

## Study Material

Module No: 1

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Topic: Nationalism and India

*Tagore's brand of nationalism is fundamentally rooted in the question of what it means to be human.*

As politics takes a right-wing turn in several countries around the world, the idea of nationalism is being debated anew. From the traditional understanding of nationalism as being bounded by ideas like culture and territory, the discourse now needs to shift to more complex ideas and reflections of nationalism. Nationalism that is dependent on the identification and demonisation of an “other”, be it another country or another community, is obviously divisive and helps to foment a culture of violence.

There have been many scholars who have tried to define the term. Benedict Anderson for instance **defines** nationalism as a bond between people that comes to exist when the members of a nation recognise themselves and their compatriots to be part of a nation. Ernest Geller believed that a nation is formed “if and when the members of a category firmly recognise certain mutual rights and duties to each other in virtue of their shared membership.”

Today, this membership is exclusive to the majority, while minorities are being excluded from this recognition of commonality.

Indian nationalism grew in the wake of our struggle for independence against the British Raj. The tone of that sort of nationalism was naturally emancipatory since it would be the rhetoric upon which the Republic of India would be founded. Now, the rhetoric of nationalism has taken a turn in an exclusionary direction. If we look back into our own history, there have been those who have provided us with alternative narratives that warn against an egregious understanding of nationalism. Such caution can be found in the works of Rabindranath Tagore, whose conceptualisation and understanding of nationalism is worth revisiting. This year marked his 158th birth anniversary.

In this reading list, we explore how scholars have understood Tagore's idea of nationalism over the years and how it is more pertinent than ever today.

## 1) Defining Nationalism

Tagore opined that the term nationalism was derived from the term nation-state which was nothing but the embodiment of Western ideas of capitalism and mechanisation. He believed that these ideals were intrinsically against the Indian tradition of self-autonomy, pluralism and religious tolerance which one would find in what he termed as the *samaj*. As Ashis Nandy writes:

Tagore's understanding of nationalism that is, its genuine European version that took its final shape in the 19th century as an inseparable adjunct of the modern nation state and the idea of nationality is explicit in a number of essays and letters. In effect argues that the idea of nationalism is intrinsically non-Indian or anti-Indian, an offence against Indian civilisation and its principles of religious and cultural plurality. Ghare Baire is a story of how nationalism dismantles community life and releases the demon of ethnoreligious violence. Similarly, Char Adhyay is an early, perhaps the first exploration of the roots of industrialised, assembly line violence as a specialisation of the modern times. Mohinder Singh also contributed to this narrative, stating:

Tagore's critique of modern civilisation finds clearest expression in his reflections on the concepts of nation and nationalism. Tagore defines nation as the political and economic union of a people and this union is the one that 'a whole population assumes when organized for a mechanical purpose. Commerce and science are used by nationalisms instrumentally to attain their ever-expanding power goals. Tagore traced all the deep flaws of modern Western 'political civilisation' back to the nexus of the political and the commercial in the apparatus of the modern state. In contrast, the defining feature of the Indian, as also of the Chinese, was for him the communities' self regulation of their own affairs. In fact, if his essays on nationalism and on the theme of samaj (community) are read together, a clear distinction emerges in his works between the nature of the political in case of the nation state and the pre-national political formations.

## 2) Tagore Is More Relevant than Ever Before

Tagore's encompassing definition of patriotism is a solution to distortions of the term which was primarily the work of Hindu nationalists of the time. His definition is embedded with values of cooperation and coexistence that transcends boundaries and is meant for humanity at large. This is comprehensively reflected in his work entitled *Gora* which Tanika Sarkar in her article **brings out**:

The novel was written a 100 years ago. Many of the critical questions that it had asked at that time remain unresolved and contentious matters even today; caste, faith, freedom of country and of individual self-determination, socially forbidden love and patriotic love. It reproduces and then thoroughly problematises certain arguments of Hindu nationalism: first elaborated by late 19th century revivalists and then, in a different way, powerfully developed in Bankimchandra Chattopadhyaya's novel *Anandamath*, written three decades before *Gora*. In a contrapuntal mode, *Gora* then offers a radically new way of being an Indian patriot.

### **3) Syncretism and Tagore's Nationalism**

Tagore was aware of the dangers of a nationalism that was rooted in the Western concept of a nation state. He had observed European forms of nationalism and concluded that the West had turned chauvinistic. In Europe, nationalism was a sentiment that was being promoted in order for a nation to become more powerful, especially commercially. Tagore's brand of nationalism sought to caution against this. His thoughts on nationalism developed from his inquiry on what it meant to be human. It was rooted not in the power that commerce could bring to Western political civilisations but in human agency and its traditions that emphasised tolerance that Indian civilisations used to be characterised by. As **Rudolph C Heredia, pointed out in his article**:

Tagore's idea of India was distinctly syncretic. He imagined a civilisation 'embedded in the tolerance encoded in various traditional ways of life in a highly diverse plural society', welcoming all peoples and cultures.

### **4) Tagore's Critique of 20th Century Nationalism Through the Japanese Example**

Tagore saw Japan as a symbol of hope as well as caution. Japan being an Asian nation had reinvented itself to become a force to reckon with. It became an

example for other Asian nations and broke the myth that only Western nations were capable of modernisation. However, Tagore also expressed a note of caution saying that the method by which Japan achieved this transformation was similar to that of other Western nations that followed a form of aggressive nationalism which he believed was corrosive and characteristic of nationalism in the 20th century. Amartya Sen in his article **wrote**:

Rabindranath Tagore appreciated and praised the importance of the Japanese experience in economic and social development as something that gave hope and some basis of self-confidence to countries outside the West.

Sen goes onto **talk about** how Tagore was also cautious by the imperialistic tendencies of Japanese nationalism.

In 1916, Tagore went on to criticise sharply the emergence of aggressive nationalism in Japan and its new role as an imperialist. Tagore's worries and concerns were already strong in 1916, the subsequent events, particularly the Japanese treatment of China, shocked him deeply.

### **5) Tagore's Nationalism Is Substantiated by Secular and not Canonical Texts**

We can also derive clues on Tagore's understanding of nationalism through his understanding of cultural unity. Unlike many 19th century thinkers like Ram Mohan Roy, Swami Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo who rooted Indian cultural unity in canonical texts, Tagore believed that religious texts could be central to classical Indian culture but not to Indian cultural unity which had to be rooted in temporal ideas.

Ashis Nandy **brings this out** eloquently when he says:

Unlike many others in his and our times, Tagore believes that the canonical texts of India – the Vedas, the Upanishads and the Gita might be at the centre of India's classical culture but they do not constitute the heart of Indian unity or provide the basis of it. Here he differs radically from the likes of Ram Mohan Roy, Swami Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo, and an array of eminent 19th century thinkers who believed that the canonical texts of Hinduism defined the basis of Indianness. Indian unity, Tagore insists, is built on the thoughts and the practices of the medieval mystics, poets and religious and spiritual figures. In such a country, importing the Western concept of nationalism was like Switzerland trying to build a navy.



## 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-emancipation. 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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## **Tagore's notion of Nationalism and Nation state: A Potential Solution to Fundamentalist Nationalism in Post-Independence India?**

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### **Abstract**

*Early in January 2015, India saw renowned Tamil writer Perumal Murugal declare the demise of his own authorial self-following his forced submission to caste group protests against one of his recent novels. The administration, both in the state and in the centre kept themselves mute in spite of the massive protests that emerged, giving rise to perhaps the most popular political debate India has seen since her independence – the intolerance debate. The murder of Prof. Kalburgi on August 30 by Hindu activists, the Dadri incident of a Muslim family being attacked by a Hindu crowd in late September, followed by beef activism and beef ban in BJP ruled states like Maharashtra clearly brought forth 2015 as what The Indian Express termed as 'The year India discovered intolerance'. However, it has to be understood that the massive media coverage of one instance of religious intolerance in Dadri does not make India more intolerant than it had been before, at least in the post independent era. Starting with tribal human rights issues just after independence to the governmental policies of “divide and please” with Operation Bluestar, the Shah Bano case and the verdicts on the Ram Janmabhoomi dispute, India has undoubtedly, always been a place for racial and religious infighting – both implicit and explicit.*

*The genius of Tagore had effectively foreseen this predicament back in the 1890s. In his words, “Her [India's] problem was the problem of the world in miniature. India is too vast in its area and too diverse in its races. It is many countries packed in one geographical receptacle”. Tagore understood the perils that the development of nationalism in such a predicament posed to what he called the Indian samaj. Post 1917, following the publication of his book Nationalism, Tagore emerged as a critique of the modern nationstate. So were Romain Rolland from France and Albert Einstein from Germany. Furthermore, his three novels – Ghore Baire, Char Odhyay and Gora brings out his disregard about nationalism and his affinity towards higher nonsectarian humanist politics. This paper brings into bold relief how Tagore's concepts of nationalism and nation, merged with his notion of multiculturalism and samaj provides a ground for the elimination of the predicament of identity based modern nationalism in the Indian scenario. In attempting to do so, it will look into the Tagore's notion of nation, nationstate and nationalism as is presented in his*



lectures on nationalism in Japan and in the USA (May to September, 1916), and two of his novels which is very much built around these concepts as a political tool – *Ghore Baire* (*The Home and The World*) and *Gora*. The paper then elucidates on an alternative construct as was proposed by Tagore – the *Samaj*. Finally, the conclusion leads us to an analysis of whether the alternative construct of the *Samaj* would be an effective solution to the growing identity based militant nationalism in the subcontinent.

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“...Where the world has not been broken up into  
fragments By narrow domestic walls...  
...Into that heaven of freedom, My Father, let my country awake.”

*Tagore Rabindranath, Song Offerings, 1912*

**1. Introduction:** The multifaceted genius of Tagore ended the last day of the 19<sup>th</sup> century by penning down the poem *The Sunset of the Century* – a poem in which he effectively launched a fierce attack on the notion of nationalism. Born into an era of increasing tensions among the superpowers of Europe, and the ever growing nationalist movement in India, Tagore, in an attempt to directly attack the modern institution of the nation state, wrote

“The last sun of the century sets amidst the blood red clouds of the West and the whirlwind of hatred.

The naked passion of selflove of Nations, in its drunken delirium of greed is dancing to the clash of steel and the 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,

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 heaven piercing its heart of grossness.”

An antinationalitarian tendency is very evident from these words. The sentiment of nationalism being the root cause of war, aggression and death remains at the core of Tagore's teachings. Yet, he is referred to as the greatest nationalist figure of the Bengali renaissance. Indeed, Tagore's greatest legacy lies in the fact that three nationstates of the world today – namely, India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, owe their national anthems to this anti-nationalitarian genius. And this poses a serious conundrum in the study of Tagore's ideas on nation and nationalism.

In a bid to effectively understand and solve this conundrum, it has to be understood that Tagore was opposed to the concept of nationalism in its military or aggressive sense – what could, truly be referred to as hypernationalism. He was an ardent believer of an interactive world, a world of dialouge among civilizations and societies. The principle of universality

would be the base of such a world, where nations would not be guided solely by selflove and selfgratification, but be a part of a higher enlightened community of societies. Tagore also envisioned an intercivilisational alliance – a synthesis of the East and the West, and a symbiosis of all world civilisation in the larger context. Indeed, he was unhappy with the “moral cannibalism” that the colonial powers were resorting to in their colonies in the pursuit of their own political and economic interests. And yet, he fervently hoped for the day when the two would meet. In a letter to Foss Westcott, he wrote, “Believe me, nothing would give me greater happiness than to see the people of the West and the East march in a common crusade against all that robs the human spirit of its significance”.

**2. Tagore's 'dis-ease' with the Nation State and Nationalism:** Benedict Anderson defined nation as an “imagined community”. Most social scientists maintain that the notion of nation is “notoriously difficult to define, let alone to analyze”. However, in spite of such complexity in defining the institution of nation in the literature of political studies, Tagore was explicitly and excessively clear about his idea of nation. In spite of being a poet and heavily resorting to similes and imageries in most of his text on nation and nationalism, Tagore is rather straight and amazingly vivid when it comes to question of the nation. A nation, Tagore emphasized, is 'a political and economic union of people' and 'is that aspect which a whole population assumes when organised for a mechanical purpose'. For Tagore, the institution of the nation is essentially modern and western. The 'mechanical purpose' of the nation state implies an instrumental rationality in its political form. This nation has a purpose – the purpose of selfdetermination and enforcement in the human civilization and fulfilment of its political and economic interests

– and this is ensured by the institution of the State. Tagore's nation is, thus, essentially a nation state. Tagore's conceptualization of nationalism is very similar to that of Earnest Gellner, who emphasizes on an ideology of nationalism which creates nations rather than preexisting nations developing nationalism.

Tagore further goes on to emphasize that when “this organisation of politics and commerce, whose other name is the Nation, becomes all powerful at the cost of the higher social life, then it is an evil day for humanity”. Tagore contrasts the dehumanised and mechanical Western civilisation and the nation that developed out of it to the indogenous societal groups in India. His is a clarion call to the East, a warning, to not be mesmerized by the lure of this glittering institution of the Nation. He calls upon the world “not merely the subject races, but you who live under the delusion that you are free, are everyday sacrificing your freedom and humanity to this fetish of nationalism, living in the dense poisonous atmosphere of worldwide suspicion and greed and panic...”

Partha Chatterjee in his article *Rabindrik Nation Ki*, which can be translated as ‘What is Tagore’s nation?’ points out that Tagore had predicted the impermanence of nations and the emergence of a union of nations and that, as creations of history nations would come and go. From his writings and utterances on nationalism we see an antinational Tagore, one who disengages himself from power structures and power struggles and one whose distaste for

the 'nation' arises from the belief that it would crush individual freedom. Tagore rejects the political notion of commercial and aggressive nationalism followed by militarily stronger societies of the West in its entirety. He rather looks forward to a neonational universal world order where societies would not be divided up or ranked in an order of hierarchy by such nationalism that brought into life Thucydides's ancient maxim of "large nations do what they wish, while small nations accept what they must". In his article "Imagining One World: Rabindranath Tagore's Critique of Nationalism", Mohamed A. Quayum stated

"India's myriadminded poet, Rabindranath Tagore—whom Bertrand Russell considered "worthy of the highest honour", and Ezra Pound deemed "greater than any of us" as a poet—shared not an iota of positive sentiment towards the ideology. His foremost objection came from its very nature and purpose as an institution. The very fact that it is a social institution, a mechanical organisation, modelled on certain utilitarian objectives in mind, made it unpalatable to Tagore, who was a champion of creation over construction, imagination over reason and the natural over the artificial and the manmade: "Construction is for a purpose, it expresses our wants; but creation is for itself, it expresses our very beings" ("Construction versus Creation," Soares 59)."

Tagore's portrait of nationalism automatically flows from his portrayal of the institution of nationstate. Tagore was of the opinion that nationalism is only an "organisation of politics and commerce", that brings "harvests of wealth" by "spreading tentacles of greed, selfishness, power and prosperity". Nationalism, according to Tagore, is not "a spontaneous selfexpression of man as social being," where human relationships are naturally regulated, "so that men can develop ideals of life in cooperation with one another", but rather a political and commercial union of a group of people, in which they congregate to maximise their profit, progress and power. It is "the organised selfinterest of a people, where it is least human and least spiritual". Tagore saw nationalism as a recurrent threat to humanity, because with its propensity for the material and the rational, it trampled over the human spirit, human morality and human emotion, "obscuring his human side under the shadow of soulless organisation".

Tagore saw his greatest example of the perverted Nation in the British colonialism in India. The British colonialism found its moral justification on the grounds of nationalism. The colonizers justified their colonial adventures and exploits as the white man's burden to spread civilization to the rest of the world. However the developing countries were only turned into 'hunting grounds' for mere selfinterests of the colonising nation. Tagore opines that all the problems in colonial India are rooted in one simple fact – that is the "abstract being, the Nation [the English nation] is ruling India".

Nationalism, thus, as Tagore notes, "is a great menace, it is the particular thing which for years had been at the bottom of India's troubles". Britain was sent "the gorgeous temptation of wealth [by God]. She has accepted it and her civilization of humanity has lost its path in the wilderness of machinery... This commercialism with all its barbarity of ugly decorations

is a terrible menace to all humanity”.

**3. Nationalism in India: A social problem?:** Tagore was indeed very much opposed to the notion of a nation state, but he was even more opposed to India as a society joining this league of nations and bandwagon of nationalism.

“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.”

“Our real problem in India is not political. It is social”. Thus started Tagore's essay on modern day nationalism and its prospects in India, written in 1916. He believes that the West has seen exclusive domination of politics on social ideals – and this is what India is, very wrongly trying to imitate. The very foundations of civilisations in the West and in India was based on completely different circumstances, challenged and supported by completely different and myriad factors. Civilizations in the West, or Europe, to be precise was founded under circumstances of racial unity and scarce natural resources. In this regard, communities within the Western civilization very naturally resorted to what Tagore termed as “political and commercial aggressiveness” uniting amongst themselves on the basis of their common identity to secure resources that were deemed essential for quotidian survival. And this spirit continues down to the cononial period – where nationstates organise and go about exploiting the whole world.

The Indian civilization, on the other hand, came into being under entirely opposite circumstances. She had the massive problem of race that was constantly posed to her throughout different epoches in her history. This does not, however, imply that India was the only nation to witness the problem of race. America too had witnessed it, where it had turned into a history of systematic exterminations of natives like the Red Indians. The problem of race that had been posed before India have never been dealt with a violent extermination of minorities. It is precisely because of this reason that India tends to lack unity when it tries to project itself as a political entity.

According to Tagore, “India has never had a real sense of nationalism”. Indians educated in Western history and ideals are trying to borrow this history of nationalism as it had developed in the west. This would do no good to the Indian civilization. Indians must understand that the history of Man is the history of both the East and the West. India must not consider herself merely as a 'beggar of the West' – she too has her own contribution to make in the history of civilizations. And this contribution is the attempt to bring into its fold all races by acknowledging the real differences that exist between these social groups, and at the same time seek some basis of unity. Tagore believes that this basis of unity in India has come forth through the saints like Kabir, Nanak and Chaitanya, who preached one God to all races in the subcontinent...

In a bid to go back to the root reason as to why commercial and aggressive nationalism as it developed in the West would be fatal for India to borrow, Tagore emphasized on the geographical vastness of the country and the social diversity that is present in it “it is many countries packed in one geographical receptacle. This was just in contrary to what Europe really is “one country made into many”. Tagore believed that India never had a violent answer to the race problem that was posed before her. The challenge before her was to try and evolve a framework of “social unity within which all the peoples could be held together, yet fully enjoying the freedom of maintaining their own differences. Tagore saw the caste system as a result of such an evolution. Aggressive militant nationalism, Tagore feels, would politically break up the already socially divided country.

Tagore and Gandhi were indeed in favourable terms – it is Tagore who addressed Gandhi as the Mahatma for the first time, and in reciprocation, Gandhi conferred Tagore with the title of Gurudev. But their ideologies, both political and social, were far from being similar. Tagore never believed in Gandhi's nationalist movement against the British – he said, “I am not for thrusting off Western civilization and becoming segregated in our independence. Let us have a deep association”. “What India most needed was constructive work coming from within herself,” he argued, like eradicating the caste system, fostering religious unity through education and social empowerment.

It has to be understood in this context that Tagore's conception of nationalism stems out from the times in which he lived. Born in 1861, he lived in the times of enormous upheaval in India's socio political realm, with the nationalist movement becoming increasingly popular. The finest and the most vivid example of Tagore's idea of nationalism can be derived from his participation in Bengal's swadeshi movement. Although Tagore was apolitical, he saw no harm in the Swadeshi movement following the partition of Bengal in 1905. In fact, the movement started from the threshold of the Tagore house with Tagore singing his song – *Ogo maa tomal dekhe dekhe ankhi na fire* [trnsd: My eyes are never satisfied enough beholding your sight, my motherland!!!]. Tagore actively participated in the Swadeshi movement of 1905 by delivering lectures and composing patriotic songs, so much so that Ezra Pound commented “Tagore has sung Bengal into a nation”. But soon after, the champion of nonviolence and ahimsa could not condone the violence perpetrated by the activists on civilians who did not support their cause, especially the Muslims. The burning of foreign cloth seemed insane to him – the poor of Bengal could not afford the more expensive home made products. He was further disappointed seeing the rise of extremist groups in Bengal like the Anusilan Samiti, who hoped to liberate their motherland from the clutches of foreign exploitation by resorting to violence. Finally in 1908, with Khudiram Bose hurled a bomb killing two innocent British civilians, Tagore called himself off the Swadeshi movement.

This sudden withdrawal on the part of Tagore was seen by many nationalists as an act of betrayal. But nothing could deter Tagore from doing so. In a bid to respond to his critics in this regard, he wrote the novels *Ghore Baire* [The Home and The World] and *Gora*, both of which elucidates on how exploitation, violence and killing become ritual acts when the

individual sacrifices his/her self to an abstraction, and nationalism is put on a pedestal, sacrificing righteousness and conscience. It would be fitting to elucidate on nationalism as Tagore conceived it to be in these two novels.

**4. Gora: Nationalism as Civilizational Universalism:** Gora (1909/1910) is widely considered “One of the most important novels ever written in British India, for it is an allegory of Indian nationalism, representing largely Tagore’s own view of it whereby religious division is replaced by worship of India’s natural and cultural diversity.” A novel steeped in the colonial experience which highlights the resultant crisis of personal identity, Gora brings out this crisis of identity as a result of the East – West encounter.

The novel is set in the backdrop of the period after the Sepoy Mutiny in 1857, a period of rising discontent against oppressive British rule. It was the “stirrings of national consciousness towards the end of the last century” that “created the historical and social setting for Gora.” The idea of the modern nationstate entered Indian society in the second half of the nineteenth century, but Tagore was ambivalent towards the western notion of the nation, particularly the “idea of a monocultural nationstate, and towards nationalism itself.” Thus in Gora, Tagore dwells on the civilizational aspects of nationalism, one that is needed in a multicultural, multiethnic and multireligious country like India. The idea of Bharatvarsha is a key concept in Gora. It is not merely a geographical area, it is identified with faith, religion, tradition, customs and the indigenous values of the subcontinent. Bharatvarsha is a mystical ‘entity’ that encompasses time itself, appropriating “the distant past and the even farther future, while weaving a particular thread in a particular pattern in the vast destiny of mankind.”

For Gora, Hinduism was synonymous with India – he grows up to become a militant Hindu. Gora finds his culture threatened by British colonialism, missionaries and non-Hindu Indians. His aggressive nationalism is directed particularly against the Brahmo Movement. However, the central paradox is Gora’s birth which is hidden from him but not from the readers. And therein lies the inherent irony of Gora’s speech and actions. The revelation that he is white, a mlechha, comes to him at the end of the novel – the news that he is Irish, not a Brahmin. He is at once lost and found. He loses his caste but finds himself as an Indian, above caste, creed and religion, forging new bonds of love and mutual respect.

At the end of the novel Gora asks to be taught the mantra of “that deity who belongs to all – Hindu, Muslim, Khrishtan, Brahmo – the doors of whose temple are never closed to any person of any caste or race – the deity not only of the Hindus but of Bharatvarsha.” The novel thus is not just a search for self-identity but for secularism that is “inclusive and indigenous at the same time.”

Gora’s movement from a Hindu militant to inclusiveness echoes Tagore’s critique of militant Swadeshi, Hindutva and Nationalism. Gora is a call to “Form yourself into a nation and resist this encroachment of the ‘Nation’.” Like Gandhi, Tagore looks at the traditions and values of Indian civilization, to work with difference and seek unity in diversity. A

nationalism circumscribed by a moral universe brings Gora closer to his mother, and by implication, his motherland. Gora, who is both centre and circumference of the novel is the oppositional voice which resolves tensions and conflicts and brings about the unity of the novel.

**5. Ghore Baire: An explicit response to Tagore's "nationalist" critics:** In colonial Bengal, if there was any consensus regarding the viewpoint of the subjugated people, it was that the west was materially superior while the east was spiritually superior. The aim was to create a cultural ideal and ambience in which the sciences of the West can be emulated while retaining the spirituality of Eastern culture. Social scientists like Partha Chatterjee have argued that the "domain of culture" was split up into "two spheres – the material and the spiritual" and into "*ghar and bahir*, the home and the world." Tagore's *Ghare Baire* (Home and the World) is a product of the modernization and selfidentity crisis of that time.

Prolonged colonial rule bred a sense of inferiority among the Bengali malefolk. Coupled with this subject status was a desire for freedom from the colonial yoke. This produced an unstable relationship not only between ruler and ruled but among the subjects themselves. Not only did caste, class and religious groups set out to acquire new identities but also produced a volatile ideological context in which the manwoman relationship had to be redefined. The modernization programme of the British was supported by the elite and the growing middle class who saw western education and industrialization as a means to move up socially and secure economic benefits. The introduction of women's education and social reform movements brought colonial rule into households. The desire for political and social autonomy clearly percolated down to familial relationships.

Bimala was a product of the age – a modern woman. Both Nikhilesh and Sandip try to fashion her according to their world views. Nikhilesh wishes to emancipate her from the *antapur* – the bounds of the home and stepping out into the world yet with one foot in the home. Sandip projects his wishes on to her by making her an icon of the nation – a representation of *Bharatvarsha*. Yet Bimala becomes neither. She first moves away from her husband and flirts with nationalism of the Swadeshi variety only to realize that it is physical intimacy with a passionate and ruthless man that she actually craves.

Bimala's failure to redefine her role within the liberated space of her home is symbolic of Tagore's apprehension about the new power equations between the sexes in a modernizing world. She internalizes the myth that woman is either *Lakshmi*, the goddess of good fortune or the incarnation of the powerful *Shakti*. She tries to play these roles within her household. At the same time western ways have impacted her in superficial ways such as in her attire, hair style and accessories. Sandip too was taken enormously by western ideals. Sandip's brand of narrow chauvinistic nationalism was the dreaded shadow of the West on the East. While Nikhilesh too is a product of western education, Tagore makes him the representative of a combination of all that is good in both east and west. He combines a love of freedom, rational thought and restrained behavior. As landlord, he is trustee of family property as well as that of his tenants. He is benevolent and lenient to a fault.

Nikhilesh is believed to be a portrayal of Tagore's ego. Both were zamindars, subservient to the British government, yet both were genuine swadeshis. Both had tried their best to promote indigenous industry long before the upsurge of Swadeshi hit the country. Both had to face hostility and were much misunderstood. Clearly, through Nikhilesh's character, Tagore attempted to bring forth his take on Swadeshi in a very direct and explicit manner. In *Home and the World* Tagore, through the political dynamics created, articulates a nationalism that is humane and in which all Indians could participate as equals, where men and women would be tied together by trust, truth and love.

**6. Samaj: Tagore's alternative construct to the NationState:** Tagore's extensive discourse on nationalism and his critique of the nationstate underlines an attempt to propose a societal fabric that is best suited to the Indian scenario. While he criticises the NationState as “an economic or political union of a people...which a whole population assumes when organised for a mechanical purpose”, he sees the notion of *samaj* [ society] as having “no ulterior purpose”.

“It [the institution of society] is a spontaneous selfexpression of man as a social being. It is a natural regulation of human relationships, so that men can develop ideals of life in cooperation with one another. It has also a political side, but this is only for a special purpose. It is for selfpreservation.”

*Tagore Rabindranath, Nationalism in the West, Macmillan, 1917*

Tagore, hence, clearly advocates a natural form of society for India, devoid of the Western institution of nationstate and the notion of political nationalism. The absence of the psychological feeling of nationalism would ensure the absence of extremist identity based nationalism. The Indian society would fare better if it remained merely an Indian *society*, with all its indigenous traditions, value systems and way of life ,as it had been for the hundreds of years before the British imported within India the notion of a nationstate.

**7. Conclusion: The case of India's Identity based Nationalism:** In all his works, Tagore persistently emphasises on racial and religious unity. In a beautiful hymn to India, entitled *Bharat Tirtha* (“The Indian Pilgrimage”), he urges all Indians to unite across race, class and religion, shedding their difference, and standing above the whirlwind of dusty politics, to unite in the constructive progress of their motherland:

“Come, O Aryans, come, nonAryans, Hindus and  
Mussulmans— Come today, O Englishmen, come, Oh come,  
Christians!

Come, O Brahmin, cleansing your  
mind Join hands with all—

Come, O Downtrodden, let the  
burden Of every insult be forever  
dispelled.

Make haste and come to Mother's coronation, the vessel



auspicious Is yet to be filled  
With sacred water sanctified by the touch of all  
By the shore of the sea of Bharat's Great Humanity!"

*Tagore Rabindranath, Bharat Tirtha [The Indian Pilgrimage]*

Tagore maintained that India's immediate problems were social and cultural and not political. India is the world in miniature, this is where the races and the religions have met; therefore she must constantly strive to resolve her "burden of heterogeneity," by evolving out of these warring contradictions, a great synthesis. In doing so, India must, first of all, address the caste issue. The caste system has become too rigid and taken a hypnotic hold on the minds of the people; what was once meant to introduce a social order by accommodating the various racial groups in India, has now become a gigantic system of coldblooded repression. India ought to come out of this social stagnation by educating the people; only when the immovable walls of society were removed, or made flexible, will India regain her vitality and dynamism as a society and find true freedom. What is the purpose of political freedom when the elites in society are exploiting the lower classes, especially the untouchables so ruthlessly?

Tagore was of the view that such unity and plurality of consciousness could be achieved only through proper education of the people, eradication of poverty through modernisation and cultivation of freedom of thought and imagination; "Freedom of mind is needed for the reception of truth" he said. It was education, and not the spinning of the Charka that Gandhi suggested, which could liberate India from the tyranny of the British colonialism. Tagore was constant envisioning a free India—free from the fetters of materialism, nationalism as well as religious and racial orthodoxy—actively seeking a common destiny with the rest of mankind and constantly evolving towards a global society.

Tagore could perhaps be criticised of impracticality. Yet the ongoing violence in the subcontinent justifies his position that joining the bandwagon of nationalism would be fatal for India. India has since been broken up into three countries: India, Pakistan and Bangladesh; ten million people were made homeless in the aftermath of the independence of India and Pakistan in 1947, one million of which also lost their lives in interreligious riots; two major wars have been fought in the subcontinent, with border skirmishes and threats of further wars, including a nuclear war, several riots have also broken out between the Hindus and the Muslims, claiming thousands of lives. India still remains a poor country, with political corruption rife, and plights of the downtrodden a daily reality. Tagore's prediction that joining the bandwagon of nationalism would make India a beggar of the West has also come true. Although India is a free country now, the appropriation of nationalist ideology has erased the sense of India's difference as a society, capable of standing on its own; forging of links with the West on unequal terms (since India has merely copied the Western thoughts and has nothing to offer of her own) has allowed neo colonialist controls to operate over the country both explicitly and implicitly, spelling

political and cultural doom for its people. Finally, the recent upsurge of extremist identity based nationalism in the subcontinent leaves us with no other alternative but place an inevitable trust on his model of nation, nationalism and society. It would be fitting to conclude the paper with a piece of Tagore's work that effectively sums up the entire question at stake

“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 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.”

*Tagore Rabindranath, Song Offerings, 191*

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