

Modernity and Nationalism at the Crossroads: Is “Creative Unity” the Answer?

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Abstract

As a philanthropist poet-philosopher, Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) was profoundly responsive to his contemporary occurrences and this can be easily traced through the rigorous analyses of his lectures and textual interventions. With the adaptation of the modern European state culture, “the India of no Nations” witnessed the baleful directions of the nationalist approach, for instance, it had not only distorted India’s political association with the West, but had also moulded the perceptions of Indians regarding their surroundings and identifications through glorifying impersonality and homogeneity. Tagore was completely futile to reconcile with the unbounded pursuits and the narrow militarism of the power politics and therefore clearly denounced its political anomalies. He was accredited with an alternative concept of nationalism which was endowed with the essence of universal humanism and the celebration of expressive individuality. Even in the crucial juncture of ‘separation’ and ‘conflict’, he never refrained himself from dreaming of coalescence of the oriental and the occidental culture or of an inclusive compassionate world beyond the barriers of the “geographical expression”. Tagore’s *Creative Unity* published in the year 1922, is one such repository of Tagorean alternative ideals which situate itself in consonance of the Indian culture while aiming to transcend itself to be participatory and receptive to the Western culture. Thus, this paper scrutinizes the evolution of his thought process and the particularities of his expressions through intersecting the Eurocentric modernity and nationalism with a special reference to the text of *Creative Unity*.

Keywords: Alternative Modernity; Colonial India; Humanism; Nationalism; Rabindranath Tagore.

“... the East and the West are ever in search of each other, and they must meet not merely in the fulness of physical strength, but in fulness of truth; that the right hand, which wields the sword, has the need of the left, which holds the shield of safety”

(Tagore 84).

How did Tagore perceive nationalism—a political idea so innately correlated with the culture of Western modernity? There is no immediate answer. Tagore’s deliberation on the idea of the colonial politics gradually evolved through the darkest pages of the history of mankind and time and time again, it was proved to be conflicting. This is why “[a]fter so much deliberation on the subject, it is still uncertain whether we understand Rabindranath Tagore better as an anti-nationalist or alter-nationalist” (Paranjape 77).

Tagore’s striking interrogations and serious engagements with the idea of nationalism are scattered throughout the gamut of his literary and non-literary works. To unfurl the concept of nationalism from Tagore’s viewpoint with special reference to *Creativity Unity* (1922), this paper episodically recontextualizes Tagore within the global rubric of modernism.

Rabindranath Tagore was born in Calcutta, the capital of the British India in the year 1861 at the crucial juncture of the emerging imperialism. By the last half of the nineteenth century, “modern European history showed to the societies of Asia, Africa and Latin America “the images of their future” (Kaviraj 498). To elaborate, after the emergence of the modern statecraft culture in the West, these ideas were put into motion in other parts of the world with an aim to posit the Europeans at the summit of controlling and economic supremacy. “The story of mankind” thereafter became synonymous with the “the story of western civilization” (Roberts 195). “After British power was consolidated [in India], it was forcefully used to create a replica of the kind of state authority that by this time dominated Europe” (Kaviraj 143). For being “radically different”, the besmirching alterations became evident in India in terms of its socio-cultural and political practices. For instance, besides the introduction of the elitist *Bhadralok* culture, “the rise of nationalism, democracy, and the welfare state” automatically elevated the importance of the “collective consciousness” at the cost of the people who actually constituted it (Ibid. 144). This peculiar world of the colonial India initiated a number of important questions, such as, to what extent should every individual be expected to be allegiant to the State culture? Or, do the modern nations contain any moral codes to secure the intrinsic human values? These “political tensions caught up with Tagore . . . even before 1916, when he began publicly to castigate the Western nationalism that he saw the root cause of the World War” and the imperilled Indian situation (Lago 2). Actually, in this context, there was no better service one can offer than “to try to combat pernicious prejudice, open the narrow heart and enlighten the spirit for his people, purifying their taste and ennobling their thought” (S. Sen 59). Tagore’s aim thus led him be-

yond the insular, dehumanizing, misanthropic trope of the Western modernity and nationalism where he introduced an alternative modernity and nationalism through bisecting and unmasking the former one.

Tagore's upbringing or the cultural background played a key role in the formation of his personality endowed with the oceanic humanitarian consciousness. Tagore was originated from such an exceptional Bengali aristocratic family that had not only drifted away from the profit culture, but also propagated the unflagging humanistic ideals. It is true that initially his family members were involved in the British introduced commercial systems, like; his grandfather, 'Prince' Dwarkanath Tagore was not only an active participant in the English opium trading, but he had acquaintances with Queen Victoria and King Louis Philippe (K Sen 34). His lavish and whimsical lifestyle ultimately concluded with a large financial debt. But, his son 'Maharshi' Debendranath Tagore despite being the inheritor of the prodigious property like any other *Bhadralok*, not only restored the financial stability within the family, but was also steeped in the liberal humanistic worldview. "[B]y early twentieth century . . . words like "cosmopolitan" were more or less interchangeable with "European"', but remarkably neither Tagore's father nor Tagore himself perceived it at its face value (qtd. in A. Chaudhuri 39). Debendranath Tagore's formation of the "Brahmo *Samāj*" alongside Raja Ram Mohan Roy based on the *Upanishadic* spiritual sustenance clearly suggests so. Brahmoism thus became assimilated within Tagore's psyche from the childhood.

In *The Religion of Man* Tagore himself admitted that, "I was born in a family which, at that time, was earnestly developing a monotheistic religion based upon the philosophy of the *Upanishad*" (Tagore 88). Furthermore, Tagore was exposed to the lessons of the *Vedas* and the *Vaishnava Padāvali* from an early age. Joseph T. O'Connell avers that, "Rabindranath and his elder brother Dvijendranath are reported to have read and enjoyed the *Bhagavata Purana*—though more for its romantic rendering of Krishna and his sweethearts than for its treatment of him as God" (O'Connell 149). The immediate legacy of the Hinduism was too some extent evident within Tagore's persona, but "[t]he unconventional code of life" or "the confluence of three cultures, the Hindu, Mohamedan and the British" within his family directed him towards a path devoid of all discriminations (qtd. in Das 156). To elaborate, his earnest admiration for the Islamic mysticism or Sufism alongside his father remained steadfast throughout his life (Paul 6). For Tagore, Jesus Christ became "the Son of Man" who articulated the ideals of "the heart's devotion" instead of the "rituals and offerings" since, Tagore placed "the man" into a 'greater' position than the

“custom or scripture” (Radice 169). Moreover, he himself admitted that, “the teachings of Buddha had “endowed [him] with vital growth” (Tagore 95). Above all, the humanistic schema of the God from the subaltern *Baūl* culture transformed him into a prophet of the “secular moral-spiritual category” (Dasthakur 342).

Michael Collins believed that, “Tagore’s philosophical critique of nationalism was firmly grounded, above all else, in a critical reading of Indian traditions, particularly in evidence in Tagore’s deployment of his *Brahmo* inheritance and the ideals of the *Upanishads*” (Collins 3). But, this adherence should not be cited in terms of the religious notions, since he was more interested in its acclamation of the oneness “as an aesthetic” (A. Chaudhuri 43). Tagore’s aesthetics actually points to such a canon where his humanistic verve of the Brahmo faith should never contradict with his habitual crossing of other cultures. Saha comments that, “For him, humanism and spiritualism were not antithetical but rather productively synthetic” (Saha 19).

If Tagore’s ideological inheritance is only concluded on the basis of the above argument, then it would seem that “he represented an orthodox reaction to the West” (Munshi 298). But, in reality, “Tagore was brought up in an atmosphere where the familiarity with European literature was encouraged” (Ibid.). He had neither any formal education in English despite being admitted to the Oriental Seminary followed by the Bengal Academy and the St. Xavier’s School nor he had acquired any degree from University College London for his typical disinclination towards the modern education system (Tagore 287-394). However, he was inspired to delve into the English literary culture by his cousin Jyotiprakash Gangopadhyay, alongside his father and the eldest brother (Ibid. 13-43). The ‘intensity’ of the English literature found its way to him through Akshay Chandra Chaudhuri, the friend of Tagore’s brother Jyotirindranath Tagore (Ibid. 102). Even his admiration for the European music and literary artists including Shakespeare whom he addressed as “a world poet” is not unknown to the scholars (Dutta and Robinson 191). In this way, Tagore was actually able to make “a distinction between ‘the spirit of the West’ and ‘the Nation of the West’” (Munshi 299). In other words, ‘Tagore’s’ West was an idea beyond the ‘actual’ formation of West. Tagore’s intricacies can be best described through Krishna Sen’s assertion: “Because of such a multistranded background, Rabindranath’s perspective was dialogic rather than dichotomized into water-tight binaries, and this hetero-discursivity permeated his thinking on nationalism and the West” (K. Sen 35).

“Man is man, machine is machine,
And never the twain shall wed.”

(Tagore 83).

Besides encountering the “sudden turn” in the Western poetics that had been “disrobing the aesthetics of beauty” as an outcome of the emerging modernism (Alam 129), Tagore had travelled to the Western countries for couple of times in the years around the World War I. His experiences of the West were channelled through “. . . immense power of money and of organised propaganda, – working everywhere behind screens of camouflage, creating an atmosphere of distrust, timidity, and antipathy. . .” (Tagore 101). The birth of the fascist Italy in hands of Benito Mussolini, the mobilization of the extremist German nationalism by the Hitler government, and the formation of Union of Soviet Socialist Republics under Stalin had typically witnessed the serialized colossal carnages. United States of America and United Kingdom equally left their footprints in the political aghast through their tyrannies over Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan and Ireland respectively. The human civilization was led into a moribund state through the participation of these ‘so-called’ democracies in the First World War. In other words, Tagore envisaged the root cause of a relentless greedy global order, culminating in colonial imperialism, was sown in the Western model of nationalism or in the very structure of the Western nation. The Indian state was not far behind, while its crimes were more covert than overt in nature in terms of co-operation with or silence over crimes. At this point, Tagore straightforwardly objurgated the idea of “carnivorous and cannibalistic” nation which was nothing but “a mere reproduction of the West” through many of his lectures and texts (Ibid. 36). On the very last day of the nineteenth century, he composed a literary piece which envisioned the imperilled future of the world, be it San Francisco or London, Tokyo or India:

The last sun of the century sets amidst the blood-red clouds
of the West and the whirlwind of hatred.
The naked passion of self-love 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 shaft

of heaven piercing its heart of grossness.

(Tagore 87).

He actually cited the idea of the modern nation-state as “one of the most powerful anaesthetics that man has invented. Under the influence of its fumes the whole people can carry out its systematic programme of the most virulent self-seeking without being in the least aware of its moral perversion—in fact feeling dangerously resentful if it is pointed out” (Tagore 57). In this sense, the word ‘nation’ acted as a homonym for him to enlist every dehumanization, exploitation, mistrust and misanthrope—the imperilled situation. Even he clearly manifested that, “I am not against this nation or that nation, but against the idea of the nation itself” (qtd. in Das 430).

Any reader can easily recognize Tagore’s anguish with the fast-evolving Indian context. He laments in *Nationalism* saying, “Englishmen can never truly understand India because their minds are not disinterested with regard to that country” (Tagore 69). He believed that, at the turn of the century “in trying to absorb some lessons from history contrary to the lessons of our ancestors” India’s “civilization of humanity lost its path in the wilderness of machinery” and was at the verge of “committing suicide” (Ibid. 27-36). In other words, the original paean voice of India was tarnished in the passage of the imperial domination which haunted Tagore through and through. As a consequence, he denounced the very existence of the word ‘nation’ in the Indian linguistic heredity. While writing the Bengali essay *Nation Kī?* for the *Bangadarshan* magazine, Tagore was futile to find a perfect corresponding term for the word ‘Nation’ in Bengali. As a consequence of which he employed the English term ‘Nation’ only in this Bengali essay. Much later, L. A. Gordon in the book *The Nationalist Movement 1876-1940* strikes the same chord:

We have no word for nation in our language. When we borrow this word from other people it never fits us. The Bengali word *rāstra* is used to indicate a state or a large political unit but has no cultural connotations. The term *deś* was often used to refer to either to Bengal or to India but the term originally meant the place of origin, place of geographic, social, linguistic and cultural sense and the equivalent for our country, home and place.

(Gordon 11)

The belligerent selfishness, ugly hubris, warmongering and greed for wealth eventually mobilized the anti-colonial approach among the Indi-

ans. This new-born political propaganda being based on nostalgia was revivalist in nature. In the year 1905, Tagore was first familiarized with an alternative approach to the colonial administration which came to be known as the *Swādeshi* movement in India. Despite the denotative definition of the phrase "*Swādeshi* movement" is "home rule", it actually promoted a typical extremist Indian nationalist discourse— where the principles of non-cooperation and execution were largely promoted. But soon, the strife was altered by the communal riots among the Indians as a deliberate consequence of the colonial "Divide and Rule" strategy. It is true that, at its beginning Tagore was "considerably swayed away by revivalism" and was even seen to publicly sing *Bande Mātaram*, the emblematic statement of the Indian patriotism, but shortly thereafter he completely drifted away from the entire curriculum "in mid-1907 under the impact of communal violence" (Sarkar 115).

In this context, it is worth investigating why Tagore could not reconcile with such alternativeness. The reason was his mainly his unswerving "faith in man" (Tagore 16). To start with, Tagore was extremely vexed and disheartened realizing how the religious idiosyncrasies of the Indians began becoming politically prominent under the colonial influence that they could not reconcile with each other anymore. Nonetheless, he offered anti-casteist, anti-communalist repose through the "demonstration in the streets of Calcutta to tie *rakhis* on the wrists of Muslims in 1906." (S. Chaudhuri 146) However, Tagore's humanistic worldview could not confine him to that crux; it connects him to the wider spectrum. He asserted that, ". . . the *rakhi* used as a symbolic token of unity during the anti-Partition agitation must be offered even to the oppressive British" (Ibid. 148). His letter of 19th November, 1908, addressed to Aurobindo Mohan revealed it all: ". . . I never have the temerity to tell my faith to go to hell and instead regard my country as supreme, as a cause worthy of my stealing, robbing and doing wrong. Patriotism cannot be our final spiritual shelter; my refuge is humanity" (qtd. in Dutta and Robinson 72). This same approach had re-echoed in his *Creative Unity* where he asked his "own countrymen" with a sceptic heart,

Have they acquired a true sense of freedom? Have they faith in it? Are they ready to make space in their society for the minds of their children to grow up in the ideal of human dignity, unhindered by restrictions that are unjust and irrational? (Tagore 102).

His oscillations between the home and the world are actually the glimpses into his unbiased attitude towards the anti-humanist nationalism. Tagore-

re's repudiation of *Swādeshi* "as a foreign concept, ill-suited to Bengal and India" ultimately led him to come up with his own interpretation of the term through his "imaginative practice" (Saha 8). For this reason, Ashish Nandy asserted that, "Rabindranath Tagore's creative self was a magisterial protest against the dominant theories of violence and counterviolence. He was probably the first to identify the banal, sanitized machine-violence of our times . . ." (Nandy 221).

Tagore's *Swādesh* undoubtedly had a "personal and quotidian" association with "every inhabitant of the country" since it was the "revival and reconstruction [*sic*] of the *svadéssamāj*" serving as an alternative of "the nation" (Chatterjee 104). To quote him,

The certain knowledge that I have a *dés* comes out of a quest. Those who think that the country is theirs simply because they have been born in it are creatures besotted by external things of the world. But, since the true character of the human being lies in his or her inner nature imbued by the force of self-making (*ātmāsakti*), only that country can be one's *svadés* that is created by one's own knowledge, intelligence, love and effort. (Ibid.).

Tagore's assertions actually redirect to a bunch of queries regarding his interpretations of the terms like 'revival' and 'reconstruction' or *dés* and *svadés* or *ātmāsakti* with regard to his *Creative Unity*. The thrust of Tagore's argument was actually quite positive. To him, the primitive Indian context was a spiritually enlightened and compassionate civic existence based on collaboration and self-government that resulted in man's overall individual and social fulfilment. In this locale, "Peace is true and not conflict, Love is true and not hatred . . ." (Tagore 11). He actually introduced his mythic imagination of God known as *Jibandebatā* who was not of cosmic power, but someone who meditated within the self and the world to flare the magical ocean of love with an aim to induce a distinct self-sufficiency within an individual. Upon receiving the God's message or *ānanda*, the finite complacent self or *choto āmi* attained liberation with the awakening of the self-subsistence or *ātmashakti* from within. With the new-found identity "as self-sameness" or *ātmaparichay*, the individuals embarked on the journey to attain salvation or *Mukti* through contributing in the formation of an organic Indian community or *Swādeshi Samāj* (S. Chaudhuri 143). In the words of Manjulika Ghosh, "*Samaja* is an ancient word, occurring in the *Rig Veda*, and it connotes equality of its members, derived as the term is from *Sama*. Society then is the republic of selves. Freed from the shell of ego, the self realizes itself fully. Harmony, for Rabindranath, does not

mean negation or exclusion of discord but transcendence of it" (Ghosh 91).

Since Tagore's "*Samāj* was a collectivity, quite literally, that could travel, that would find its inspiration internally and yet produce itself in a larger world", this was the nodal point from which his virtue of universalism blossomed (Saha 8). To elaborate, Tagore largely focused on the absorption of varied races into one oceanic Indian consciousness. Soon, India metaphorically became the world and the world metaphorically became his home. The Bengali phrase *Dibe ār nibe, milābe milibe, jābenā fire* or "Share and exchange; unite and be united; they would never return" of the poem *Bharat-Tirtha* essentially echoed this spiritual growth of India. As, "the spirit of India" does not "reject anything", precisely "any race" and "any culture"; this particular syncretic nature of the ancient India became the epicentre of his universalism (Das 294). In his *Creative Unity*, this "India holds sacred, and counts as places of pilgrimage" since India was in the "spiritual communion" with other cultures of the world (Tagore 47).

Tagore's conscious invocation of such non-statist *Samāj* in the colonial reality actually adopted his intention of the "Creative Unity" in the true sense of the term. He envisioned India in such a way that even being self-sustained within its own culture, it would be participatory and receptive to the Western cultures. Because, "[t]hus man, being free from the constant urging of unbounded competition, could have leisure to cultivate his nature in its completeness" (Tagore 108). To simplify, Tagore believed that, the human race cannot find its purpose in fragmentations or without one another. It is true that, his abnegated the Knighthood as the protest for the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre but it is also true that the same Tagore transcreated *Gitanjali; Song Offerings* to cater the "troubled Europe . . . who had been hurt in the midst of her game" (qtd. in Radhakrishnan 254). These two phenomena seem to be apparently conflicting, but, if analysed deeply, the former proves how Tagore condemned "the nation of the West" (Munshi 299), while the second depicts that, he never drifted away from his 'responsibilities' and the chief reason was his profound faith into humanity which in turn strived re-initiating "the spirit of the West" that was purely "moved by freedom" (Ibid.). In "[t]he Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech" in 1921, Tagore clearly avowed that the laurel conferred upon him as his "individual share" was actually "the East in [him], which gave to the West" (Tagore 291). In the *Creative Unity* published a year after, Tagore identified just the European perspective behind such a decision of choosing him for the highest honour. To again quote him,

The coincidence came to me with a great and delightful surprise when the Nobel Prize was offered from Sweden. As a recognition of individual merit, it was of great value to me, no doubt; but it was the acknowledgement of the East as a collaborator with the Western continents, in contributing its riches to the common stock of civilisation, which had the chief significance for the present age. It meant joining the hands in comradeship by the two great hemispheres of the human world across the sea. (Tagore 79).

In many ways, it would seem that Tagore's perspectives of nationalism are historically unfounded, bereft of critical approaches and romantic in nature that can be staunchly contrasted to the modern politics. Even, during his lifetime Tagore also encountered this sort of stereotyping impediment. Recently, Dipesh Chakravarty has posited Tagore's ideologies in "the imaginary waiting room of history" (Chakravarty 8). But in reality, such interpretations actually hinder the complete understanding of Tagore's political affinities. It is true that Tagore had "never opt[ed] for a straightforward definition" (Thompson 7). His multifarious metaphors and similes were scattered throughout his literary gamut including the text of *Creative Unity*. For instance, on one hand, the nation-state had been described as 'organisation', 'machine', 'factory', 'evil' while on the other hand, the pre-colonial existence of India had been elucidated in terms of 'self-expression', 'nature', "religious consciousness", "spiritual unity" and so on. But, this intense subjectivity implies that, ". . . for Tagore, nature was [*sic*] as much a political metaphor, an instrument for national contestation, as it was [*sic*] for John Clare and Ted Hughes . . . it moved [*sic*] in the opposite direction, critiquing imperialism . . ." (A. Chaudhuri 47). "The arcadian conception" intertwined with "Tagore's politics" practically took its inspiration from "the ancient India" (Ibid.) which "[f]ormerly, . . . worked through a more decentralized pattern of collective deliberations . . ." (Kaviraj 329). In a nutshell, Tagore's political ideas were replete with the "freedom of mind" where "independence of thought and action" could be traced (Tagore 90). Thus, Tagore's argument could never be dismissed as useless and critically unfounded, since it had a "practical-moral imperative" quality (Benhabib 230) that "forced [*sic*] us to break out of our individual boxes — our selfish ego [to] keep on moving in search of something greater, more glorious, and ultimately more meaningful . . . into the world that . . . [was] bleeding to death" (Sil 139-40).

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