



## Tagore and Nationalism

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### Abstract

Tagore had awakened the wave of nationalism at the beginning of the twentieth century by composing a national anthem: *Jan Gan Man*. He stood against the authoritarian form of nationalism, but his outlook was interpreted from a different point of view and was understood anti-national unfortunately. Tagore emphasized the 'classless and casteless' nation in place of rigid societal formation. He very aptly considered that the patriotism that has the right to sacrifice the happiness and human rights, would certainly invite the disasters instead of making sound base of great civilization. He had deep faith in universal humanity and he wished to have freedom of heart, not as nationalist, but as an internationalist. His novel *Gora*, the song 'Bharat Tirtha' and national anthem offered a vision that guided the struggle for independence and gave people its identity. One of his poems "Where the Mind is Without Fear" is in the form of a prayer for country wherein he wishes that it may rise above the narrow domestic walls and notions of development. The poet wishes an atmosphere of freedom and equality based on truth and fearless reasoning. One of his novels *Ghare Baire* (The Home and the World) also reflects the worth of humanity. His writings elucidate that entire world should stand united.

**Keywords:** nationalism, humanity, freedom, nation, domestic walls, patriotism

### Introduction

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1914) was a distinguished playwright, poet, short story writer, academician, musician and painter. Tagore was the first Asian to receive Nobel Prize for unique literary work *Gitanjali* in 1913. *Gitanjali* was originally written in Bengali and the poet himself translated it into English, considered a trans-creation. Tagore had contributed greatly to shape the future of cultural and intellectual 'modern India'. He had composed the national anthems India and Bangladesh. His Ravindra Music is still favourite in India. His idea about the world was universal. He gave importance to humanity in place of mere region and nation.

Tagore's "Where the Mind is without Fear", poem 35 in *Gitanjali* is a prayer by the poet for his country. The poet wishes that his nation may rise above the narrow notions of progress. He prays to God to offer an atmosphere of equality and freedom, which is based on truth and fearless reasoning. It is his wish that country should rise above the narrow notions of nationalism, progress and rigid domestic walls of social order. The poet aspires that the entire world should stand united and it should not be broken into diverse fragments under the name of caste, creed and religion. Every people should have dignity and self-respect as an ideal citizen of this nation.

According to him knowledge should not be restricted to particular caste or class, but should be free to all without any bias. He seems to appeal that people of this nation should strive untiringly towards excellence and their mind should be led into widening thought and action forever. The poet seeks the awakening of country in the heaven of freedom. Thus, the poet wishes his country to have all such qualities to fulfill his

vision of ideal nation. The appeal of this lyric poem seems both- personal and universal. The poem is subjective, however, its appeal remains universal. The poet says "into that heaven of freedom, My Father, let my country awake" which refers the pre-independence phase of India. Though, the name of specific country has not been mentioned, hence it can also be relevant to all countries. To that sense, the poet seems to communicate his feelings that the world should not be broken into the narrow walls of casteism, racism or nationhood. The poet indirectly implies the entire universe in general.

Tagore was strongly involved in protest against the British Raj on a number of occasions. He very actively took part in the national struggle. His criticism of the British administration of India was consistently strong and grew more strong in the course of time. He did not consider India's culture as weak and helpless without protection from western influence. Tagore was against communal sectarianism. According to his vision healthy nationalism in place of narrowly defined nationalism will certainly lead the nation towards the framing up of an honest internationalism.

Tagore had awakened the wave of nationalism at the beginning of the twentieth century by composing a national anthem: *Jan Gan Man*..., though he was accused of praising the British king in this song. He had returned the award of 'knighthood' which was offered to him by colonial power in protest of Jaliyawala carnage. It has also been argued that Tagore's poetry acquired international fame only because of the positive European response. In fact, Tagore stood against the authoritarian form of nationalism, but his outlook was interpreted from a different point of view and was understood anti-national unfortunately. The mere thinking of 'India as distinct as other nations and spiritually unmatched nation'

would be a false-pride according to Tagore's vision. It is like '*Ahorupam Aho Dhvani*' (a sense of self-appreciation). Tagore had clarified his concept of patriotism by viewing that greatness of country doesn't depend upon mere our nativity to this land. The love for country is integrated in the belief of geographical adoration which has preserved the live utterances of the great Sages during the restlessness of centuries. There should be 'classless and casteless nation' according to Tagore's views. In response to a Japanese poet who was justifying the act of war as a spiritual factor to improve others, Tagore very aptly suggested that the patriotism that has the right to sacrifice the happiness and human rights, would certainly invite the disasters instead of making sound base of great civilization. Tagore had deep faith in universal humanity and he wished to have freedom of heart, not as nationalist, but as an internationalist.

Rabindranath Tagore in a letter to his friend, A. M. Bose obviously favours the ideals of humanity and advocates that it cannot be compromised at any cost: "patriotism 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" (Dutta and Robinson 72)

His novel *Ghare Baire* (1916) (*The Home and the World*) also manifests the humanitarian approach. The character of Nikhil in the novel is enthusiastic for social reform besides women's liberation, but indifferent towards nationalism. As a result of his disregard for patriotic commitment and unenthusiastic outlook about anti-British agitations, loses the respect of his wife, Bimla. She is attracted towards Sandip, the nationalist and friend to Nikhil. Sandip seems dedicated to nationalistic feelings and performs his duties with patriotic zeal. Bimla falls in love with him. However, Nikhil is not ready to compromise with his ideology: "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" (22). The novel concentrates on the Swadeshi movement. Though, Tagore doesn't seem to advocate the Swadeshi movement because he believes that it would more damage the country than good. The writer seems to warn the people that it would lead the nation towards further aggression because peaceful movement at the outset would gradually turn into hostile form nationalism.

Tagore's *Gora* (1909) incorporates a variety of themes like caste discrimination, nation and nationalism, spirituality, motherhood and woman-emanicipation. Gora, the protagonist of the novel shows his dedication for Hinduism. His claim of identity as a Brahmin places him in an awkward situation at the end of the novel, when he comes to know the truth regarding his Irish lineage. Throughout the novel, Gora subsists in a world which doesn't belong to him in reality. The novel integrates the social and political ideology of educated middle class, their movements and changing vision, religion and new ideals of national life. The narrative doesn't introduce mere individual life of male and female, but it relates to national and social life in a broader perspective. The political dissatisfaction gave birth to national feeling and then started a search for national identity. The ego and injustice carried out by British Empire had generated the agitation in the mind of Indian especially Bengali people who received

English education. The effort became more intensive in the beginning of twentieth century. Tagore was one of them who were trying to survive the national unity. He could visualize the integrity in India's glorious civilization of past, its ideals and sacrifices, spiritual and *mantra* meditation. As a result of Tagore's acquaintance with people, disputes and discussions over a variety of issue, the idea of integrated life-philosophy took place in Tagore's mind. Hence, he gave due attention to characterize the valid notion of nation, religion, civilization and meditation in his writings. When man accepts the religious attainment of particular sect, his religious feeling generates certain rigid complexity. Religion is not confined under specific time, place, *shastras*, and authentic utterances. The novel *Gora* manifests all such arguments and thought through practical approach and discourse. It introduces the social consciousness and reality. The effort to declassify the religious and class-bias of character of Gora clearly suggests the facets of social realization. Gora shapes his life-philosophy based on culture and religion of nation and its code and conduct. The concept of such nation is based on false imagination and hence, the novelist seems to explore progressive ideology. The novel symbolizes a journey in search of individual and national. Towards the end of the novel, his vision for notion of Indianness and Nationalism seem to transform when he says: "Today I am Bharatiya. Within me there is no conflict between communities, whether Hindu or Muslim or Krishtan. Today all the castes of Bharat are my castes" (Tagore 475). He becomes 'conscious' enough to realize the truth that ideal nation should be free from caste, color and creed-biases. Tagore seems to advocate here the removal of caste and gender discrimination in order to promote the socio-religious harmony of Indian society.

Krishna Kriplani very appropriately justifies that:

Gora is more than a mere novel; it is an epic of India in transition at a crucial period of modern history, when the social conscience and intellectual awareness of the new intelligentsia were in the throes of a great churning. No other book gives so masterly an analysis of the complex of Indian social life with its teeming contradictions, or of the character of Indian nationalism which draws its roots from renescent Hinduism and stretches out its arms towards universal humanism (Kriplani 118).

Nationalism in the West' observes that India has been facing the 'problem of race' since the beginning of history. We have been facing it as a 'mission' and prove our humanity in dealing with it in the fullest form. Tagore clarifies that in India we are having 'internal' troubles; our history remained the history of 'continual social adjustment': "She has made grave errors in setting up the boundary walls too rigidly between races, in perpetuating the result of inferiority in her classifications; often she has crippled her children's minds and narrowed their lives in order to fit them into her social forms; but for centuries new experiments have been made and adjustment carried out" (Das 419). While defining the 'Western Nationalism' Tagore observes that the basis of western Nationalism is not based on 'social cooperation', but

its origin is the spirit of 'conflict and conquest'. Though, it has developed a 'perfect organization of power, but it lacks 'spiritual idealism' (426). Likewise India, the issue of race problem especially of 'Red Indian and Negro' is also prevalent in America. Tagore views in his essay on 'Nationalism in India' that until they solve the said issue in America, they have no right to question India on 'caste-division'. India has been trying to make an 'adjustment of races' yet its search for some basis of unity has not been accomplished fully. Tagore explains that the notion of unity has been preached by some saintly figures like: Nanak, Kabir, Chaitanya and others (453). While giving his views on Nationalism in context to India, Tagore seems obvious in his consideration: "India has never had a real sense of nationalism. Even though from childhood I had been taught that the idolatry of Nation is almost better than reverence for God and humanity, I believe I have outgrown that teaching, and is my conviction that my countrymen will gain truly their India by fighting against that education which teaches them that a country is greater than the ideals of humanity" (Das 456).

In the epic poem *Ramayana* Lord Rama utters while addressing his younger brother Lakshmana after their victory over the Rakshasa: अपि स्वर्णमयी लङ्का न मे लक्ष्मण रोचते जननी जन्मभूमिश्च स्वर्गादपि गरीयसी! ("Lakshmana, even this golden Lanka does not appeal to me, birth giving motherland is greater than heaven."), *but* Tagore positioned the idea of humanity exceeding all. To Tagore Nationalism seems a big threat. Though, he has clarified his position that he is not against one nation in particular, but against the general idea of all nations. He shows his annoyance against the social customs and rigid caste-system which have undermined the self-respect and made us dependent. The political freedom will make us free is rather a delusion according to Tagore's philosophy. We must preserve our faith in humanity. Tagore's philosophy also seems relevant in existing situation as we find the variety of social and political issues unsolved even after achieving the freedom from British hegemony.

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