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Paradisiacal Imagination: Rabindranath Tagore's *Visvobod* or Vision of Non-National Neo-Universalism

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In "Re-reading Tagore," an article published in the *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, Anita Desai, a prominent Indian writer in the English language, regretfully comments about Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), 'As a writer he is now largely unread and forgotten in everything but name'.¹ Yet Tagore, a multifaceted genius, a darling of versatility, was the most respected name in the literary-cultural world during his lifetime, in both the East and West.

He was not only the first Asian to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature² (in 1913) 'but also only the second writer in English to receive it'.³ Fondly dubbed 'Gurudev' (venerable teacher) by Mahatma Gandhi (whose title 'Mahatma,' or 'the great soul' was suitably given by Tagore) and 'eagle-sized lark' by Romain Rolland, his exquisite poetic power and gifted musical sensibility made him the author of the national anthems of three countries – Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and India – a feat still unmatched in history.⁴ He was knighted by King George V of England in 1915 (which he renounced in protest of the heinous massacre at Jalianwalla Bagh, Amritsar in 1919)⁵ and awarded an honorary doctorate by Oxford in 1940, for which Oxford had to travel to the poet's doorstep because of his ill health.

When Tagore was alive, he played on the heartstrings of many with his wizard fingers and breathtaking creativity. On reading Tagore's *Gitanjali*, a volume of poetry that earned him the Nobel Prize for Literature, W.B. Yeats was so moved by the 'simplicity' and 'abundance' of his work that he instantaneously hailed Tagore as founder of a 'new Indian Renaissance,' and said in an extraordinary tribute to the poet:

[The poems of] Rabindranath Tagore have stirred my blood as nothing has for years ... These lyrics ... display in their thought a world I have dreamed all my life ... Rabindranath Tagore ... is so abundant, so spontaneous, so daring in his passion, so full of surprise, because he is doing something which has never seemed strange, unnatural, or in need of defence. These verses will not die in little well-printed books upon ladies' tables ... or be

carried about by students at the university to be laid aside when the work of life begins, but as the generations pass, travellers will hum them on the highway and men rowing upon rivers. Lovers, while they await one another, shall find, in murmuring them, this love of God a magic gulf wherein their own more bitter passion may bathe and renew its youth.⁶

Tagore's reputation far exceeded the boundary of the literary-cultural world. He was in the company of the likes of Russell, Einstein, Mussolini and Gandhi, and they all held him in the highest esteem. Albert Schweitzer called him 'the Goethe of India',⁷ and Romain Rolland described a meeting between him and Gandhi as a 'meeting between... a St. Paul and a Plato'.⁸ So why has Tagore's reputation suffered since his death? Why is the poet who was considered a literary titan in his time, a supreme symbol of India's culture and spirit, now so widely neglected? Is it because of some change of taste in poetry? As Tagore has aptly said, 'poetry is... a matter of taste'.⁹ Or is it because Tagore was too provincial a poet to retain a universal appeal after his death?

Perhaps the reasons are not so much poetical but ideological and philosophical, for Tagore was a poet-philosopher and the world simply chose not to tread the path that he sought to pave. Tagore's vision of universal human unity, of 'living bonds in society';¹⁰ of 'spontaneous expression of man as a social being';¹¹ of 'wholeness and wholesomeness of human ideals',¹² proved too good for a world that believed in the 'bondage of the dust,' the tyranny of matter, machine and money, and in the fetish of nationalism. According to Tagore, such 'ideals' replace the true identity of the self with a blend of corporate identity, rooted not in truth, beauty, sympathy or moral welfare of mankind but in a 'spirit of conflict and conquest'¹³ and a whirlwind of greed, jealousy and suspicion, reducing mankind, Tagore poignantly suggests, to 'a pack of predatory creatures'¹⁴ or 'band of robbers'.¹⁵

Critics are often apologetic when discussing Tagore, as though it is for some inherent weakness that he is neglected now; for instance, his lack of a proper understanding of the world, or his overly mystical tone, which suggests a blindness to the realities of life. But such apologies are unnecessary – and Tagore is never in 'need of defence,' as Yeats rightfully said¹⁶ – since he stood for the totality of life, for the physical as well as the spiritual; for the real and the ideal; and for the values of truth, compassion and justice that the world will reckon its own, as soon as it chooses to break the current hypnotic allure of money and materialism, and rise from the dungeon of illusion. I believe that, given the present crisis in the world, in which nations, fiercely locked in a devil-dance of destruction, are perpetuating cycles of retribution and retaliation, and hollow hysteria between fanatics of nation and fanatics of religion is taking its toll on innocent civilians everywhere, Tagore's alternative vision based on peace, harmony and the spiritual unity of humankind has become more relevant than ever. What the world needs at this juncture of widespread agitation and unrest is Tagore's healing message and the restoration of his blissful, paradisiacal imagination, imbued with teachings of simplicity, self-restraint and *ahimsa*, or non-violence. Remembering Tagore's advice in the 1915 lecture, "Nationalism in the West," which was delivered as the West was engrossed in the savage bloodbath of World War I, may help to instil some sense as our planet grapples afresh with the global ramifications of recent disastrous events that opened the doors to a new pandemonium:

Be more good, more just, more true in your relation to man, control your greed, make your life wholesome in its simplicity and let your

consciousness of the divine in humanity be more perfect in its expression.¹⁷

Tagore's vision of human unity and equality, and his critique of modern civilisation, with its twin principles of materialism and nationalism, is recurrent in all his works. His vision emerges most explicitly and powerfully, however, in several of his lectures and addresses, including "My Life," "My School," "My Religion," "Civilization and Progress," "Construction *versus* Creation," "Nationalism in India," "Nationalism in Japan," "Nationalism in the West," "International Relations," "The Voices of Humanity," and "The Realization of the Infinite," as well as in his novels *The Home and the World (Ghare Baire)* and *Four Chapters (Char Adhyay)*, the poems of *Gitanjali* and "The Sunset of the Century." In each of these works, Tagore most engagingly and energetically investigates what has gone wrong with the world and where the remedy lies.

Tagore was opposed to modern civilisation for its lack of completeness; its fragmented and fragmenting nature; its undue bias towards the physical, the intellectual and the practical; its predilection for the material rather than the moral progress of humankind; and its celebration of bloodless policies and canned, constructed ideas, in lieu of a fearless striving for truth, creativity and imagination. Modern civilisation, Tagore believed, is built on the law of necessity rather than the law of truth; the law of might instead of the law of right; and of self-interest and success, rather than perfection in humanity. In "Civilization and Progress," he explains,

Civilization cannot merely be a growing totality of happenings that by chance have assumed a particular shape and tendency which we consider to be excellent. It must be the expression of some guiding moral force which we have evolved in our society for the object of attaining perfection ... A civilization 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 which is *dharma* gives place to some overmastering passion, then this civilization bursts into conflagration.¹⁸

In other words, for its absence of a moral centre, this civilisation is, to Tagore, a civilisation of *adhrama*, in which, as he explains using a quote from the *Upanishads*, 'man prospers, gains what appears desirable, conquers enemies, but perishes at the root'.¹⁹ It both shoots out of and caters to the baser instincts of the individual and has nothing to do with that innate spiritual power that ennobles us and brings us together as one large family living in the reality and unity of one ineffable God. Thus, progress, as it is understood in the modern civilisation, is nothing but a millstone on the human spirit, bringing with it dehumanisation, despiritualisation, deformity and doom.

Tagore was essentially a religious thinker and he always upheld the primacy of the soul. In "My Religion," he emphasised, 'Man's religion is his innermost truth.... One's religion is at the source of one's being'.²⁰ However, he was not religious in the traditional sense and was least concerned with the practices of the communal religion he belonged to i.e. Hinduism. Rather, he was influenced by the teachings of the *Upanishads* and, like the English Romantics and American Transcendentalists before him,²¹ came to believe in its pantheistic teachings. In this regard, his firsthand influence was his father, a leading member of a religious movement called the Brahmo Samaj²² who, Tagore explains, believed in 'a strict monotheism based upon the teachings of the Upanishads'.²³

The Upanishadic God is, paradoxically, both transcendent and immanent; both present and absent in His creation. He is a *Personality* who does not dissociate Himself fully from His creation but recurrently manifests Himself in all created objects, making this world a ‘living expression of the spirit’.²⁴ In *Svetasatara Upanishad*, for example, God is described thus:

O Brahman Supreme!
Formless art thou, and yet
(Though the reason none knows)
Thou bringest forth many forms;
Thou bringest them forth, and then
Withdrawest them to thyself.
Fill us with thoughts of thee!
Thou art the fire,
Thou art the sun,
Thou art the air,
Thou art the moon,
Thou art the starry firmament:
Thou art the waters – thou,
The creator of all.²⁵

God is also present in every human heart: ‘Self-luminous is Brahman, ever present in the hearts of all.... In him exists all that is’.²⁶

The Upanishadic faith in a living God, a ‘deep abiding creative force’²⁷ as Tagore describes it – a force that expresses itself in the living objects of the world, including human beings – runs through all of his works and forms the cornerstone of his *visvovod*, or vision of universal human unity.²⁸ His argument is simple: since God dwells in every human heart, we are innately inseparable, and to realise God we must therefore overcome the visible differences between us as individuals and learn to treat one another – in spite of caste, creed and race – with love and utmost respect. In “My Life,” Tagore explains:

In the night we stumble over things and become acutely conscious of their individual separateness, but the day reveals the great unity which embraces them. And the man, whose inner vision is bathed in an illumination of his consciousness, at once realizes the spiritual unity reigning supreme over all differences of race, and his mind no longer awkwardly stumbles over individual facts of separateness in the human world, accepting them as final; he realizes that peace is in the inner harmony which dwells in truth, and in any outer adjustments; that beauty carries an eternal assurance of our spiritual relationship to reality, which waits for its perfection in the response of our love.²⁹

In “International Relations,” a lecture delivered in Japan, in 1923, he further affirms that:

The Kingdom of Heaven is here on this earth. It is there, where we realize our best relations with our fellow-beings, where there is no mutual suspicion and misunderstanding – there is the Kingdom of Heaven, in the spirit of comradeship and love.³⁰

Tagore’s pantheistic and anthropocentric³¹ worldview is exquisitely dramatised, in the following poem, through a series of dialogues between God and His devotee, which he used as an epigraph to his essay “My Religion”:

In the deep of the 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?'³²

This view of a divine presence in the human individual, which forms the basis of universal unity, contains clear overtones of Emerson. Like Tagore, Emerson, as mentioned earlier, was also much influenced by the teachings of the *Upanishads*. In "The American Scholar," for example, Emerson comments:

The old fable covers a doctrine ever new and sublime; that there is one Man, – present to all particular men only partially, or through one faculty; and that you must take the whole society to find the whole man. Man is not a farmer, or a professor, or an engineer, but he is all. Man is priest, and scholar, and statesman, and producer, and soldier ... man is one ... It is one soul which animates all men.³³

To both Emerson and Tagore, soul was at the centre as well as the circumference of life; soul, in their view, is what makes us wholesome and whole; and, as they saw it, the remedy to human deformity in modern society, in its carnival of materialism and perpetual pursuit of wealth, was, as Emerson put it, 'first, soul, and second soul, and evermore, soul'.³⁴ To both, the doctrine of the soul was anything but outmoded or ancient. To Emerson it was 'ever new,' and so to Tagore, who announced affirmatively in "My Life," 'The impertinence of material things is extremely old. The revelation of spirit in man is truly modern: I am on its side, for I am modern'.³⁵

The Isha Upanishad says, 'To darkness are they doomed who worship only the body, and to greater darkness they who worship only the spirit'.³⁶ In the *Katha Upanishad* it is stated, 'What is within us is also without. What is without is also within. He who sees difference between what is within and what is without goes evermore from death to death'.³⁷ Tagore inherited this Upanishadic 'double consciousness,' which calls for a recurrent synthesis of body and soul, physical and spiritual, mind and matter. As he maintains in "Construction *versus* Creation," 'Life is a continual process of synthesis'.³⁸ In spite of his cardinal faith in the cult of the soul, he was not disdainful of the material and practical side of life. He knew that body and spirit, visible and invisible, within and without are interdependent for their mutual realisation – they are one and the same, and one is *not* without the other. Like Emerson, he believed that 'Human life is made up of two elements, power and form, and proportion must be invariably kept if we have it sweet and sound';³⁹ and, like Whitman, he was an 'arbiter of the diverse'⁴⁰ who sought to knit "the old knot of contrariety".⁴¹ In "My Religion," Tagore comments, 'I am not in favour of rejecting anything, for I am only complete with the inclusion of everything. I want to accept all excluding nothing, / for it is I, my friend, that waits outside to meet me!'.⁴² This is his inclusive, multilateral ideology; he was realistic

enough not to look for the soul outside the body, or for God outside nature and the world. In “Voice of Humanity,” he explains:

I do not cry down the material world. I fully realize that this is the nurse and the cradle of the Spirit. By achieving the Infinite in the heart of the material world you have made this world more generous than it ever was.⁴³

The poem that was quoted earlier (“In the deep of the night...”), also testifies to this view, where God urges that his devotee need not seek Him outside the daily realities of life but in the midst of everyday happenings. He should attend to his crying child and his lonely, affectionate wife in order to realise God and his own self; only by attending to the practical affairs of life and bestowing love upon his family can he pacify his thirst for God.

Contrary to Tagore’s inclusivism and multilateralism, balance and equilibrium, modern civilisation, he suggests, thrives on a partial and unilateral outlook. It is totally indignant of the moral and the spiritual side of life, of beauty and truth, of love and sympathy, of ‘the music of soul’⁴⁴ and the great rhythm of ‘symphony’ that lies ‘at the very heart of the world’.⁴⁵ It aspires solely and shamelessly to a life of material fulfilment and bodily comfort. Instead of goodness, it champions greed; instead of self-sacrifice, self-aggrandisement; instead of giving, possessing; instead of spiritual human unity, collective worldliness; instead of moral freedom, material bondage; instead of magnanimity, vindictiveness; instead of *being, becoming*. It replaces feelings, spontaneity and imagination with a bloodless, mechanical logic, based on the principles of usefulness and need. It looks upon the world like a grammarian who is singularly absorbed in the functional side of language in the study of a poem, instead of appreciating the full poem in its rhythm, harmony and meaning. Its interest ranges between the human stomach and the human head, leaving out the heart where the soul dwells, giving rise to a culture of mere production and consumption, buying and selling, pomp and pageantry, with no peace, understanding and amity in sight for the human race.

If civilisation is a site of contention for Tagore, so is the nation, which he considers as the main institutional/political machinery through which the current materialistic and capitalistic civilisation manifests and fulfils itself. Tagore was born at a time when nationalist movement in India against the British Raj was gaining ground. The Sepoy Mutiny of 1857, which was the first organised uprising by the Indian soldiers against their colonisers, took place only four years before the poet was born. In 1905, the Swadeshi movement (*swadeshi* meaning, literally: of one’s own country – buying local products and boycotting foreign goods, especially the British) broke out at the very door steps of the poet, when the British, in keeping with their policy of divide and rule, partitioned Bengal, an Indian province inhabited by the same Bengali speaking people for centuries, into two: East Bengal (presently Bangladesh) and West Bengal. Initially, Tagore was infuriated by the British injustice and insanity in this action, and became actively involved in the Swadeshi movement, writing patriotic songs to unite and inspire the people against British oppression, with such fury that Ezra Pound quipped, ‘Tagore has sung Bengal into a nation’.⁴⁶ Soon after, he withdrew from the movement, never to have anything to do with nationalism again, except to launch a systematic diatribe against it in a series of lectures and essays, most prominently, “Nationalism in India,” “Nationalism in Japan” and “Nationalism in the West.” His departure from the Swadeshi movement of 1905 made him vulnerable to wild criticisms from many of his contemporaries and compatriots, to which Tagore responded through his novel *The Home and the World*, published in 1915 – a political allegory that dramatises the writer’s pacifist, universalist ideology

vis-à-vis the nationalism of *Realpolitik*, in which Radhakrishnan poignantly capsulized, ‘self-interest is the end; brute force, the means; conscience is taboo’.⁴⁷ Even Gandhi’s repeated urgings, during his *Satyagraha* movements that eventually brought independence to India, in 1947, from cruel and conniving British rule, failed to persuade Tagore to return to the fold of nationalism or reinstate his faith in the idea of the nation.⁴⁸

Nationalism is no doubt a deeply ingrained idea in the modern imagination. Anderson suggests that it is ‘the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time’.⁴⁹ Bill Ashcroft et al. are of the view that in spite of ‘all its contentiousness, and the difficulty of theorising it adequately, [nation/nationalism] remains the most implacably powerful force in twentieth century politics’.⁵⁰ Despite its dominance and universal acceptance as a political institution, the idea of the nation is of course relatively new. In 1882, when Tagore was still a young writer, the French Orientalist, Ernest Renan, in an address at Sorbonne, “What is a Nation?,” felt it necessary to explain the origins of the idea to his audience because of its relative obscurity:

Nations... are something fairly new in history. Antiquity was unfamiliar with them; Egypt, China and ancient Chaldea were in no way nations. They were flocks led by a Son of the Sun or by a Son of Heaven. Neither in Egypt nor in China were there citizens as such. Classical antiquity had republics, municipal kingdoms, confederates of local republics and empires, yet it can hardly be said to have had nations in our understanding of the term.⁵¹

So, what is the nation? How and when did it come about? What are Tagore’s objections to it? How justified is he in his fury against the nation? Why did he consider it a ‘menace’ to mankind and spurn it as ‘a cruel epidemic of evil... sweeping over the human world of the present age and eating into its moral fibre’?⁵² Why did he castigate it as a source of human diminishment, war and carnage, as he did with utmost ferocity in “The Sunset of the Century,” a poem written on the last day of the nineteenth century, even before he was drawn into the Swadeshi movement of 1905 and subsequently withdraw from it as a result of a growing sense of frustration and disillusionment? Here are the opening lines of the poem as a preview to the intensity of Tagore’s outrage against nationalism:

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
own shameless feeding.

For it has made the world its food.⁵³

Nation is a socio-cultural-political formation – an ‘imagined community,’ as Benedict Anderson has described it – of a group of people, living within a certain geographical boundary, with either a unifying cultural signifier, such as language, as in the case of linguistic nationalism of Europe, or certain shared collective values and overarching ideologies, but no inherently homogenising signifier/s as, for example, in ‘Creole nationalism.’ As an institution, it is of European origin and its provenance can be traced in European political and social heritage. Critics suggest that the nation is a product of the European Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution. Benedict Anderson argues that the rise of nationalism in Western Europe was made possible by the decline, if not the death, of religious modes of thought, in the wake of the

rationalist secularism of Enlightenment, or the Age of Reason. The guiding principles of this intellectual movement were the glorification of reason and faith in human dignity, both of which were instrumental in breaking down old belief systems, which gave centrality to the church and the theocentric worldview, and gave rise to a more pragmatic and worldly socio-political system of the nation, that would suit the new post-religious, secular world, or the godless expanse of what Anderson describes as 'homogenous empty time'.⁵⁴ Anderson explains, 'What was then required, [following the decline of cosmological consciousness] was a secular transformation of fatality into continuity, contingency into meaning ... few things were better suited to this end than an idea of the nation'.⁵⁵

Ernst Gellner attributes the emergence of nationalism to the rise of industrialism, or capitalist economies, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The epochal shift of human society from pre-industrial to industrial economies, he argues, set up the conditions required for the creation of larger social units and economies that would also be culturally 'homogenous' and cooperative as a workforce, thus paving the way for the formation of the more complex and intricate social organisation of the nation-state. Effectively, the expansion of the workforce and the market made the earlier pre-industrial, tribal societies and their structures both inadequate and redundant.

Tagore's objections to nation/nationalism lie in its very nature and purpose as an institution. The fact that it is a social construction, a mechanical organisation, modelled with certain utilitarian objectives in mind, made it unpalatable to Tagore, who always valued creation over construction, imagination over reason, 'expression' over want, natural and organic over the manmade and contrived. In Tagore's view, 'Construction is for a purpose, it expresses our wants; but creation is for itself, it expresses our very beings'.⁵⁶ He believed that the nation as a formation, based on needs and wants rather than truth and love, could not contribute much to man's moral fulfilment or to the dignity of human beings. To Tagore, race was a more natural, and therefore acceptable, social unit than the nation and he envisioned a world where races would live together in amity, keeping their 'distinct characteristics but all attached to the stem of humanity by the bond of love'.⁵⁷

Tagore was of the view that since nationalism emerged in the post-religious laboratory of industrial-capitalism, it is but an 'organisation of politics and commerce',⁵⁸ that brings 'harvests of wealth'⁵⁹ by spreading tentacles of greed, selfishness, power and prosperity, and sacrificing in the process, 'the moral man, the complete man... to make room for the political and the commercial man, the man of limited purpose'.⁶⁰ Nationalism, Tagore expressed, is not 'a spontaneous self-expression of man as social being,' where human relationships are naturally regulated, 'so that men can develop ideals of life in co-operation with one another',⁶¹ but rather a political and commercial union of a group of people, in which they come together to maximise their profit, progress and power. Tagore dismissed nationalism as 'the organised self-interest of a people, where it is least human and least spiritual'.⁶² He saw it as a recurrent threat to humanity because it trampled over the human spirit and 'upset man's moral balance, obscuring his human side under the shadow of soul-less organisation'.⁶³

Tagore also found the fetish nationalism a source of war, hatred, mutual suspicion between nations and militarism. As Sandip argues in *The Home and the World*, 'country's needs must be made into a god'⁶⁴ and one must 'set aside... conscience... by putting the country in its place'.⁶⁵ This deification of the nation, where it is made to occupy the place of god and conscience, breeds exclusivism,

fanaticism, cultural particularism, paranoia and xenophobia, thus every nation considering another a threat to its existence and waging war against it for self-fulfilment and self-aggrandisement, a justifiable act. Tagore explains:

The Nation, with all its paraphernalia of power and prosperity, its flags and pious hymns, its blasphemous prayers in the churches, and the literary mock thunders of its patriotic bragging, cannot hide the fact that the Nation is the greatest evil for the Nation, that all its precautions are against it, and any new birth of its fellow in the world is always followed in its mind by the dread of a new peril.⁶⁶

Tagore argued that British colonialism also found its justification in the ideology of the nation as the British came to India and other rich pastures of the world only to plunder and so prosper their own nation. They were never interested in developing the countries of occupation, as it would contribute little to their national cause to turn their 'hunting grounds' into 'cultivated fields'.⁶⁷ Like predators, they thrived by victimising and looting other nations and never felt deterred by love, sympathy, fellowship, or humanity in perpetrating heinous crimes for the sake of their nation. In other words, in Tagore's view, there is an inherent discourse of victimisation/othering in the discourse of nationalism – in order to have rich and powerful nations, some nations ought be left poor and pregnable: 'Because this civilization is the civilization of power, therefore it is exclusive, it is naturally unwilling to open its sources of power to those whom it has selected for its purposes of exploitation'.⁶⁸

Of course, Tagore's critique of nationalism might seem a little lofty and farfetched – 'too pious,' as Pound might have said⁶⁹ – but much of it is intellectually valid and some of it is borne out by contemporary post-colonial criticism. Critics, for example, hardly ascribe the nation with any moral authority but emphasise its practical necessity, its legitimacy on the ground that it has laboured on behalf of modernity, an outcome of the overlapping discourses of Reason, Modernity and History that serves as an underpinning to modern civilisation. In the view of Leela Gandhi, 'nationalism is the only form of political organisation which is appropriate to the social and intellectual condition of the modern world'.⁷⁰ She does not, however, suggest how beneficial it is from a human point of view, how much it contributes to the moral and spiritual fulfilment of human beings. Interestingly, that does not seem to be part of the contemporary discourse, something that Tagore was so preoccupied with; modern discourse is monocular in its acceptance of progress, civilisation and modernity as a material and intellectual process only, and not both material and moral, or intellectual as well as spiritual – precisely the criticism that Tagore, a multilateral thinker, directed at the current unilineal civilisation.

Critics also view the constructed aspect of nationalism as a weakness in the ideology. They believe that nations are profoundly unstable formations and are always likely to regress into more natural social units of clan, tribe, and race, or language and religious groups; that this structural vulnerability, or self-deconstructing discourse, is the inevitable consequence of its being a social construction. The process of formation/invention of the nation further makes it a potent site of power discourse, as the signifiers of homogeneity/overarching ideologies in creating the myth of nationhood almost always fail to represent the diversity of the actual national community that they profess to represent, and express and consolidate instead the interests of the dominant group/s of people, thus creating a new hierarchy, hegemony, domination and exclusion within the structures of the nation. Fanon describes this as one of the principle dangers of nationalism, especially in the post-colonial societies,

where nationalism is a derivative discourse and is often faced with additional problems:

National consciousness, instead of being the all-embracing crystallization of the innermost hopes of the whole people ... [becomes] a crude and fragile travesty of what it might have been ... [when] the nation is passed over for the race, and the tribe is preferred to the state.⁷¹

Critics furthermore concur with Tagore's arguments that nationalism breeds xenophobia and violence, and contains a discourse of binarism, which perpetuates the process of victimising and othering of nations by one another. It is simply horrifying to see the gruesome violence and number of deaths that have taken place in recent times in the name of the nation, whether in Chechnya, Russia, Afghanistan or the USA, and the alacrity with which citizens are willing both to kill and to die for the sake of their nations. In some instances, the fanaticism and irrationality that nationalism generates is no less than the religious fanaticism that preoccupies some people in the underdeveloped parts of the world, countries that are not yet considered part of the elite league of nations, and where, in some instances, so-called civilisation and modernity have not yet travelled. Gellner, Anderson and Tom Nairn have pointed out the irrationality, prejudice, hatred, sentimentality, collective egoism and aggression that nationalism generates, and Leela Gandhi explains it in the following words:

East or West, we are now aware of the xenophobia, racism and loathing which attends the rhetoric of [national/cultural] 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.⁷²

Were Gandhi to write her book more recently, she might have included in her list the new strained relationships that have evolved in the wake of the most tragic and repugnant events of 9/11 and the Bali massacre; and as the monstrous, menacing, satanic figure of neo-imperialism emerges from the *spiritus mundi* and threatens to engulf the world in a suicidal conflagration.

Tagore is astute in equating the imperial discourse with the discourse of nationalism and asserting the process of othering colonised nations by the Lacanian *grande-autre*, the great Other, or the colonising Other, to fulfil its imperial ego. A nation can construct itself only by constructing its others in such a way as to confirm its own reality. Thus every nation is given to an inherent discourse of self and other, each finding its identity by positing itself against the other, thereby making each potentially an enemy of the other. This vindicates Tagore's statement, quoted earlier, 'that the Nation is the greatest evil for the Nation, that all its precautions are against it, and any new birth of its fellow in the world is always followed in its mind by the dread of a new peril'.⁷³

If nations are given to a binary relationship, so are the coloniser and the colonised. The business of creating an empire is a business of creating the enemy, of drawing the opposition that must exist, in order that the empire might define itself against those it colonises/excludes/marginalises. A colonising nation can never be benevolent to the colonised nation – it is there to ascribe its authority on the 'mastered' subjects through a discourse of power, and plunder them of their wealth and culture, like 'predatory creatures,' using Tagore's phrases, prowling through 'its hunting grounds,' which they would never like to convert 'into cultivated fields'.⁷⁴ As

Amy Césaire starkly put it ‘colonisation = “thingification”’.⁷⁵ Or as Fanon has more elaborately stated:

Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native’s brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures, and destroys it.⁷⁶

Tagore was intensely opposed to India joining the bandwagon of nationalism. It would compromise India’s history and identity as a culture and bring her under the shadow of the West. In “Nationalism in India,” Tagore cautioned:

We, in India, must make up our minds that we cannot borrow other people’s history, and that if we stifle our own we are committing suicide. When you borrow things that do not belong to your life, they only serve to crush your life ... I believe that it does India no good to compete with Western civilization in its own field ... India is no beggar of the West.⁷⁷

Tagore’s warnings have come true because although India has attained freedom from the British Raj by appropriating the coloniser’s own political discourse, thus using the master’s tools to dismantle the master’s house, it has ironically made the country follow the destiny that the West has thrust on her. The incorporation of the Western model of nationalism has erased the sense of difference of India as a society, capable of standing on its own, and created linkages that now allow neo-colonialist controls to operate over her both explicitly and implicitly, thus effectively reducing her to a ‘beggar of the West.’

Tagore’s lectures on nationalism drew many angry responses, even from those of kindred spirit, such as D.H. Lawrence, who spitefully declared Tagore, ‘horribly decadent and reverting to all forms of barbarisms in all sorts of ugly ways’ and denounced the ‘wretched worship-of-Tagore attitude’ as ‘disgusting’.⁷⁸ However, not all were offended; not everyone misunderstood him. The French Nobel Laureate, Romain Rolland, greeted him in a salubrious personal letter:

The reading of *Nationalism* has been a great joy for me; for I entirely agree with your thoughts, and I love them even more now that I have heard them expressed by you with this noble and harmonious wisdom which, being your own, is so dear to us ...⁷⁹

Tagore’s animosity to nationalism should not make us think that he was not patriotic or that he was anti-West. He believed in a symbiosis of the East and West, a ‘deep association’ or a living relationship between the two cultures; a creative unity that was possible only when the East had discovered its soul and its separate identity. Moreover, his profound love for Bengal and India is manifest in his many immortal songs and poems. His love and intensity for the land transcended the bounds of a narrow, selfish and self-aggrandising nationalism and carried such depth, generosity and broadness that his compositions were adopted as national anthems in three countries. Despite the fervour, Tagore never allowed his love for his country to stand in the way of his love for truth, justice and humanity – he was not given to a national consciousness but a world-consciousness, a *visvovod* in which every country would keep alight its own lamp of mind as its part in the illumination of the world. As Nikhil says in *The Home and the World*, ‘I am willing to serve my country; but my worship I reserve for Right which is far greater than my country. To worship my country as a god is to bring a curse upon it’.⁸⁰ And as Atin says to Ela in *Four Chapters*:

The patriotism of those who have no faith in that which is above patriotism is like a crocodile’s back used as a ferry to cross the river ... That the life of the country can be saved by killing its soul, is the monstrously false

doctrine that nationalists all over the world are bellowing forth stridently.

My heart groans to give it effective contradictions ...⁸¹

And, indeed, effective contradictions Tagore gave all through his life, through his paradisiacal imagination that envisioned a world of love, equality, honesty, bravery and spiritual unity of all mankind – of sympathy and fellowship across race, religion and gender – the world of *sattva* (light), to put it in a phrase from *The Bhagavad Gita*, rising from its current *tamasik* (dark) state, that the present humanity, infatuated with greed, wealth and power may not choose to tread, but it is there for them to choose when they rise from their long and horrific moral slumber. Tagore's following prayer for India is also his prayer for the rest of humanity:

Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high;

Where knowledge is free;

Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls;

Where words come out from the depth of truth;

Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection;

Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into the dreary desert sand of dead habit;

Where the mind is led forward by thee into ever widening thought and action

—

Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake.⁸²

To attain this state, of course, mankind will first need to break away from the 'mind-forged manacles' of modern civilisation, and its main apparatus, the nation, and restore the soul to its rightful place, because only the soul can help us realise our true universal bond by redeeming us from the tyranny of matter, machine and money, and revitalising our inherent bond with God. Needless to say that Tagore's universalism is essentially different from the emerging globalisation which is variously described by sociologists as 'the second phase of modernisation,' 'metaphysics of the world market,' 'economic internationalisation,' and that shares the industrialist-capitalist premise of the nation-state, with a bias towards the intellectual realisation of human potential. Tagore's was a more poetical approach, rooted in comradeship and love; he sought to pave an intuitive, spiritual path for a world that is increasingly becoming prosaic and pragmatic, wilfully espousing a 'head culture' and the culture of, what Wordsworth would call, 'getting and spending'.

Notes

¹Anita Desai, "Re-reading Tagore," *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 29.1 (1994): 5.

²Tagore's biographer, Krishna Kripalani, writes of the many rumbling protests in the West after the poet was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913. One of the American newspapers, outraged by the prestigious award being given to a non-white, for example, wrote, "The awarding of the Nobel Prize for literature to a Hindu has occasioned much chagrin and no little surprise among writers of the Caucasian race. They cannot understand why this distinction was bestowed upon one who is not white" (Kripalani 226). This was characteristic of much of the Western press. However, not all reacted negatively. Sir William Rothestein, a friend of the poet, was elated by Tagore's receiving the award and wrote in his memoirs, "It was pleasant to see homage paid so readily to an Indian; nothing of the kind had happened before...." (Kripalani 227).

³Desai 6.

⁴According to the *Longman Encyclopaedia*, Tagore is the author of the Sri Lankan national anthem as well (1034).

⁵This was an incident in which a British general, R.E.H. Dyer, killed four hundred Indians and wounded 1200 more by maliciously firing upon a banned public gathering. Tagore was mortified by this senseless event and wrote in an angry letter to the then British Viceroy to India, on 30 May 1919, renouncing his knighthood, "The enormity of the measures taken by the Government of Punjab for quelling some local disturbances has, with a rude shock, revealed to our minds the helplessness of our position as British subjects in India. The universal agony of indignation roused in the hearts of the people has been ignored by our rulers – possibly congratulating themselves for imparting what they imagine as salutary lessons.... The time has come when badges of honour make our shame glaring in the incongruous context of humiliation" (Tendulkar, Vol. 1: 263). For more information on the incident, see Stanley Wolpert, *A New History of India*: 298-300.

⁶Rabindranath Tagore, *Gitanjali* [1912]. Introduction by W.B. Yeats (London: Macmillan, 1959) vii-xv.

⁷Krishna Kripalani, *Rabindranath Tagore: A Biography*. (London: Oxford UP, 1962) 295.

⁸Desai 6.

⁹Indu Dutt, tr. *A Tagore Testament*. (Bombay: Jaico Publishing House, 1969) 36.

¹⁰Rabindranath Tagore, *Nationalism* [1916]. (Madras: Macmillan India, 1976) 5.

¹¹Tagore, *Nationalism* 5.

¹²Tagore, *Nationalism* 6.

¹³Tagore, *Nationalism* 12.

¹⁴Tagore, *Nationalism* 12.

¹⁵Tagore, *Nationalism* 1.

¹⁶Tagore, *Gitanjali* xv.

¹⁷Soares 18.

¹⁸Anthony X, Soares, ed., *Rabindranath Tagore: Lectures and Addresses* (Macmillan India, 1970) 43, 51.

¹⁹Soares 44.

²⁰Dutt 37.

²¹The influences of Indian philosophy on the English Romantics and the American Transcendentalists is fairly obvious. Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey," Emerson's "Brahma" and "Hamatreya," Thoreau's *Walden*, and Whitman's "Song of Myself" are some examples that bear evidence of influences of the Upanishadic pantheistic philosophy on these writers. For more information, see Yeager Hudson, *Emerson and Tagore: The Poet as Philosopher*.

²²This movement was founded by Raja Rammohun Roy as an attempt to reform Hinduism of its overbearing ritualistic practices and Tagore's father Maharshi Debendranath was a prominent member of the movement.

²³"My Life", Soares 8.

²⁴"The Voice of Humanity", Soares 144.

²⁵Swami Prabhavananda and Frederick Manchester, ed. and tr., *The Upanishads*. (New York: New American Library, 1957) 123.

²⁶Prabhavananda 45.

²⁷"My Religion", Dutt 35.

²⁸According to Yeager Hudson, "Rabindranath participated each day in his father's morning prayer services at which there were always readings from the Upanishads"

(Hudson 27). This shows how the poet was initiated to the Hindu mystical scriptures very early in life, thus creating a lasting impact on his consciousness and making it the cornerstone of his imagination.

²⁹Soares 17.

³⁰Soares 130.

³¹In his interview with Albert Einstein, “Note on the Nature of Reality,” Tagore explained how human centred his religion was. He believed that “truth of the universe is a human truth” and that ours is essentially a “human universe” in which Truth or Beauty could not exist independent of human beings (Tagore, *The Religion of Man* 222-223).

³²Dutt 33.

³³Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Vols. 1 & 3. Centenary Edition. Ed. Edward Waldo Emerson. 12 Vols. (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1903-1904) Vol. 1: 84-108.

³⁴Emerson Vol. 1: 147.

³⁵Soares 6.

³⁶Prabhavananda 28.

³⁷Prabhavananda 21.

³⁸Soares 66.

³⁹Emerson Vol. 3: 67-68.

⁴⁰Emerson Vol. 3: 444.

⁴¹Emerson Vol. 3: 130.

⁴²Dutt 40.

⁴³Soares 145.

⁴⁴“Construction *versus* Creation”; Soares 62.

⁴⁵“Construction *versus* Creation”; Soares 62.

⁴⁶Desai 10.

⁴⁷Rabindranath Tagore, *The Home and the World* [1915]. Tr. Surendranath Tagore. (London: Penguin, 1957) 163.

For a full discussion of Tagore’s critique of nationalism in *The Home and the World*, see my article “In Search of a Spiritual Commonwealth: Tagore’s *The Home and the World*.”

⁴⁸The differences between Gandhi and Tagore on the subject of nationalism is well recorded in their personal correspondence. Tagore’s letter to Gandhi “The Call of Truth” and Gandhi’s reply can be found in Ronald Duncan, ed. *The Writings of Gandhi*. Kripalani has also discussed the subject at length in his biography of Tagore, see e.g. Kripalani 293-297. Amit Chaudhuri also refers in passing to the strained relationship between Tagore and Gandhi on the issue of nationalism in his article, “The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore.”

⁴⁹Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. (London and New York: Verso, 1983) 12.

⁵⁰Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies*. (London and New York: Routledge, 1998) 151.

⁵¹Quoted, Ashcroft, et al, *Key Concepts* ... 149.

⁵²Tagore, *Nationalism* 9.

⁵³Tagore, *Nationalism* 80.

⁵⁴Anderson 11.

⁵⁵Anderson 11.

⁵⁶“Construction *versus* Creation,” Soares 59.

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- ⁵⁷S. Radhakrishnan, *The Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore*. (Baroda: Good Companions, 1961) 173.
- ⁵⁸Tagore, *Nationalism* 7.
- ⁵⁹Tagore, *Nationalism* 5.
- ⁶⁰Tagore, *Nationalism* 9.
- ⁶¹Tagore, *Nationalism* 5.
- ⁶²Tagore, *Nationalism* 8.
- ⁶³Tagore, *Nationalism* 9.
- ⁶⁴Tagore, *The Home and the World* 61.
- ⁶⁵Tagore, *The Home and the World* 224.
- ⁶⁶Tagore, *Nationalism* 17-18.
- ⁶⁷Tagore, *Nationalism* 12.
- ⁶⁸Tagore, *Nationalism* 13.
- ⁶⁹Amit Chaudhuri, "The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore." Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, ed. *An Illustrated History of Indian Literature in English*. (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003) 113.
- ⁷⁰Leela Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*. (NSW: Allen and Unwin, 1998) 104.
- ⁷¹Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, eds., *The Post Colonial Studies Reader*. (London and New York: Routledge, 1995) 156.
- ⁷²Gandhi 108.
- ⁷³Tagore, *Nationalism* 17-18.
- ⁷⁴Tagore, *Nationalism* 12.
- ⁷⁵Amy Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*. (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1972) 21.
- ⁷⁶Ashcroft et al, *The Post Colonial Studies Reader* 154.
- ⁷⁷Soares 106.
- ⁷⁸Kripalani 278.
- ⁷⁹Kripalani 277.
- ⁸⁰Tagore, *The Home and the World* 26.
- ⁸¹Quoted, K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar, *Indian Writing in English*. (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1962) 109.
- ⁸²Tagore, *Gitanjali* 27-28.
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