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## Rabindranath Tagore: An Advocate Of Humanism

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### **Abstract:**

*Rabindranath Tagore rejected nationalism as it 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 the Tagore's imagination in most of his writing: his letters, essays, lectures, poems, plays and fictions. Despite this, Tagore was a highly patriotic poet. But he never placed patriotism above soul, conscience and love for humanity. He had a strong faith in an interactive, dialogical world given to a deep sense of sympathy, generosity and mutuality and in which nations would not be parochial, xenophobic and centripetal guided by more selfish and self –aggrandizement., but poised towards a morally and politically enlightened community of nations through the espousal of a centrifugal outlook, multilateral imagination, principle of universality and reciprocal recognitions. Modern nations, to him, seem to be merely an organization of politics and commercialization armed with power and wealth. It promotes only the material wellbeing of the people, but not their moral and spiritual health where the soul rests. So, it is important to restore the soul to its rightful place.*

*This requires a humanitarian intervention into present self seeking and belligerent nationalism*

**Key words:** Nationalism, Humanitarianism, Mutuality, Universality, Belligerent.

### **1.Introduction**

Rabindranath Tagore, though often referred to as a 'nationalist poet' or a 'nationalist leader', wide ranging controversies still revolves round on the theme, since by the end of the first decade of the twentieth century Tagore had explicitly rejected nationalism. Even his well known intimates have disputed his nationalist ambivalence in different occasions. In a letter sent by Mahalanabis to Edward J. Thomson in 1921, Mahalanabis claims that Tagore never supported nationalism, not in any form or guise. Even at the height of the Swadeshi movement he was protesting against some particular aspects<sup>1</sup>. Tagore's legacy is further complicated by certain trends in post colonial historiography. A subaltern study collective has often presented rather a more complex historical analysis depicting him beyond the dichotomy between nationalist and anti –nationalist. In this version, Rabindranath Tagore, a Bengali intellectual is deeply marked by a spirit of 'cosmopolitanism', 'modernism' and other derivative tropes of western bourgeois intellectual and cultural life<sup>2</sup>. Rabindranath's reputation, outside India and within it, has been, in many occasions suffered from a parochial norms confining him a Bengali poet writing his poems, novels, plays and songs in Bengali- a provincial language. The poet Subhas Mukhapadhyay recalls, 'a time' when the elite of Bengal among themselves to monopolise Tagore. They tried to seal off Tagore, cordoning him away from the (sic) hoi polloi. Then he adds: "There was another trend, serving the same purpose, but in a different way. In the name of ideology and as the sole representatives of the masses, some tried to protect the proletariat from the bourgeois poet's harmful influence<sup>3</sup>. The Bengali Communists have since taken back their hostility to Tagore, they now quote his verses and sings his lyrics with as much gusto as their (bourgeois) compatriots. Such a geographical diminution of the man and his reputation has been beautifully commented by another world traveller and world citizen of Bengali extraction, the sitar player Ravi Sankar. In his autobiography, the musician writes that , 'being Bengali, of course, make it natural for me to feel so moved by Tagore; But I do feel that if he had been born in the west he would now be (as) revered as Shakespeare and Goethe... He is not as popular or well known worldwide as he should be. The Vishva – Bharati are guarding everything he did too jealously, and not doing enough to let the entire world know of his greatness.<sup>4</sup> But still Tagore was a poet, a novelist, a playwright, a lyricist, a composer and a artist. He had good days and bad, but he at his best was outstanding in each of these fields. Tagore's poems and stories are mostly set in Bengal. However, he wrote extensively on the relations between the different cultures and countries of the world through his letters, essays, talks, and polemics. Tagore, writes Humayun Kabir, 'was the first great Indian in recent who went out on a cultural mission of restoring contacts and establishing friendships with peoples of other countries without any immediate or specific educational, economic, political, or, religious aim. It is also remarkable that his cultural journeys were not confined to the Western world.<sup>5</sup> He visited Europe, and North America, but also Japan, China, Iran, Latin America, and Indo-China. In this mission, Rabindranath Tagore was different from Mahatma Gandhi,

Jawaharlal Nehru, and BR Ambedkar- all are revered as the founders of modern India. Gandhi studied law in London and later went to South Africa to work. After he finally returned to India in 1915, he visited England once to negotiate with the British government. Apart from a short trip to Sri Lanka (formerly known as Ceylon), he did not otherwise travel abroad in the last three decades of his life. As a young man Ambedkar went to the United States and the United Kingdom to acquire advanced degrees in law and economics. Then he came back to a life of social activism in India. In later years, his trips to overseas were to participate in political or academic conferences. Nehru, at first glance, seems to have matched Tagore as a world traveller. Nehru first went to overseas as a boy to study at an English public school. Later, in the 1920s and 1930s, he travelled through Europe to forge links between the Indian freedom struggle and the world socialist movement. Still later, as Prime Minister of India between 1947 and 1964, he visited many different countries and continents. He went on his official capacity, representing and negotiating for his nation. Before and after Independence, Nehru's journeys abroad were thus almost wholly political (The one exception was when his wife fell seriously ill and had to be taken to Europe for treatment). On the other hand, Tagore travelled to other lands out of curiosity, with a cosmopolitan outlook simply to see and speak with humans of a cultural background other than his own. Tagore's journey in Japan, America, Europe, China and Erstwhile Soviet Union will open an eye towards the humanitarian, cosmopolitans and modernistic that Rabindranath Tagore preached for the mankind.

## 2. Tagore In Japan

Tagore was very keen to visit Japan. When Tagore arrived for the first time in the Japanese capital of Tokyo in June 1916, some twenty thousand people turned out to receive him at the city's central railway station. By this time, Tagore was known to Europe, America and other parts of the world for his Nobel Prize for literature for his book of self translated poems Gitanjali. Some years previously he had come in contact with Okakura Tenshin, the leading Japanese art historian and art curator of his day. In his book, *The Ideals of the East*, Okakura spoke of three 'mighty' Asian civilizations- India, China, and Japan- while placing his own country at the apex. Japan, he argued, had synthesized and elevated all that was best in Indic and Chinese culture and history.<sup>6</sup> In a letter to a scholar from that country, Tagore wrote, 'I want to know Japan in the outward manifestation of its modern life and in the spirit of its traditional past. I also want to follow the traces of ancient India in your civilization.'<sup>7</sup> Tagore's first speeches in Japan were delivered in Osaka on 1 June 1916. It was reported in the News papers under the headings "Tagore Curses Civilisation". Tagore argued that a special responsibility developed in Japan as the first Asian country to engage with the modern world. Tagore could not believe that 'Japan has become what she is by imitating the West'. He reminded his audience, 'You have the freedom to use the materials you have gathered from the West according to your genius and your need'.<sup>8</sup> The materials Tagore himself was willing to gather were its fabulously rich art and literature, its spirit of justice, its knowledge, and its science. In his speech in Japan, Tagore argued that Japan could, if she wants, show a third way, to embrace the best of the West without damage to her cultural traditions. Disregarding Japanese outward show of nationalism and militarism, Tagore was very impressed by the sophistication of the Japanese aesthetics, as manifested in their gardens and decorations and layout of their homes and shrines. 'True modernism, the poet told their audience, "is freedom of mind, not the slavery of taste. It is independence of thought of action, not tutelage under European schoolmaster".'<sup>9</sup> Tagore's fears for Japan were expressed in interviews to the press before he left the country's shore. He advised the Japanese 'to avail the fruits of the Western civilization, but not to be caught in its meshes'. He himself conceived of a kind of federation of nations in which each contributes its characteristic philosophy'. But Tagore's ambition as it manifested during the visit of Japan was not entirely uncritical. One novelist complained, 'Tagore does not even mention the possible use of material civilization for the benefit of all mankind'. A leading philosopher said sarcastically that Tagore's voice was 'like the song of a ruined country'. As, 'the people of a rising nation, he added, 'I think we should make every effort to especially to exclude the Indian tendency towards pessimism and dispiritedness'. An English journalist made a reaction to the Indian visitor: "Tagore's contempt for mere nationalism is naturally the bitterest pill for the Japanese to swallow, since from the cradle to the grave the importance of being Japanese is firmly impressed upon them. How can they put nationalism behind them? Surely such a doctrine can only be preached by a man whose country has lost its independence--- by an inhabitant of a pale, decaying land, where all things droop to ruin".<sup>10</sup>

## 3. Tagore In America

From Japan Tagore sailed on to the United States. He arrived at the Pacific port city of Seattle in the last week of September in 1916. Two weeks later, he wrote to his son Rathindranath where he expressed his willing to make his school in Santiniketan 'a connecting thread between India and the world'. He continued: "I have to find a world centre for the study of humanity there. The days of petty nationalism are numbered- let the first step towards universal union occur in the fields of Bolpur. I want to make that place somewhere beyond the limits of nation and geography- the first flag of victorious of universal humanism will be planted there. To rid the world of the suffocating coils of national pride will be the task of my remaining year."<sup>11</sup>

Tagore stayed four months in North America, criss- crossing the continent, addressing audience large and small on the perils of nationalism. Like Japan, the United States had not entered the First World War; like Japan it was free to make its destiny other than in the image of Europe. In the United States, Tagore wanted to raise his voice towards internationalism. Thus, he went to argue, 'the spirit of conflict and conquest' had been at 'the centre of Western nationalism'. The decades of a grid driven expansion had now reached their nadir, 'when this cruel war has driven its claws into the vitals of Europe', when her hoard of wealth was brushing into smoke and her humanity is shattered into bits in her battlefield'. The cult of the 'Nation', as practiced by the nations of the Europe, led inevitably to an escalating cycle of conflict, where, 'machine must be pitted against machine, and nation against nation, in an endless bullfight of politics'. But Tagore perhaps was optimistic about America. Unlike the Europeans, the Americans were not

essentially colonialist and that is why America may help Japan in her lesson in Western civilization and China can look upon America with her best confidence. 'America is destined to justify Western civilization to the east. You are carrying all the responsibility of a great future because you are untrammelled by the grasping miserliness of the past'.<sup>12</sup>

Once more, Tagore's hopes as he expressed to the American audience were subjected to ridiculous criticism. A columnist in the Minneapolis Tribune wrote in as much satire as he commented that Tagore 'was the best businessman who ever came to us out of India', who scolded Americans 'at \$700 per scold' while pleading with them 'at \$700 per plead'. The poet was denounced in editorials, review essays, and letters to the newspapers. Tagore's Lectures, when published in book form, were caught in a blistering attack by the Yale geographer Ellsworth Huntington who puts: 'It is wonderful that a man who uses English which is ungrammatical, can hold the reader's attention so steadily'. After he had read through half the book, the reviewer wrote a note to himself describing it as 'a vivid appeal of the weak, impotent, but brainy man of the topics against the over-mastering power of the "nations" which live in the temperate zone. In Huntington's view, 'Tagore seems to oppose the idea of a nation because he belongs to a race which has no nations of its own. Such a race is to be pitied, not blamed'.<sup>13</sup>

In the early twentieth century, the United States, like Japan was eager to engage itself as an important actor on the world stage. The citizens of America were now constructing cities and factories that in size and productivity would exceed those in England and Germany (the two countries from which the bulk of the settlers had come). There was a beautiful combination economic growth and political ambition. The United States had already over powered Spain as the major force in Latin America and it had already gathered interest in Asia. So, Japan from the far East, and the United States from the far West, both sought to achieve global dominance by the means of their scientific knowledge and political structure. In other words, they sought to supersede Europe by the means of Europe. Naturally, they had little time for and less patience with the voice of a seer from a poor and defeated land. Historian Sujit Mukherjee summarizes the American criticisms of Tagore's Lectures in these words: "When Tagore said that Western society was being dehumanized by excessive organization, it was pointed out that lack of organization had not brought happiness to India. When Tagore spoke out Against British rule in India, history was cited to show that of all the rulers of India, the British had been the most just. When Tagore warned America against greedy commercialism, it was said that this very prospect of money making had brought Tagore to this country. The most serious charge against Tagore was that by denouncing nationalism wholesale, he was.....debasement the principles which were then being defended in Europe, preaching social anarchy through denigrating organization, even subverting American youth by advocating pacifism."<sup>14</sup>

#### 4. Tagore In Europe

After his returned from Japan and North America, Tagore set up a university for the study of humanity at Santiniketan. He named the university 'Visva- Bharati', which may be translated as 'India in the world' or 'the world in India'. The prime objective as explained in the Memorandum of Association was to bring together of 'thinkers and scholars of both Eastern and Western countries, free from all antagonisms of race, nationality, creed or caste'. Tagore raised money for his new university through friends in India and by subscriptions from abroad. In the summer of 1920, he undertook an extended trip to Europe for the purpose.

He landed first in England. Incidentally, a debate was going on in the House of Commons over the fate of the 'Butcher of Amritsar', General R Dyer. Dyer had ordered his troops to fire on a peaceful and unarmed crowd of Indians in April 1919. More than four hundred people had died in the firing. The act had caused a great reaction throughout India; it had insisted Gandhi to launch Non-Cooperation movement and Tagore himself had been moved to return his Knighthood. Ultimately, he found that a year later, the politicians and public of Britain had issued a clean cut to Dyer. His faith in the concept of British justice had been shattered. He wrote to an English friend: 'Your Parliament debates about Dyerism in the Punjab and other symptoms of the arrogant spirit of contempt and callousness about India have deeply aggrieved me and it was with the sense of relief that I left England'.<sup>15</sup> Tagore travelled across the Channel, to find himself, by contrast, 'in a delightful country, in a delightful place in France, meeting with the people who are so human (Ibid, p. 11). He visited other countries in Europe, came back to Britain, and then in the winter crossed the Atlantic to go to North America. Everywhere, he gave speeches and met potential donors, working restlessly to get support for his university. In 1921, he crossed the ocean again. He was received with respect in England and rapturously in Germany. A vivid account of Tagore's trip to Germany is contained in the memories of his German publisher Kurt Wolff. The wolf was very much impressed by the poet's lack of insularity, namely, that rather than talk about himself or his work 'what interested (Tagore) most was Germany, and he posed simple, precise, intelligent questions' about the cost of war, of the future of German literature, and the like. Writing forty years later, he remembered the conversations that 'revealed the universal breadth of Tagore's learning' and demonstrated 'without doubt that he knew far more of the west than most of the Europeans he encountered knew far more of the East'.

#### 5. Tagore In China

In the summer of 1924, Tagore went to China for the first time, visiting the major cities- Shanghai, Peking and Nanjing- and also travelling through the countryside, in territories controlled by warlords. Tagore was optimistic that his message would resonate in china, that other great civilization seeking a place of its own in the modern world. In his first talk in Shanghai, he expressed the hope that 'some dreamer will spring from among you who will preach a great message of love and therewith overcoming all difference bridge the chasm of passions which has been widening for ages..... Asia is again waiting for such dreamers to come and carry on the work not of fighting, not of profit making, but of establishing bonds of spiritual relationship'.<sup>16</sup> As in Japan, large crowds turned out to hear Tagore's speak in Chinese. But not all Tagore's listeners were as welcoming. Some were unhappy with his apparent rejection of machinery, others with his apparent pacifism. In the 1920s, the youth of China were flocking towards Communism, a doctrine which

has little patience with dreaming poets of any nationality. As it happens, in the winter of 1923-24, on the eve of Tagore's visit, an opinion poll taken in Peking University found that 725 out of 1007 students favoured the 'people's revolution' as the surest way 'to save China'. Tagore's visit to China, as described by the left-wing novelist Shen yen-ping : the Chinese were 'determined not to welcome the Tagore who loudly sings the praise of Eastern civilization, nor do we welcome the Tagore who create a paradise of poetry and love, and leads our youth into it so that they may find comfort and intoxication in meditating....Oppressed as we are by the militarist from within the country and by the imperialist from without, this is no time for dreaming'. Another Scholar, Wu Chih-hui wrote with disgust of how 'Mr. Tagore,..... a petrified fossil of India's national past, had retreated into the tearful eyes and dripping noses of the slave people of a conquered country, seeking happiness of a future life, squeaking like the hub of a wagon wheel that needs oil'.<sup>17</sup> A third commentator characterized the ideas offered by Tagore, as the "morphine and coconut wine of those with property and leisure".<sup>18</sup> Tagore's reception in China, a Japanese news paper dispassionately summed up, 'has not altogether appealed to some of the elements in China. The reports indicates that he is too willing to recognize the good in Western institutions and too truly intellectual to suit the present phase of acute nationalism in this country'.<sup>19</sup>

### 6. Tagore's Journey To Soviet Russia

Tagore's journey would never like to end. In the summer 1930, he entered his seventieth. This Bengali poet wandered a great deal. He had visited the great nations of the West and of the East. Now he turned to Soviet Russia, a country was sharing the ideals of both East and West, was experiencing a unique political system. His trip to Soviet Russia lasted for two weeks. During this period, Tagore visited 'schools and factories, saw films directed by Sergei Eisenstein, and watched operas by Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakoff. He listened, spoke and, in one city, even exhibited his paintings'.<sup>20</sup> In letters written home, Tagore expressed a deep sense of admiration for the Soviet experience. After the Bolshevik Revolution, he noted, 'suffering humanity has a nobler vision of itself on the world stage than before', since 'at the very threshold of the rich invincible Western civilization Russia has raised the seat of the power of the dispossessed'. He was surprised to see the number of workers and craftsman who visited art galleries in Moscow, which before 1917 had been patronized only by the aristocracy.

Before leaving the Soviet Union, Tagore gave an interview to the newspaper Izvestia. Praising the 'amazing intensity' with which the Soviets had spread education then added his comments: "I must ask you: Are you doing your ideal a service by arousing in the minds of those under your training, anger, class hatred and renegefulness against those not sharing your ideals, against those whom you consider to be your enemies? True, you have to fight against obstacles; you have to overcome ignorance and lack of sympathy, even persistently antagonism. But your mission is not restrict to your own nation, own party, it is for the betterment of humanity according to your light. But does not humanity include those who do not agree with your aim? In Tagore's opinion, it would give birth an infertile world and uninteresting school of thought if all our opinions were forcibly made alike. A universal mission includes all humanity, recognizes the existence of difference of opinion. Opinions are constantly changed and rechanged only through the free circulation of intellectual forces and moral persuasion...Freedom of mind is needed for the reception of truth; terror hopelessly kills it'.

### 7. Conclusion

To Rabindranath Tagore, nationalism is a source of war and carnage, death, destruction and divisiveness rather than international solidarity that induces a larger, more expansive vision of the world. Nationalism as a menace to civilization remains at heart of Tagore's imagination in most of his writing: his letters, essays, lectures, poems, plays and fiction<sup>21</sup>. Tagore had a strong faith 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-aggrandizement, but poised towards a mutually and politically enlighten community of nations through the espousal of a centrifugal outlook, multilateral imagination, principle of universality and reciprocal recognitions.<sup>22</sup> Tagore believes in intercivilisational co-existence. His vision was driven to a symbiosis of the East and the West. Undoubtedly, he was unhappy with British Raj for their cruelty and oppression in India during the colonial period, and felt that the West was often immerse in commercialism, "moral cannibalism"<sup>23</sup> (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 the possible union of the East and the 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 Kiplings remark that the East and the West were too divergent and " Never the twain shall meet", by affirming much like Emerson's Spirit in his essay, " Compensation", that the realization 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 the West are ever in search of each other and 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 thought calls for a two-fold objective so that nations and communities can flourish and find their own fulfillment and to rise above exclusivism and provincialism to forge an international community. It is like finding a way somewhat similar to the Emersonian "Double Conciousness" where the individual is required to keep his independence and yet not to lose his sympathy; or the Whitemensque celebration of the "Self" and the "en-mass" or "I" and "you" in one breath. But to attain that stage is not so easy that

the modern nations seems to be merely an organization of “politics and commercialization” armed with power and wealth. The modern nations exist to promote only material well being of its people but not their moral and spiritual health. It counts the individual’s head and stomach but not their heart where the soul rests. Restoration of souls, Tagore believe, to its rightful place is more important. In an interview with Einstein, Tagore said, “my religion is in the recognition 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, a cosmopolitan world. Tagore’s humanitarian, cosmopolitan and modernistic mission might seem to be idealistic but it is not altogether unattainable. What is more important is a humanitarian intervention into present self seeking and belligerent nationalism through the introduction of a moral and spiritual dimension in the institution. It also calls for us to spell out a new history to reinvent a new future for ourselves that respects human dignity and see every individual and nation as equal, in a true democratic spirit.

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19. Japan Weekly Chronicles, quoted in Tagore in Abroad, p.86.
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21. In spite of Tagore’s anti-nationalitarian stance, he was a highly patriotic poet. This evident in many of his patriotic songs and poems he wrote. Tagore, however never placed patriotism above soul, conscience and love for humanity. Responding to a letter from Abala Bose, the wife of the celebrated Indian scientist, Jagadish Chandra Bose, Tagore wrote, “Patriotism cannot be our final spiritual shelter; my refuge is humanity. I will not buy glass for the price of diamond, and I will never allow patriotism to triumph over humanity as long as I live (Quoted in Amartya Sen: Tagore and his India, Edt. Robert B Silvers and Barbara Epstien, India: AMosaic, New York: NYRB, 2001, p.86.)
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