

A Critical Review of Tagore and Cultural Nationalism

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Abstract

Nation and **Nationalism** are concepts drawing in admittedly both negative and positive literary reflections. The idea of nation has the observable outcome that is supplemented strongly with the nation's people. It could be, collectively, or individually grasped as one's love for the country. Nationalism can also be acknowledged with patriotism. Both signify the love for one's nation. Nationalism is denoted in terms of Individualistic, collective, political, or cultural congeniality.

The association of culture, religion, gender discrimination and other social set up like caste, with nationalism and its deleterious effects on individual and society are some philosophical and realistic themes presented in some of his writings. Tagore's steadfast view on freedom indulges in culture within the strata of nation at the same time draws out his disenchantment for violence. He preached and practiced humanity drawing upon his travel exposure and rich education compounded in the rich fabric of Indian culture.

Introduction

It is evident that individuals relate themselves with the piece of land that they live and revere the same tangible proposition by putting it on the high pedestal. This sense of identity ushered in beginning of the nineteenth century vitalized the Indian writers of literature to imagine cultural state through prevalent contemporary nationalist fervor in their fictional and poetic works. In the writings of Tagore an attempt to connect nation, nationalism, culture, and humanity is reverberated. By connecting the different ideas like culture, religion and nation, Tagore displays the intricacies existing among social group that has resulted in the man-made institutions like religion, caste, nation, and culture.

An inevitable part of human life since the conception the word culture it has been allied with different kinds of growing things and mostly associated with nurturing non-human living entities. Gradually with the evolution of human civilization in different parts of world, the term came to be understood as concomitant of human life, where different races, communities, cultures created a niche to identify themselves sometimes by clubbing or by condescending attitude towards each other. Culture has been used to define the element of identity. This process of shaping different recognition generated several hostile and disagreeable actions, ideas, thoughts, and attitudes in society.

Tagore and Culture

Exploration of different models for understanding culture can be initiated through literary writings from across the world. An immense realm of prodigious writers and a significant number of works in English literary writings are forthcoming from India. The opulent cultural past of India has been commemorated by many versatile writers and in their exemplary writings.

This paper is focused primarily upon Tagore's usage of style and language, which throws light to contemplate upon people in the Indian society and their rendition of culture and element of nationalism of the period of time. Subjects and themes in his writings are fused in the real life, hence mirror the Indian society succinctly. Most of the works dealt the local realistic issues that reflect the general vulnerability of his times rife in the larger context of the country.

The characters in the writings are strong enough to manifest constrains and imperfections of society. The writings throw light on the usual developments and customary musing of the society. Subjects and themes are fused in real life, through Nationalism which is one of the key issues that is aptly portrayed in his writings.

Tagore's writings illustrate the realistic portions of ordinary life meticulously and exhaustively. His *The Home and The World (Ghare Bhaire)* is an exemplary work that showcases the transformation of a woman, Bimala who was content to confine herself to a family to get along as a propagator of patriotism. This characterization is a wonderful illustration of the element on nationalism through her portrayal in the novel. In his other work, *Gora*, believed to be an influential novel on nationalism, presents the female characters as a mature and poised person. Even if Sucharita and Lolita, the major women characters of the novel, are socialized in the same set up where *Gora* was, they become the synonyms for maturity drawing in the high opinion on nationalism and showing extraordinary thoughts within the established social institutions like nationalism.

Tagore and Nationalism

Tagore opined that nationalism should fetch good to people. It is always possible when patriotism drives along with the national economy and spreading humanity for fellow person in society. Tagore strongly held an opinion that India's half of the social problems, could it be sectarianism, violence, hatred, religious issues, is resulted from lack of education. The impact of hegemony of nationalism and nationalistic ideology was widespread and overpowering in contemporary period when Tagore evolved as a writer. The established practice of nationalism affected Tagore intensely in span of time. The prevailing tendency compelled him to pen down his thoughts and spread out the message of humanity over any other man made social-political institutions. The mercurial nature of Tagore visiting the several places and meeting people shaped his outlook of nationalism.

Though he associated himself with different cultures, it did not cease him from loving and embracing 'others' ideas and ideologies. Amartya Sen, emphasizing acceptance of Tagore by people of other regions and religions, writes:

"Muslim citizens of Bangladesh (had) a deep sense of identity with Tagore and his ideas. Nor from choosing one of Tagore's songs ... Tagore's own description of his Bengali family as the product of "a confluence of three cultures: Hindu, Mohammedan, and British". (Tagore and His India 2001.)

In an interview with Einstein, Tagore relates human emotions and science. He while relating the human tendency of dominating others and the same phenomenon in science, he states:

'Our passions and desires are unruly... And is there a principle in the physical world which dominates them and puts them into an orderly organization?'" (Tagore, *The Religion of Man*, Appendix II 222-225)

Though he denounced nationalism, he believed in the strength of the country. Just like any other common citizen of a country, he too coveted the progress and prosperity of a country. He, while on a visit to Iran in 1932, wrote:

"... Asia will solve its own historical problems... but the lamp they will each carry on their path to progress will [become] converge to illuminate the common ray of knowledge." (Tagore, *Selected Letters of Rabindranath Tagore* 1932)

Tagore had broader outlook of life. Rather being a person of constrained attitude, he believed in life of reasoning. Amartya Sen claiming the same writes,

“Tagore greatly admired Gandhi, but he had many disagreements ...including nationalism, the role of rationality and of science, and the nature of economic and social development. These differences ... with Tagore pressing for more room for reasoning, and for a less traditionalist view” (*Tagore and His India* 2001).

Tagore was disenchanted about the developments in India during the Independence movement. He resented the political inefficiency to eradicate the problems of poverty and hunger in India. It exacerbated when the social conditions were fueled by different religious matters.

In a letter he wrote to Leonard Elmhirst in 1939, Tagore noticed the communal and sectarian violence that builds the wall between people. Tagore writes in the letter,

“It does not need a defeatist to feel deeply anxious about the future of millions who...are being simultaneously subjected...the seething discontents of communalism.” (Tagore, *Selected Letters of Rabindranath Tagore* 1932, p 515)

Tagore had firm belief in freedom. His thoughts and his ideas wherewith were based on proper reasoning. *Gitanjali* is the best known work for demonstrating Tagore’s idea on how freedom brings light to life and empowers life, he also urges nation to be heaven for freedom. His reserved views on patriotism and cultures also stemmed out from the same belief. Tagore’s propogation of same view is clearly expressed in *Gitanjali*’s verse,

“Where the mind is without fear
and the head is held high...;
.....Into that heaven of freedom,
my Father, let my country awake.” (Tagore, *Gitanjali* 2013)

Due to his steadfast view on freedom, Tagore disallowed all types of violence that would mortify civilization. He resented any of the fanatic view or irrational thinking that could deliberately bring mutilation to fellow citizen. Nationalism too was not an exception. His stances against nationalism or sectarian violence in the name of religion were crystal clear.

Familiarization of different cultures, according to Tagore, not just benefits people to bridge a gap but also admits varied cultures and celebrate it. In Tagore’s letter to his son-in-law Nagendranath Gangulee, who went to the U.S for further studies in 1907, he stresses the blending cultures and tradition and cautions Nagendranath Ganguli:

“... you must know America too..., one begins to lose one's identity and falls into the trap of becoming an Americanised person contemptuous of everything Indian” (Tagore, *Selected Letters of Rabindranath Tagore* 1932)

In spite of the fact that Tagore was against viciousness in the name of nationalism and sectarian violence, he always loved his country. In an interview with Einstein, he hoped that country like India needs its own time and course for attaining growth, thus stood by the opulence of the nation. The incident of Amritsar in April 13, 1919 where about 379 people were brutally massacred by the British, Tagore openly writes a letter to C.F. Andrews to express his resentment. He even returned the knighthood to protest against 1919 incident. (Tagore, *Selected Letters of Rabindranath Tagore* 1932).

He was afraid that rebuff of the West or grandeur of one's own past could result in detestation towards other religions like Christianity, Parsi, Islam, Zoroastrianism, and Judaism. In 1908 in a letter replying to Abala Bose, the wife of a great Indian scientist, Jagadish Chandra Bose, Tagore writes,

“Patriotism cannot be our final spiritual shelter; my refuge is humanity. ...and I will never allow patriotism to triumph over humanity as long as I live.” (Tagore, *Selected Letters of Rabindranath Tagore* 1932)

Tagore stood by the patriotism that becomes ladder to the subjugated and he considers patriotism should enable the marginalized in society to progress along with the nation. Whenever Tagore pondered over such issues, he admired the great effort of Japan, a country once admired for its true spirit for its land which decreed people of Japan to grow.

Tagore opined that nationalism should fetch good to people. It is always possible when patriotism drives along with the national economy and spreading humanity for fellow persons in society. But Japan's nationalism was questioned by Tagore when it demonstrated the vigorous role in the wars with China and its participation in World Wars. Tagore intensely believed the intolerance for others has instigated violence in Japan. On the other hand, he admired Russia for its growth and development.

It is the rapid growth of education that Tagore believed is the true sign of a country's growth. Though he opposed the terror against freedom in Russia that the spread of education eventually led to freedom of mind fascinated him. Tagore strongly held an opinion that India's half of the social problems, could be sectarianism, violence, hatred, religious issues, which resulted from lack of education. Education results in freedom of mind, a strong idea that Tagore had been propagating in his works. Santiniketan, a school that Tagore started, led an example on this. Having

been different from the traditional school set up, Santiniketan was a fresh breeze of the time. Tagore, breaking the traditional education system, introduced a completely new setup creating new waves in the field of education. Different topics that uncover a pupil to the world were taught. It included the cultures, practices of other nations like Russia, China, Japan and other Western ideas, which could open anew a window to the other world and life, thus spreading love.

Conclusion

Tagore in response to the cultural nationalism which believes in ostracizing the other nations as danger to their own existence, Tagore writes,

“Whatever we understand and enjoy in ... becomes ours... it hurts me deeply when the cry of rejection rings loud against the West in my country with the clamor that Western education can only injure us.” (R. T. Kumar 113)

Tagore believed that India does not need to be insecure, and that it doesn't have to protect itself against any force from outside. He was not blind to accept and believe only in the nation's heritage and the past. He reciprocated the western culture as he believed that it would also be helpful in India's growth.

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