writer. He was never willing to compromise his ideals for any practical, political or personal gain. He knew that siding with Gandhi during the Indian independence movement would significantly boost his popularity among his people, but he refused to do so and voluntarily courted the risk of being accused of disloyalty by the striving millions in the country. However, his refusal to participate in the nationalist movement should not lead us to think that he did not love India. He certainly did, and not any less than Gandhi or any of his other contemporaries or compatriots. He was the first poet to imaginatively capture India’s glory and beauty in his many songs and poems, which have become truly immortal, especially in his native Bengal. Two of his songs were retrospectively chosen for national anthems of India and Bangladesh respectively, thus making him the only poet in the world to have the honor of authorship of two national anthems. He set up a university, a bank, a match factory and a weaving center to help out his people. Yet to the poet, soul and conscience were loftier than love for his country. He would not allow himself to be blinded by his passion for the land, or let the country usurp his moral sense. He truly believed in a global society, in which India would form a part of the whole, and not occupy his whole being. “The complete man must never be sacrificed to the patriotic man, or even to the merely moral man” (*Letters* 92), he warned in a letter from New York, dated 14 January 1921. In a letter from on board S.S. Rhyndam, during his return voyage from Europe in 1921, he further said, elaborating the nature of his love for India, which he saw more as a cultural allegiance than adulation of the land, “I love India, but my India is an idea and not a geographical expression. Therefore, I am *not* a patriot – I shall ever seek my compatriots all over the world” (*Letters* 119).

Tagore consistently believed that imperialism and nationalism were only passing phases in the development of human community. Humanity was too good for such narrow, exclusive, and erratic principles, which patronized social hierarchy, exploitation and reckless

injustice. He affirmed that the days of suffering, disharmony and suspicion were drawing to an end, and a better morrow was awaiting humanity, since both the corrupt forces of imperialism and nationalism were rapidly disintegrating. “We must usher in the age of reason, of cooperation, of a generous reciprocity of cultures which will reveal the richness of our common humanity,” he asserted in a speech in Iraq in 1932. In a letter from New York, he advised: “We must make room for Man, the guest of this age, and not let the nation obstruct his path” (*Letters* 80). In his reply speech to the welcome address by the king of Iraq, on 25 May 1932, he professed in his characteristic tone of conviction and exultation, stepping out of the debris of history, and ushering in a world of ineffable beauty and synchronous rhythm:

Human civilization has crossed the boundaries of racial and national segregation. We are today to build the future of man on an honest understanding of our varied racial personality which gives richness to life, on tolerance and sympathy and cooperation in the great task of liberating the human mind from the dark forces of unreason and mutual distrust of homicidal pride of sect and lust of gain. I pray that Iraq may realize this great responsibility of a coming civilization... let her win her right to a boundless freedom in a world of greatness and proclaim under her high-vaulted heavens the majesty of the spirit of man which is the sacred shrine of the spirit of God. (*Parasya Jatri* 148)

If the current explosive situation in Iraq, in the wake of the American invasion in March 2003, subverts Tagore’s optimistic futurism in the above speech, or his confidence for a better future for the world and humanity expressed in his other travel writings, then it also ratifies and reinstates the significance of his global vision. It shows that without the search for a global identity, the world remains locked in a nationalism of *Realpolitik* in which, as Radhakrishnan pointed out, “self-interest is the end; brute force, the means; conscience is taboo” (163), or that brutally ensures the hierarchical world order expressed in Thucydides’ ancient maxim, “large nations do what they wish, while small nations accept what they must” (qtd. in Chomsky 16).

One might be tempted to dismiss Tagore as a romantic and idealistic writer; too pious and unrealistic for a world that prides in its hardheaded, practical approach. But that is not the case. Many of his arguments against empire and nation have been echoed by critics and thinkers before and after him. For example, Tagore’s view that imperialism was motivated by sheer economic and cultural factors, and that it was a site for control and domination of weaker nations by the powerful ones has been emphasized by Hobson, Lenin, and Said.

Hobson explains how in the wake of the Industrial Revolution, Western economies were forced to acquire colonies in order to provide markets for their manufacturers and merchants, and concludes that “It is the economic condition of affairs that forms the taproot of imperialism” (71). Lenin also provides a similar economic definition of imperialism in *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*. Associating imperialism with a particular stage of the development of capitalism, he predicted that in due course the rest of the world would be absorbed by European finance capitalists, owing to an enormous superabundance of capital in the Western countries. Said, on the other hand, stresses that the imperial practice had more to do with the desire for, and belief in, cultural dominance, than pure economic profit. According to him, the ideology of race, the discriminatory binary of “us” and “them,” and the civilizing mission to fulfill the white man’s burden, are factors that contributed to the development of imperial rhetoric and practice in the nineteenth century in the West.

Likewise, many of Tagore’s views on nationalism are intellectually valid, and some are borne by contemporary post-colonial criticism. For example, Tagore’s view that imperialism is but an offshoot of nationalism is shared by Timothy Brennan, who suggests that European nations came into their own and realized their national identity only when they were confronted by the “other” in the colonized nations; “European nationalism,” he argues, “was motivated by what Europe was doing in its far-flung dominions” (qtd. in Bhabha 50). Critics such as Renan, Fanon and Anderson share Tagore’s view that nationalism is not a natural entity but a social construct, and that there is an absence of a moral basis in its formation. They believe that nation is a necessity, which has helped to bolster the modern civilization, and as a political organization 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 moral virtue.

Moreover, critics acknowledge that nationalism begets a sentiment of intolerance and “othering”; that it is a potent site for power discourse, and there is a recurrent hierarchy and hegemony within its structure. Ernest Gellner, Benedict Anderson and Tom Nairn have pointed out the irrationality, prejudice and hatred that nationalism generates within and between nations. Ania Loomba explains how nation “itself is a ground of dispute and debate, a site for the competing imaginings of different ideological and political interests” (207). Leela Gandhi, on the other hand, speaks of the concomitant loathing and racism in the discourse of nationalism, and the horrific violence that is often committed or justified in its name. She explains:

East or West, we are now aware of the xenophobia, racism and loathing which attends the rhetoric of particularism. Nationalism has become the popular pretext for contemporary disquisitions of intolerance, separating Croatians and Serbians, Greeks and Macedonians, Estonians and Russians, Slovaks and Czechs, Armenians and Azerbaijanis, Israelis and Palestinians, Hindus and Muslims. (108)

These arguments add up to show how relevant Tagore still is in present-day society, and that the moral and spiritual basis of his political ideas has not made him outmoded or anachronistic. It is important to realize that Tagore was right in condemning empire and nation as destructive forces, and that we should work wholeheartedly towards building a global society. After having lost more than fifty million people in wars fought in the name of national interest and national security in the twentieth century,⁷ we are now confronted with even greater threats from a growing American military hegemony and its “crusades,” in Chomsky’s view, for “polyarchy” in the name of democracy. There is also the mounting hazard of terrorism spreading around the globe like a virus. Paul Hirst, a leading international social theorist, has predicted a “conflict ridden international environment,” with several conventional wars, “to limited nuclear war” (2) in the twenty-first century, owing to escalating tensions between nations. Such prospects cast shadows of humanity’s potential doom. Perhaps the world could still avert such an apocalyptic future by accepting the path of international fellowship, inclusivism and mutual harmony, paved by the Indian enlightened humanitarian poet, Rabindranath Tagore. By challenging the prevailing political systems of imperialism and nationalism, with a more holistic and wholesome outlook of global unity and cultural confederation between races and nations, we could still realize our full human potential, and live in mutual fellowship, dignity and peace.

Notes

1. I have examined Tagore’s political ideology, within the broad scope of his work, in several other essays, published recently: “In Search of a Spiritual Commonwealth: Tagore’s *The Home and the World*”; “Paradisical Imagination: Rabindranath Tagore’s *Visvobod* or Non-national Neo-universalism”; “Tagore and Nationalism”; “Tagore, Rabindranath,” “Imagining ‘One World’: Rabindranath Tagore’s Critique of Nationalism,” and “Rabindranath Tagore’s *Ghare Baire* (The Home and the World).”

2. It is ironic that Tagore was neither interested in politics nor in traveling, and yet he became a widely traveled writer who frequently used his travel writings for expression of political ideas. His view of politics was, as he wrote in a letter from his ship on return voyage to India from Europe in 1921, it is “politics which in every country has lowered the standard of morality, has given rise to a perpetual contest of lies and deception, cruelties and hypocrisies, and has increased inordinately national habits of national vainglory” (*Letters* 147). Yet he found politics totally unavoidable owing to the circumstances of his time and his station in society: “Politics [are] wholly against my nature; and yet, belonging to an unfortunate country, born to an abnormal situation, we find so difficult to avoid their [sic] outbursts” (*Letters* 134), he stated in a letter from Geneva, dated 6 May 1921. Tagore’s attitude to traveling was likewise ambivalent. “I am not a born traveler – I have not the energy and strength needed for knowing a strange country” (Dutta, *Letters* 213), he recorded in a letter to Charles Andrews. As a poet he loved his isolation, and the life of “sweet obscurity” and “utter inutility.” Yet he traveled far and wide like a roving ambassador for his country; like a *chirapathik* or perpetual wayfarer. Besides, he had high regards for natural travelers, who were in his view more hardy and progressive than those who liked to stay home. The latter were, in his view, more tradition bound and embroiled in dead customs, such as the Indians, who have failed “to get rid of any one of the three-hundred-and-sixty-five items of foolishness that encumber every page of the calendar they so religiously follow” (Dutta, *Anthology* 119), he explained in a letter from Java, Indonesia.

For more information on Tagore’s travels abroad, see Krishna Kripalani, *Rabindranath Tagore: A Biography*.

3. The essential teaching of *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* is the oneness of the universe. Everything comes from Brahman and exists in Him, although God in his all-pervasive presence still remains transcendent. The individual can realize who he is only when he realizes this truth. Much of the teaching occurs in the form of dialogues between Gargya and Ajatasatru, Yagnavalkya and his wife Maitreyi, and Yagnavalkya and several wise Brahmins at the court of Janaka, King of Videha. This particular extract is taken from the exchanges between Yagnavalkya and his wife Maitreya, in which Yagnavalkya explains that it is the knowledge of Self, or identification of the individual with Brahman, and not accumulation of wealth, that brings peace and immortality to the human soul.

4. Tagore and Gandhi had much in common with one another in their outlooks. Both were inspired by the Hindu scriptures and believed in human dignity and equality; both shared the ideas of non-violence, eradication of untouchability, and Hindu-Moslem unity. Moreover, both wanted India to shake off its indolence, stasis and inertia and realize its full potential as a people through education, self-awareness, mutual fellowship and self-reliance. However, when it came to the method of attaining India’s future, the two parted their separate ways. Tagore believed that human beings were essentially spiritual beings, and therefore freedom was an internal state – freedom of the soul; the presence of the Englishman had nothing to do with the culturally decadent state of Indians. In a letter to Gandhi, he explained, “To gain one’s

own country means to realize one's own soul more fully expanded within it. This can only be done when we are engaged in building it up with our service, our ideas and our activities. Man's country being the creation of his own inner nature, when his soul thus expands within it, it is more truly expressed, more fully realized" (Duncan 103). He also said that "love of country" need not create "hatred of the foreigner" (Duncan 102), as Indians need to "win the country not from some foreigner, but from our own inertia, our own indifference" (Duncan 103). Tagore's ultimate faith was in the "unity of humanity," which, in his view, could be attained "by destroying the bondage of nationalism," and realizing "the *Advaita* of humanity," and not by "harping on others' faults and quarrelsomeness" (Duncan 119).

Unlike Tagore, Gandhi was an advocate of anti-colonial nationalism. He believed that India could come to its own only by resisting the British and by rediscovering its own heritage. Gandhi explained his nationalist principle in the following words:

After much thinking, I have arrived at a definition of Swadeshi that perhaps best illustrates my meaning. Swadeshi is that spirit in us which restricts us to the use and service of our immediate surroundings to the exclusion of the more remote. Thus, as for religion, in order to satisfy the requirements of the definition, I must restrict myself to my ancestral religion.... In the domain of politics I should make use of the indigenous institutions and serve them by curing them of their proved defects. In that of economics I should use only the things that are produced by my immediate neighbors and serve those industries by making them efficient and complete where they might be found wanting. (Duncan 135-36)

Motivated by such principles of indigeniety and cultural essentialism, Gandhi urged Indians to reject the superficial glitter of modern civilization, which was but a gift of Western imagination. In *Hind Swaraj*, advising Indians to valiantly resist the cultural viscosity of Europe, he wrote, "We brought the English, and we keep them. Why do you forget that our adoption of their civilization makes their presence in India at all possible? Your hatred against them ought to be transferred to their civilization" (66).

Gandhi's nationalist movement was, however, based on nonviolent non-cooperation. He preferred "soul force" to "brute force," and sought to pit his yogic powers of self-control, abstinence and suffering against the awesome might of the world's greatest empire. In 1920, upon becoming the undisputed leader of the Congress Party, Gandhi drafted a new Congress Constitution, whose first principle became its credo, "the attainment of Swaraj by the people of India by all legitimate and peaceful means" (Wolpert 303). Gandhi's revolutionary program earned him the support of both Jinnah and Nehru, but not all the Congress leaders were on his side. Subhas Chandra Bose, a young Bengali leader, whose first ambition was to join the British military service and who was to later become Gandhi's main rival in the party until his expulsion in 1939, did not share any of Gandhi's religious aversion to violence. He, like Manabendranath Roy, the founder of India's Communist Party, and Aurobindo Ghosh, another Bengali intellectual, believed violence as a legitimate means to

attain India's independence. Aurobindo Ghosh, who came before both Bose and Roy, summed up the sentiment of this revolutionary camp, in his following passage:

The morality of the Kshatriya justifies violence in times of war... Aggression is unjust only when unprovoked; violence unrighteous when committed wantonly or for unrighteous ends... The sword of the warrior is as necessary to the fulfillment of justice and righteousness as the holiness of the saint... To maintain justice and prevent the strong despoiling, the weak from being oppressed, is the function for which the Kshatriya was created. "Therefore," says Sri Krishna in *Mahabharata*, "God created battle and armor, the sword, the bow and the dagger." (Qtd. in Quayum, "In Search of a Spiritual Commonwealth" 35)

5. Gandhi's response to Tagore's accusation was as follows: "I venture to suggest that the poet has done an unconscious injustice to Buddhism in describing *nirvana* as merely a negative state. I make bold to say that *mukti* (emancipation) is as much a negative state as *nirvana*. Emancipation from or extinction of the bondage of the flesh leads to *ananda* (eternal bliss). Let me close this part of the argument by drawing attention to the fact that the final word of the Upanishads (Brahmavidya) is Not. *Neti* was the best description the authors of the Upanishads were able to find for Brahman" (Duncan 122).

6. In spite of Gandhi's non-violent objectives, his program did result in violent riots on several occasions. In 1921, soon after Gandhi called for nationwide civil disobedience, there were widespread riots in Bombay, with Hindus and Muslims uniting primarily to attack Parsis, Christians and Jews in the city. In January 1922, twenty-two Indian police constables were burnt by fire by a rowdy mob inside their headquarters in Chauri Chaura, which led Gandhi to temporarily abandon his program. After several days of fasting and meditation, he emerged from his withdrawal to report that he has been warned by God that "there is not as yet in India that non-violent and truthful atmosphere which alone can justify mass disobedience, which can be at all described as civil, which means gentle, truthful, humble, knowing, willful yet loving, never criminal and hateful" (qtd. in Wolpert 307).

7. For estimated figures on the number of deaths in wars and other forms of political violence in the twentieth century, see <<http://user.erols.com/mwhite28/atrox.htm>>.

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