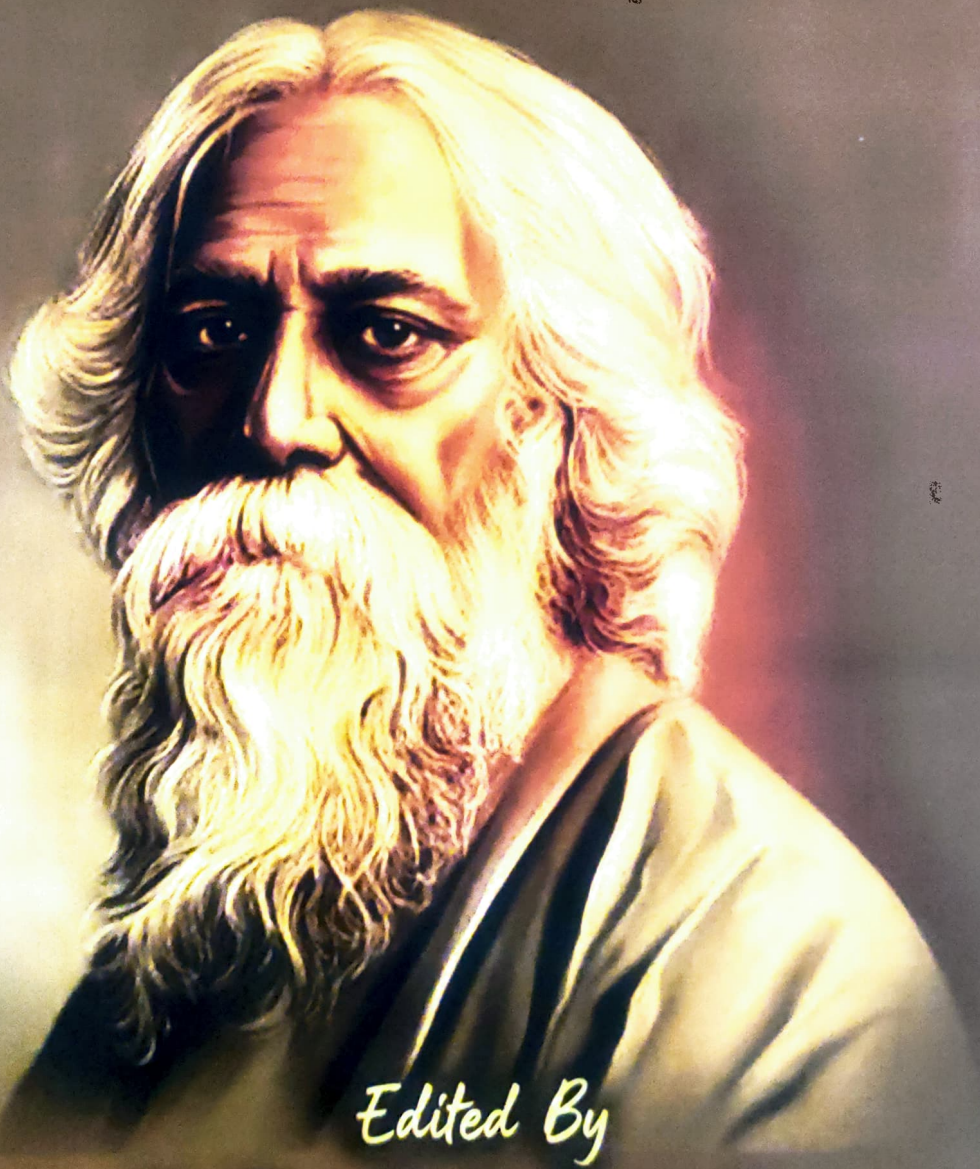


Rabindranath Tagore

A Contemporary Reader



Edited By

*Dr Ram Avadh Prajapati
Soumi Mukherjee*

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PERCEPTION PUBLISHING HOUSE

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Nation, Nationalism and Racism: Critical Perspectives from Rabindranath Tagore's Select Non-fictional Writings

Dr. Samit Kumar Maiti

Despite its abstract nature, nationalism still remains the most powerful political and cultural force in the contemporary world. Nationalism, although it speaks of fulfilling the ambition of the whole population of the 'imagined communities,' is fundamentally an exclusivist sentiment that manifests itself in the creation and perpetuation of diverse forms of discrimination on the basis of class, caste, race, religion, language, geography, etc. and is essentially detrimental to the spirit of cooperation, harmony and interdependence. Nationalism is invariably associated with the perception of national superiority, an inordinate ambition for dominance, and the promotion of an unhealthy spirit of competitiveness and contest. Needless to say, national egoism and an unmitigated lust for power and dominance are responsible for the two world wars in the last century. Under

the facade of national unity and progress, the nation-states are engaged in systematically marginalizing and excluding a large section of their population from the realization of fundamental human rights. As the most influential intellectual in British India, Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) came to express his unambiguous reservations about the concepts of nation and nationalism in his literary works. A nation, Tagore believed, was basically a political and commercial organization, whereas nationalism was a sentiment attached with the commercial and political interests of the nation. Apart from denouncing nation and nationalism, Tagore was also highly critical of racism, which he believed was the manifestation of the pernicious nationalistic feelings. While offering his systematic castigation of nation, nationalism and racism, Tagore's writings, both fictional and non-fictional, promote the ideals of love, harmony, cooperation, and an intercultural understanding. Tagore's idea of universal humanism and international cooperation is urgently needed in our times to defeat the vulgar forces of discrimination, division, and marginalization. Against the background of toxic nationalism, cultural arrogance, terrorism, racism and xenophobia of the contemporary world, the present paper, through an analysis of the select non-fictional essays of Tagore, aims to enhance our understanding of the complex interrelations of nation, nationalism and racism, with a view to promote humanitarian ideals and cooperative principles for the betterment of mankind.

Because of its dynamic, elastic and volatile nature, nationalism remains the most potent political and cultural force in the modern world. It shows its remarkable capacity to adapt itself to a number of factors: political, cultural, economic, religious, social, psychological, emotional and

spiritual. It is because of this highly accommodating and adaptive nature that nationalism remains the most powerful politico-cultural force shaping the national and international events in the present world. However, despite its enormous influence on the political and cultural affairs in modern days, nationalism is an undertheorized subject, as Benedict Anderson admits unequivocally: "Nation, nationality, nationalism—all have proved notoriously difficult to define, let alone to analyse. In contrast to the immense influence that nationalism has exerted on the modern world, plausible theory about it is conspicuously meagre" (3). But the paradox is that "nation-ness is the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time" (Ibid.).

The ideas of nation and nationalism entered into the Indian political culture in the late nineteenth century, chiefly as a political ideology to counter the forces of the European colonialism and imperialism. The ideas of nation and nationalism gained popularity during the anti-colonial and anti-imperial resistance spearheaded by the Indian National Congress, which came to articulate the aspirations of the millions of Indians for the freedom of the country. It is true that from ancient times there had been divisions among the Indians on the basis of class, caste, language, culture, religion, gender, etc., but nationalism became an overarching political ideology that successfully absorbed within itself all other forms of discriminations among the Indians. This is not to say that nationalism manifested itself as a single and unitary political force in India; in fact, there were multiple imaginings of nationhood in India during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, as the numerous political leaders and intellectuals came to express their individual versions of nation in a diversified ways. The political leaders like Bal

Gangadhar Tilak, Bipin Chandra Pal, Lala Lajpat Rai, Sri Aurobindo, Chitta Ranjan Das, Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, Mahatma Gandhi articulated their individual versions of nation and nationality during India's struggle for Independence. Along with the Hindu nationalist leaders, there were also the Muslim nationalist leaders who came to offer an alternative version of nation and nationhood for the Indians. So, the pre-independent India displayed the diverse and conflicting versions of nationalism.

At a time when almost all the political leaders and intellectuals in pre-independent India came to embrace the ideas of nation and nationalism as the only viable option to counter the forces of colonialism and imperialism, it was Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), the most dynamic and charismatic figure during the Indian Renaissance, who came to offer his most powerful critique of the ideas of nation and nationalism. Tagore believed that the ideas of nation and nationalism were basically the Western concepts and those concepts are not compatible with the Indian civilizational values. He came to argue that the word 'nation' does not have a Bengali synonym, so he preferred to use the word 'nation' even in Bengali language. In a letter to C. F. Andrews, he wrote, "We have no word for 'Nation' in our language. When we borrow this word from other people, it never fits us" (*Letters to a Friend* 103). So, 'nation', for Tagore, is a 'derivative discourse' that came to be imported from the West and is essentially incompatible with the Indian cultural ethos.

Despite the fact that Tagore supported India's struggle for Independence, he was a staunch critic of the idea of nation. His literary works— novels, poems, dramas, songs, non-fictional writings— contain his powerful diatribe against the concept of European nation. Tagore first articulated his

idea of nation in an essay entitled "Nation ki" (What is nation? 1905), which was, to a great extent, inspired by Ernest Renan's essay, "What is a Nation?" (1882). In his essay, Renan argued that nation is basically a modern phenomenon and antiquity was not familiar with the concept of nation. Echoing Renan, Tagore also came to state that nation is a product of modern European colonialism and imperialism. But, Tagore differed from Renan when the latter argued that nation was basically a soul or a spiritual principle. For Rabindranath, nation was an expression of the political and economic ambition of the people. In *Nationalism*, Tagore defined nation in the following words: "A nation, in the sense of the political and economic union of a people, is that aspect which a whole population assumes when organized for a mechanical purpose" (37). This is how Tagore significantly deviated from Renan's perspectives on nation. Tagore had his significant contribution to the theory of nation at a time when the concept of nation was acquiring a critical currency in the West.

Along with offering a strong critique of nation, Tagore came to vehemently oppose nationalism for several reasons. Nationalism, it is true, sometimes acts as a unifying force in the anti-colonial and anti-imperial resistance. This is why, it was accepted as an ideological tool in the national movements in most of the countries in Asia and Africa. But, Tagore believed that nationalism was an exclusivist idea: it excludes a large section of the society on the basis of economic power, religion, language, race, gender, etc. and marginalizes the socio-economically weaker sections from the scheme of nation building. Although a nation is supposed to be the crystallization of political aspirations of all the people of a country, it actually translates into reality the ambition of

the dominant section of a country, thus marginalising all other sections of the society. It is for this exclusivist nature of nationalism that Tagore came to castigate it in his writings. The path-breaking research works of the subaltern historians have revealed how the marginalized sections have been systematically excluded from the scheme of nation-building.

Tagore denounced the Western concept of nationalism on the ground that this exclusivist political ideology disturbed the spirit of cooperation and tolerance by rousing among the people selfishness, competitiveness, racial arrogance, and cultural chauvinism for the fulfilment of commercial and political interests. Nationalism generates a sense of competitiveness and conflict and Tagore believed that this spirit of conflict is at the heart of Western civilization. Since a nation is a political and commercial organization, the relationship among the citizens in a nation is mechanical, utilitarian, and impersonal. So, Tagore viewed nationalism as a pernicious political ideology and offered his serious diatribe against it in his writings. The *Home and the World* is one of Tagore's remarkable literary creations in which Tagore came to condemn the Western concepts of nation and nationalism. Tagore's *Gora* is a critique of the Western monolithic concept of nation and national identity. On the other hand, *Four Chapters* contains Tagore's severe denunciation of the extremist methods which were adopted by the Indian nationalists during the anti-colonial struggle against the British. Tagore, therefore, did not see any positive aspect of nationalism; nationalism for him was an out-and-out vulgar political force. Tagore was not only critical of the Western nationalism that came to be manifested in Europe and America, he was equally critical of the Indian nationalism that became a dominant political force during the anti-British

movements in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. Irfan Habib, the eminent historian sums up the basic tenets of Tagore's critique of nationalism in the following words:

He saw the darker side of nationalism that stifled the innate, instinctive qualities of the human individual and its overemphasis on the commercial and political aspects, at the expense of man's moral and spiritual qualities. Tagore emphasized humanitarian intervention into the self-seeking and belligerent nationalism, through the introduction of a moral and spiritual dimension. His internationalist and cosmopolitan vision was contrary to the narrow sectarian nationalism being espoused by nations across Europe and Asia. (118)

Tagore's critique of nation and nationalism had its strong association with his critique of racism. It was Tagore's conviction that racism was a perverted expression of national egoism and chauvinism. The sense of superiority and the spirit of megalomania that make people boast of their national superiority make also people conscious about their racial superiority. Racism is therefore an expression of an exaggerated national egoism. In an essay entitled "International Co-operation", Tagore criticized the "race egotism" in the following words:

In no period of human history has there been such an epidemic of moral perversity, such a universal churning up of jealousy, greed, hatred, and mutual suspicion. Every people, weak or strong, is constantly indulging in a violent dream of rendering itself thoroughly hurtful to others. In this galloping competition of hurtfulness, on the slope of a

bottomless pit, no nation dares to stop or slow down. A scarlet fever with a raging temperature has attacked the entire body of mankind, and political passion has taken the place of creative personality in all departments of life. (303-4)

While opposing the Western concepts of nation, nationalism and racism, Tagore developed an alternative theory of universal humanism. His idea of universal humanism was very much in consonance with the cultural traditions of India as it was based on the principles of love, fellowship and cooperation with an objective to achieve the unity of mankind on the basis of man's innate humanity. He believed that, although mankind is divided on the basis of class, religion, language, nationality, race, etc., there is essentially a fundamental identity of man – man's human identity, and that identity is man's basic identity while all other identities are artificial. Nationalism, as understood by Tagore, posits a binaristic contrast with the idea of universal humanism. He argued that "down below race, rank, religion, there is a fundamental humanity – man as man – which is universal and everywhere the same." Diversity on the basis of race, culture, religion, language, etc. is natural and this should not pose an obstacle to the unity of mankind because "Humanity will be perfect only when diverse races and nations shall be free to evolve to their distinct characteristics, while all are attached to the stem of humanity by the bond of love. All imperialism—except the imperialism of love—is wrong ("League of Vagabonds" 736-37). The passage epitomizes Tagore's central argument regarding the idea of universal humanism, which he developed as a counter discourse to the Western notion of nationalism and racism.

Tagore's critique of nation, nationalism and racism is based on his epistemological understanding of the ideas as well as his empirical experiences of the contemporary politics at the national and international level. He witnessed the ruthless brutalities of the nation-states during the First World War and the early phase of the Second World War. He was also anxious about the pernicious growth of nationalistic feelings in the Indian politics during the national struggle for Independence. He had his reservations about the Gandhi-led Non-cooperation Movement and the policy of boycott. It is true that Tagore offered his critique of nation, nationalism and racism in a different socio-political context, more than a century ago, and we have a completely different socio-political situation in the first half of the twenty-first century. But, this is not to say that Tagore's ideas of nation, nationalism and racism have lost their relevance in the contemporary scenario. Despite an altered situation, Tagore is equally relevant to our times, particularly at a time when the international relationships among the nation states are at stake mainly due to their aggressiveness to fulfil the petty political and commercial interests. The unprecedented outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic has exposed the authoritarian and inherently fascist nature of the nation states, which ruthlessly violate human rights of their citizens, particularly of the marginalised sections of the society. The oppressive and exploitative nature of the nation states is harmful for the peace, harmony and international cooperation, and there is a strong reason to surmise that the violation of fundamental human rights is the root cause of social instability and discrimination which ultimately gives birth to the forces of terrorism, fundamentalism, sectarianism, and other such divisive forces. Under such

circumstances, the study of Tagore's idea of universal humanism is of crucial importance as it can function as an antidote to the forces of sectarianism, terrorism, racial arrogance, cultural chauvinism and xenophobia with which the present world is troubled with and can pave the way for the betterment of mankind.

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