

War, Violence and Rabindranath Tagore's Quest for World Peace¹

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Abstract

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), India's messianic poet and Asia's first Nobel Laureate (1913), promulgated a vision of peace through the cultivation of the ideologies of *Ahimsa*, or non-violence, which he derived from the *Bhagavad Gita* and *Advita*, or one-identity of the universe, which he derived from the *Upanishads*. This paper investigates how Tagore formulated this vision of peace against a backdrop of and as an antidote to the reckless 'jihadism' (both religious and secular) and 'war-madness' of the twentieth century, which witnessed the two World Wars as well as an on-going violence in different forms, effectively turning the world into a 'tower of skulls.' He attributed this 'devil dance of destruction' to three intersecting forces: the unmediated materialism of modern society; belligerent nationalism which often led to nationalist selfishness, chauvinism and self-aggrandisement; and the machinery of organised religion which, he said, 'obstructs the free flow of inner life of the people and waylays and exploits it for the augmentation of its own power.' His response to it was the creation of a global human community, or a 'grand harmony of all human races,' by shunning exclusivism and dogmatism of all forms, and through the fostering of awareness that human beings were not only material and rational as creatures but also moral and spiritual, sharing a dew-drop of God in every soul.

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In July 1955, Bertrand Russell and Albert Einstein issued a joint manifesto, asking humanity to shun the path of conflicts and war and save the species from an impending doom. The choice facing the world, they said, is 'stark and dreadful and inescapable: shall we put an end to the human race; or shall mankind renounce war?' 'There lies before us, if we choose,' they added, 'continual progress in happiness, knowledge, and wisdom. Shall we, instead, choose death, because we cannot forget our quarrels? We appeal as human beings to human beings: Remember your humanity, and forget the rest. If you can do so, the way lies open to a new Paradise; if you cannot, there lies before you the risk of universal death.'² Disenchanted and horrified by the devil dance of destruction by the pious warlords and suicidal 'fundamentalists'³ of modern civilisation (both secular or religious, who, to paraphrase Rabindranath Tagore, believe that Truth depends upon them and they do not depend on Truth), Russell even went on to depict the

¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented at a seminar at the Singapore Management University in 2011. Thanks to Prof. Kirpal Singh for inviting me to give the lecture and for sponsoring my trip to Singapore.

² 'The Russell-Einstein Manifesto: Issued in London, 9 July 1955,' *Pugwash Online: Conferences on Science and World Affairs*. 11 Nov 2007. <http://www.punwash.org/about/manifesto.htm>. Accessed on 15 January 2016.

³ In his book, *The Clash of Fundamentalisms: Crusades, Jihads and Modernity*, the Pakistani writer Tareq Ali explains this point more fully by showing how the extremists, no matter what their source and objectives are, are basically made of the same ingredients.

following doom's day scenario about the world's future in which he envisioned peace through annihilation of the human race. He wrote: 'After ages during which the earth produced harmless trilobites and butterflies, evolution progressed to the point at which it has generated Neroes, Genghis Khans, and Hitlers. This, however, I believe is a passing nightmare; in time the earth will become again incapable of supporting life, and peace will return.'⁴

A senior contemporary of Russell (1872-1970) and Einstein (1879-1955), India's national poet and Asia's first Noble Laureate, *biswakabi* Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) also cautioned the world of a potential destruction through war, violence and bloodshed, although he never went to the extent of making a dark prediction like Russell. He was relatively more optimistic, who always saw a ray of hope in the midst of human lunacies and insanities – arising from, as he said, the blindness of contempt, greed, selfishness, hatred and ignorance – in the modern age. In this regard, he once famously said, 'I have become my own version of an optimist. If I can't make it through one door, I'll go through another door – or I'll make a door. Something terrific will come no matter how dark the present.'⁵ Elsewhere he commented, explaining his ultimate hope in humanity, that although he saw the present civilisation in 'crumbling ruins ... strewn like a vast heap of futility,' yet he thought that it would be a 'grievous sin' to lose faith in mankind.⁶

It is because of this abiding optimism, despite what he lived through and what he saw, and his tireless efforts to bring back peace and harmony through inter-civilisational dialogue and through human fraternity, overcoming their differences, that both Russell and Einstein were full of praise for this iconic Renaissance poet and myriad-minded genius. In a tribute to Rabindranath, Russell, for example, wrote, '[Tagore] has contributed ... much ... to the most important work of our time, namely, the promotion of understanding between races... [and] on this account he is worthy of the highest honour.'⁷ In a similar vein, Einstein commented, '[Tagore] served mankind ... spreading everywhere a gentle and a free thought in a manner such as the Seers ... have proclaimed as the ideal.'⁸

Tagore always believed, very much like Noam Chomsky (1928-), a contemporary thinker, to put it in Chomsky's words, that 'another world is possible [by] seeking to create constructive alternatives of thought, actions and institutions' and by bringing 'a measure of peace and justice and hope to the world.'⁹ This alternative world would be possible, according to Tagore, only through a symbiosis of the East and the West, and through a sympathetic understanding of our differences as people, which would allow us to overcome our suspicion of each other as aliens, or the 'other,' and appreciate that at core we are all one and the same, and that in spite of our outer differences we are all tied by an invisible bond of love, very much like the petals of a rose

⁴ Quoted in Noam Chomsky, *Hegemony or Survival: America's Quest for Global Dominance* (New York: Metropolitan, 2003) 237.

⁵ Krishna Makwana, 'Rabindranath Tagore Birthday: The Topmost Influential Quotes by the Nobel Prize Winner', *India*, 7 May 2014. <http://www.india.com/buzz/rabindranath-tagore-birthday-the-topmost-influential-quotes-by-the-nobel-prize-winner-51219/4>. Accessed on 2 April 2017.

⁶ Quoted in Sisir Kumar Das, 'Introduction', *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore: Volume 3, A Miscellany* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1996) 22.

⁷ Quoted in Krishna Kripalani, *Rabindranath Tagore: A Biography* (London: Oxford UP, 1962) 358.

⁸ Quoted in Kripalani 360.

⁹ Chomsky 236-37.

that look separate at one end but remain united at the other (Tagore's metaphor). Put differently, the ingredients of peace for Tagore were the spirit of inclusivity, empathy, 'mutual sympathy', 'cultural cooperation', cultivation of 'an international mind', 'international goodwill'¹⁰ and a sense of 'the spiritual bond of unity'.¹¹ '[T]he realization of the great spiritual unity of man only can give us peace', Tagore stated unequivocally in his essay 'A Cry for Peace.'¹²

Thus while Tagore was furiously critical of the British atrocity and oppression in India during the colonial period and felt that the West was often immersed in commercialism, 'moral cannibalism', 'homicidal orgies of cannibalistic politics',¹³ militarism and 'war-madness,' and that it was too full of contempt for the East, yet he never gave up hope for a 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',¹⁴ Tagore wrote in a letter to his friend Charles Andrews. In 'The Meeting of the East and the West,' he declared, 'it is a matter of the greatest urgency that the East and the West should meet and unite in hearts.'¹⁵ In a letter to Foss Westcott, Tagore further wrote, 'Believe me, nothing would give me greater happiness than to see the West and the East march in a common crusade against all that robs the human spirit of its significance.'¹⁶ Moreover, when Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936) notoriously said that the East and the West were too divergent and 'Never the twain shall meet,' Tagore responded in his characteristic hope of creating a unitary world:

Earnestly I ask the poet of the Western world to realise and sing ... with all the great power of music which he has, that the East and West are ever in search of each other, and that they must meet not merely in the fullness of physical strength, but in the fullness of truth; that the right hand, which wields the sword, has the need of the left, which holds the shield of safety.¹⁷

Tagore's poetic response to Kipling's opening line of 'The Ballad of East and West,' 'Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet',¹⁸ was:

Man is man, machine is machine
And never the twain shall meet.¹⁹

In other words, to Tagore, West was not the problem, but it was the excessive mechanisation of the Western civilisation; the fetishisation of money, matter and machine, or its intense

¹⁰ Tagore, 'International Goodwill', *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore: Volume 3, A Miscellany* ed. Sisir Kumar Das (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1996) 646.

¹¹ Tagore, 'The Meeting of the East and the West' in Das, 377.

¹² Tagore, 'A Cry for Peace' in Das, 411.

¹³ Tagore, 'To the World League for Peace' in Das, 786.

¹⁴ Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson, *Rabindranath Tagore: An Anthology* (New York: St. Martin's, 1997) 172.

¹⁵ Tagore, 'The Meeting of the East and the West' in Das, 377.

¹⁶ Dutta and Robinson 197.

¹⁷ Dutta and Robinson 213

¹⁸ Rudyard Kipling, 'The Ballad of East and West,' *Poetry Lovers' Page: Complete Collection of Poems by Rudyard Kipling*. Online edition. https://www.poetryloverspage.com/poets/kipling/ballad_of_east_and_west.html. Accessed on 2 March 2017.

¹⁹ *The Collected Works of Rabindranath Tagore*. Online edition. New Delhi: General Press, 2017. Accessed on 2 April 2017.

materialism, which led to the East-West conflict, dissensus and binary, since such deification of the phenomenal and the material resulted in the obscuring of humanity in people and ‘smother[ing of] the higher spirit of man which you often find in the individual’.²⁰

Tagore was aware that race conflict was an ‘age-long inheritance of mankind’ as humanity shared the animal instinct of suspicion for aliens, and that it was ‘the highest problem of human history’,²¹ which often expressed itself through bloody violence. His mantra against it was the assertion of human divinity, that mankind, like nature, was an expression of God, and that in spite of all their differences, they shared the same spark of God, and therefore love of self ought to translate into love for the rest of mankind. This was also the basis of Tagore’s faith in what he called *Advitam* or organic oneness and unity of the universe which he expressed in his poem ‘The Sick-bed 21,’ again using the metaphor of the rose and its many petals to signify the many and one of life and nature, in a similar vein as Whitman’s leaves of grass.²²

I am a poet, I do not debate,
I look at the world in its wholeness –
At the millions of stars and planets in the sky
Revolving in grandeur and harmony
Never losing the beat of their music
Never slipping into derangement.
When I look at the sky I see spreading petalled layers,
A vast and resplendent rose.²³

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 (1857), 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.’²⁴ 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 says in a letter from Russia, ‘become great and do great things for mankind’.²⁵ Tagore also lived through the violent riots between the two largest religious groups in the subcontinent, Hindus and Muslims, both after the partition of Bengal in 1905 and during Mahatma Gandhi’s *satyagraha* (search for truth) and *swaraj* (nationalist) movements, which were meant as non-violent non-cooperation movements but somehow, ironically, always ended up in violence and bloodshed.²⁶ Moreover, he lived through the two World Wars which not only

²⁰ Tagore, ‘International Goodwill’ 646.

²¹ Tagore, ‘Race Conflict’ in Das, 360, 361.

²² In *Leaves of Grass* (1855), Walt Whitman uses ‘grass’ as a symbol of unity of all mankind – grass which grows everywhere without discrimination of place or people.

²³ Dutta and Robinson, 373.

²⁴ Stanley Wolpert, *A New History of India* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993) 239.

²⁵ Dutta and Robinson, 121.

²⁶ See Sekhar Bandyopadhyay’s *From Plassey to Partition* for a detailed discussion on how the mainstream Indian nationalism, that emerged towards the end of the nineteenth century, under the aegis of the Indian National Congress, was contested from all sides, and repeatedly, by various alternative communal visions of nation. This resulted in recurrent clashes between Hindus and Muslims. After the outbreak of a series of riots between the

unleashed horrific devastations both in Asia and Europe but also claimed the lives of millions of people across the world.

Tagore initially took part in the nationalist movement which began after the partition of Bengal in 1905, in which the British, as a ploy to strengthen their hold on India, broke up Bengal into two provinces on religious lines, creating a separate province of East Bengal for the Muslims, with Dhaka as its capital, which later became East Pakistan (in 1947) and subsequently Bangladesh (in 1971). The British did this in an apparent attempt to help out the Muslims but actually to sow the seed of distrust and animosity between Hindus and Muslims, which they successfully did as the partition of Bengal also marks the beginning of communal politics in the subcontinent,²⁷ eventuating in the breakup of India into two countries in 1947, India and Pakistan, and later into three countries, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, in 1971.²⁸

The nationalist movement through the leadership of the Indian Congress Party (founded in 1885) was gaining momentum very fast and this was the best way for the British to derail the movement. Riots broke out between Hindus and Muslims as the Muslims were happy to have a separate province for themselves while the Hindus wanted to reunite Bengal. Tagore was in favour of unity and wrote many patriotic songs to energise the movement, such that Ezra Pound commented, 'Tagore has sung Bengal into a nation.'²⁹

But soon after, when the movement turned violent, with a Bengali nationalist killing two innocent British civilians in Calcutta in 1908, Tagore withdrew from the movement and never again returned to participate in any nationalist movement after that, including Gandhi's independence movement, and in spite of Gandhi's repeated requests to extend his support. This is because Tagore came to realise that, nationalism, together with the unmediated materialism of the modern society as well religious extremism arising from excessive faith in institutionalised religions, were the root causes of violence and warfare in the modern world.³⁰

Hindus and Muslims in the 1920s, affecting all parts of the country, the situation became so bad that, to quote Bandyopadhyay, 'An exasperated Gandhi lamented in 1927 that the resolution of the problem of Hindu-Muslim relations was now beyond human control and had passed on to the hands of God' (335). The situation continued to deteriorate despite the best efforts from both Tagore and Gandhi. For Tagore's attempts to heal the animosities between Hindus and Muslims, see my essay, 'Hindu-Muslim Relations in the Work of Rabindranath Tagore and Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain.'

²⁷ The Muslim League, with an agenda to voice the grievances and expectations of Indian Muslims, was formed in 1906, soon after the riots broke out in Bengal. The founder of the party, Mohamed Ali Jinnah, was a member of the Indian Congress Party until this period.

²⁸ My argument is that although the British were not solely responsible for the festering Hindu-Muslim relations in India that resulted in endless violence during the country's independence movement, they made every effort to instigate, aggravate and exploit it to their political advantage, and to make sure that it played into their policy of divide and rule. However, it ought to be pointed out that Hindu-Muslim relations continues to be bloody and turbulent still after 70 years of the country's independence. The current Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi, a Hindu nationalist, is himself believed to have orchestrated a riot in Gujrat in 2002, when he was the Chief Minister of the state, which killed 1000 innocent Muslims (Datta-Ray, 'Modi in Gujrat'). More recently, Modi has appointed a firebrand Hindu priest, Yogi Adityanath, as the Chief Minister of India's most populous state, Uttar Pradesh, who controversially praised Donald Trump's Muslim ban and is facing charges 'of attempted murder, defiling a place of worship and inciting riots in Uttar Pradesh, a state where communal tensions run high and religious violence four years ago killed more than 60 people' (Safi, 'Controversial Hindu Priest').

²⁹ Anita Desai, Introduction, *The Home and the World* by Rabindranath Tagore (London: Penguin, 1985) 8.

³⁰ For my detailed discussions on Tagore's views of nationalism and religious unity, see my following articles: 'Paradisiacal Imagination: Rabindranath Tagore's *Vosnovod* or Non-national Neo-universalism'; 'Tagore and

Tagore's grandfather, 'Prince' Dwarkanath Tagore, was the founder of a religious movement, *Brahmo Sabha*, which later came to be known as *Brahmo Samaj*. The objective of this movement was to do away with ritualistic Hinduism and all its 'inauthentic traditions', which often had a 'hypnotic hold' on the people, and resulted in bigotry, hatred, intolerance, antagonism and cold-blooded oppression in society. Tagore saw this movement as a kind of 'inner Hinduism'³¹ that sought to reinstate the monistic basis of the religion as laid down in the *Upanishads*. Under its influence, Tagore came to believe that organised religions, with their many rituals and institutions, and expectation of total and unequivocal submission from their followers, were a recurrent threat to humanity. They divided people into cults and sects and cultivated the spirit of persecution among followers of different religions, and this has been one of the main sources of violence and warfare in society. 'When religion instead of emancipating mind, fetters it within the narrow confinement of creeds and conventions, then it becomes the greater barrier against a true meeting of races,' Tagore wrote in his essay 'The Way to Unity.'³² In a letter to Charles Andrews, he stated more incisively, 'Formalism in religion ... breeds sectarian arrogance, mutual misunderstanding and a spirit of persecution.'³³ Tagore was of the view that when we continue to worship our 'tribal God[s]'³⁴ and remain 'partitioned into mutually exclusive sects,' then 'the vision of the great is lost ... aspirations fail to soar high ... the spirit remains steeped in a perpetual despondency,'³⁵ and in such a state attaining the bond of unity or 'kingdom of souls,' which is the *sine qua non* for achieving peace, becomes impossible. It is because of such divisive powers of conventional religions that Tagore once stated, expressing his revulsion for such organised religions, that 'Atheism is much better than superstition in religion'.³⁶

Tagore did not believe in any 'temple, or scriptures ... images or symbols' but in the 'intense yearning of the heart for the divine in Man'.³⁷

Temples and Mosques obstruct thy path,
and I fail to hear thy call or to move,
when the teachers and priests angrily crowd round me,

Tagore quoted in approbation in his Oxford Lectures, 'The Religion of Man,' from a *Baul* song sung widely by both Hindu and Muslim mystics in Bengal.³⁸ His denunciation of organised religion as a source of cruelty, oppression and violence, and his longing for the freedom of the soul, is expressed eloquently in his following poem:

Those who struck Him once
in the name of their rulers,

Nationalism'; and 'Imagining "One World": Rabindranath Tagore's Critique of Nationalism.'

³¹ Dutta and Robinson, *Selected Letters* 62

³² In Das, 462.

³³ Tagore, *Letters to a Friend: Rabindranath Tagore's Letters to C.F. Andrews* (New Delhi, India: Rupa, 2002) 85.

³⁴ Tagore, 'The Meeting of the East and the West' 376

³⁵ Tagore, 'Spiritual Civilization' in Das, 735

³⁶ Tagore, *Letters from Russia* translated by Sasadhar Sinha (Calcutta: Visva-Bharati, 1960) 60.

³⁷ Tagore, 'The Religion of Man' in Das, 129.

³⁸ Tagore, 'The Religion of Man' 129.

are born again in this present age.
They gather in their prayer halls in pious garb,
they call their soldiers – ‘Kill, kill,’ they shout;
in their roaring mingles the music of their hymns.
While the Son of Man in His agony prays, ‘O God,
fling, fling far away this cup filled with the bitterest of poison.’³⁹

Thus while organised religion destroyed the humanity of the individual by quashing his or her inner being – ‘it obstructs the free flow of inner life of the people and waylays and exploits it for the augmentation of its own power’,⁴⁰ Tagore argued – the only way to restore peace was by accepting the Upanishadic teaching that every human being was an expression of God and therefore had to be loved and respected, for the sake of loving God. ‘However different be the symbols and rituals, God, whom they try to represent, is one without a second, and to realise him truly is to realise him in the soul of all beings,’ Tagore explained in his essay ‘Race Conflict’.⁴¹ He poignantly dramatised this idea of loving God by loving one’s family, friends or fellow human beings – which forms the core of Tagore’s philosophy of compassionate humanism as well as his vision for peace – in the following poem, through an animated exchange between God and His devotee, in which God urges the devotee to turn to his family to discover Him, instead of going away on some vague quest for divinity:

In the deep of night the man averse to worldly pleasures said:
‘I shall leave home to seek my desired God.
Who is it that has kept me here, tied?’
God said, ‘It is I,’ but the man paid no heed.
Clasping the sleeping infant to her breast
The loving wife lay at one end of the bed in deep slumber.
The man said, ‘what are you all – the trickery of illusion?’
‘It is I,’ said God. No one paid any heed.
Leaving his bed the man called ‘Where are Thou, my Lord?’
God said, ‘I am here!’ Still His words were not heard.
The child cried out in his sleep hugging his mother;
God said, ‘Turn back.’ But His words were lost.
God heaved a sigh and said, ‘Alas! Deserting me,
Whither goes my devotee to find me?’⁴²

In a letter from New York, dated 14 January 1921, Tagore declared, ‘To me humanity is rich and large and many-sided.’⁴³ Humankind, he believed, were physical and intellectual as well as spiritual beings; they had a head, heart and a stomach, and therefore, to retain their humanity, a symbiosis and synthesis among these divergent forces was a necessity. However, Tagore found that the modern civilisation had failed to take into account the spiritual aspect of the human

³⁹ Dutta and Robinson, *Rabindranath Tagore: An Anthology* 389.

⁴⁰ Tagore, ‘The Religion of an Artist’ in Das 685.

⁴¹ Tagore, ‘Race Conflict’ 361.

⁴² Indra Dutt (trans.), *A Tagore Testament* (Bombay: Jaico Publishing, 1969) 33.

⁴³ Tagore, *Letters to a Friend* 92.

personality and that is where it had gone wrong and become a breeding ground for war and violence. Without a moral and spiritual awareness, human beings become victims of their intellect and physical appetite, leaving them at the mercy of selfishness and greed, and devoid of a sense of empathy, understanding and fellowship with each other. Thus in a letter to Andrews, Tagore wrote, 'When the spiritual ideal is lost, when the human relationship is completely broken up, then individuals freed from the creative bond of wholeness find a fearful joy in destruction.'⁴⁴ In his essay 'Civilisation and Progress', condemning modern civilisation as a 'soulless progeny of greed' and therefore a source of human suffering and deformity, he further wrote:

[Civilisation] must be the expression of some guiding moral force which we have evolved in our society for the object of attaining perfection ... A civilisation remains healthy and strong as long as it contains in its centre some creative ideal that binds its members in a rhythm of relationship. It is a relationship which is beautiful and not merely utilitarian. When the creative ideal ... gives place to some overmastering passion, then this civilisation bursts into conflagration.⁴⁵

When the First World War broke out, Tagore blamed 'overgrown materialism' as its main cause: 'The war, to my mind, is the outcome of overgrown materialism, of an ideal based on self-interest and not based on harmony.'⁴⁶ Likewise, after the war ended, Tagore cautioned that more wars could follow if human beings didn't remedy the one-sided nature of the present civilisation by infusing a moral or the spiritual dimension into it:

The great war was one of the blows of God working to break down our materialism, our selfishness, our narrow nationalisms. It made a dent; but only a dent in the crust. Other blows will fall betimes. Until we learn to live together by the real law of our nature – law of love – veil will hide the beauty and wonder of the world, leaving us to wander alone.⁴⁷

In the above statement, Tagore accuses both materialism and nationalism as sources of war, especially the First World War. In 'A Cry for Peace,' he says more decisively, 'It is the national and commercial egoism, which is the evil harbinger of war.'⁴⁸ In fact, Tagore saw materialism and nationalism as two interrelated forces that were almost fused, with nationalism acting as the political arm of the modern industrialised society. Tagore considered nationalism as an 'organisation of politics and commerce',⁴⁹ hatched in the post-religious laboratory of industrial-capitalism. It brought 'harvests of wealth'⁵⁰ and 'carnivals of materialism'⁵¹ by stoking the human greed and selfishness, and in the process sacrificed 'the moral man, the complete man...

⁴⁴ Tagore, *Letters to a Friend* 94.

⁴⁵ Tagore, 'Civilisation and Progress,' in Anthony X Soares, *Rabindranath Tagore: Lectures and Addresses* (Madras: Macmillan India, 1970) 43, 51.

⁴⁶ Quoted in Kalyan Kundu, 'Rabindranath Tagore and World Peace', *Asiatic: IIUM Journal of English Language and Literature* 4.1 (June 2010) 81.

⁴⁷ Quoted in Kundu 82.

⁴⁸ Tagore, 'A Cry for Peace' 411.

⁴⁹ Tagore, *Nationalism* (1916; Madras, India: Macmillan, 1976) 7.

⁵⁰ Tagore, *Nationalism* 5.

⁵¹ Soares 113.

to make room for the political and commercial man'.⁵² Nationalism was not 'a spontaneous self-expression of man as social being',⁵³ but a political and commercial union of a group of people in which they congregate to maximise their profit and power: 'the nations are not living beings, they are organisations of power ... where the subjugation of humanity by the machine is complete, there the Nation is triumphant,' Tagore argued.⁵⁴

Like Hobson, Tagore also saw colonialism and imperialism, to quote Hobson, as 'a natural overflow of nationality'.⁵⁵ After all, the colonisers came to India and other rich pastures of the world to plunder and so further the prosperity of their own nations. They were never sincere in turning their 'hunting grounds' into 'cultivated fields'.⁵⁶ They could hardly afford any altruism towards the weaker nations, because their very success depended on a cruel but a privileging norm that Tagore summed up in the following words 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'.⁵⁷ However, such a privileging norm of the strong oppressing and exploiting the weak went against the 'universal law of moral balance',⁵⁸ and violated the principles of love and truth and, therefore, no peace could be attained in such a backdrop. True peace could be achieved only when, Tagore explained in a 'Message to World Peace Congress' in 1936,

the average peace-loving citizen of the successful nations... [can] extricate himself from the obvious anomaly of wishing for peace whilst sharing in the spoils of war, – which exposes his wish to the charge of mere pretence.⁵⁹

Peace 'must be founded on the strength of the just and not on the weariness of the weak'; 'We cannot have peace until we deserve it by paying its full price – which is, that the strong must cease to be greedy and the weak must learn to be bold', Tagore argued in the same message.⁶⁰

Tagore found the fetish of nationalism a source of war and mutual hatred among nations. The very deification of nation, where it is privileged over soul, God and conscience, cultivates absolutism, fanaticism, provincialism and paranoia. It also breeds animosity among nations through the Hegelian dichotomous logic of self's fundamental hostility towards the other. Thus every nation becomes inward looking and considers another a threat to its existence, while war is hailed a legitimate, or even 'holy', action for national self-aggrandisement or self-fulfilment. Thus, in a letter from Vienna, Austria, Tagore wrote, 'I have said over and over again that the aggressive spirit of nationalism ... religiously cultivated by most of the nations of the West, is a menace to the whole world'.⁶¹ In a letter from Stockholm, dated 27 May 1921, he further wrote:

⁵² Tagore, *Nationalism* 9.

⁵³ Tagore, *Nationalism* 5.

⁵⁴ Tagore, 'To The Nation', in Das 859.

⁵⁵ J.A. Hobson, *Imperialism* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1902) 7.

⁵⁶ Tagore, *Nationalism* 9.

⁵⁷ Dutta and Robinson 121.

⁵⁸ Tagore, 'A Cry for Peace' 410.

⁵⁹ Tagore, 'Message to World Peace Congress' in Das, 813-14.

⁶⁰ Tagore, 'Message to World Peace Congress' in Das, 813-14.

⁶¹ Dutta and Robinson 333.

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 cry 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.⁶²

Tagore launched his first diatribe on nationalism in his poem 'The Sunset of the Century,' which he wrote on the last day of the nineteenth century. In a mood of outrage and disenchantment, tempered with intermittent hope, he wrote, foreshadowing the devastation that the two World Wars would wreak on peoples of the planet, and on Europe in particular:

The last sun of the century sets amidst the blood-red clouds of the West and the whirlwind of hatred.
The naked passion of the self-love of Nations, in its drunken delirium of greed, is dancing to the clash of steel and howling verses of vengeance.
The hungry self of the Nation shall burst in a violence of fury from its shameless feeding. For it has made the world its food.
And licking it, crunching it and swallowing it in big morsels,
It swells and swells
Till in the midst of its unholy feast descends the sudden shaft of heaven piercing its heart of grossness.⁶³

However, despite this ominous foreboding, Tagore, as I have mentioned earlier, briefly participated in the nationalist movement which began with the partition of Bengal in 1905, only to withdraw from it in 1908, when the movement turned violent. His sudden withdrawal was seen as a betrayal by many who thought Tagore has taken the side of the British. Tagore responded to such criticisms in his novel *The Home and World*, which was first published in 1915. In this novel he crystallises his vision of peace through the doctrine of *ahimsa* or non-violence, thereby making him the first Indian to introduce and advocate this principle in modern politics, about six years before Mahatma Gandhi embarked on his non-violent non-cooperation movement against the British.⁶⁴ Thus rejecting the nationalist dogmatism of his friend Sandip, Tagore's protagonist and doppelganger in the novel, Nikhil, for example, says, 'I am willing to serve my country; but my worship I reserve for Right which is far greater than country. To worship my country as a god is to bring curse upon it.'⁶⁵ Likewise, Tagore himself wrote in a letter to Abala Bose, wife of the celebrated Bengali scientist, Jagadish Chandra Bose, 'Patriotism

⁶² Tagore, *Letters to a Friend* 143.

⁶³ Tagore, *Nationalism* 80.

⁶⁴ Explaining the efficacy of *ahimsa*, in a letter to Nanalal Dalpatram, on 3 February 1922, Tagore wrote, 'I believe in the efficacy of *ahimsa* as the means of overcoming the congregated might of physical force on which the political powers in all countries mainly rest. But like every other moral principle *ahimsa* has to spring from the depth of mind and it must not be forced upon man from some outside appeal of urgent need' ('The Efficacy of *Ahimsa*' 755).

⁶⁵ Tagore, *The Home and the World* 29. For a more elaborate discussion of Tagore's vision of nationalism in *The Home and the World*, see my essay 'Rabindranath Tagore's Political Imagination in *The Home and the World*: A Textual and Contextual Reading.'

cannot be our final spiritual shelter; my refuge is humanity. I will not buy glass for the price of diamonds, and I will never allow patriotism to triumph over humanity as long as I live.’⁶⁶

Tagore’s message in these two statements is quite straightforward. Like Russell and Einstein, he is urging us to remember our humanity and forget the rest, and for him the best way to forget our differences is to restore trust in ourselves, reach out to the goodness and love in us, believe in our divinity and one-identity as human beings, and keep the mind free from all kinds and dogmatisms – social, political or religious. Moreover, he advises us to shun materialism for a spirit of synthesis between the head, heart and spirit; nationalism for a cultural confederation between races and nations, in which every nation would, Tagore explained, ‘keep alight its own lamp of mind as its part of the illumination of the world’;⁶⁷ and religious orthodoxy for a sense of fellowship and fraternity of all human beings. Only if we follow these instructions we could avoid war and violence and bring back peace to the world. Peace couldn’t be attained via hatred or violence, for ‘it is hateful to hate’,⁶⁸ Tagore said, and, ‘Violence begets violence and blind stupidity’.⁶⁹ The way forward lies in the three-fold teachings of the *Upanishads* – *Santam*, *Sivam* and *Advaitam* – which he explained in a letter to Charles Andrews, written from Kashmir, India, in the following words:

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.⁷⁰

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⁶⁶ Quoted in Amartya Sen, ‘Tagore and His India’, *India: A Mosaic* edited by Robert B. Silvers and Barbara Epstein (New York: NYRB, 2001) 86.

⁶⁷ Quoted in Kripalani 268.

⁶⁸ Tagore, *Letters to a Friend* 126.

⁶⁹ Tagore in Dutta and Robinson 125.

⁷⁰ Tagore, *Letters to a Friend* 50.

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