

Nationalism, Patriotism, Cosmopolitanism: Tagore's Ambiguities and Paradoxes (Part I)

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The American writer Ralph Waldo Emerson once said, "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines." Certainly, Tagore was above this puerile mindset. He was never concerned about perceived inconsistencies in his work, as his mind was large and dynamic and given to multiple viewpoints. It was also free to evolve with time, an important consideration for Tagore as freedom of thought was vital to him in his search for truth. In his interview with the Russian newspaper *Izvestia*, he stated, "Opinions are constantly changed and rechanged only through the free circulation of intellectual forces and moral persuasion." This freedom and the possibility of mutation of existing ideas led to occasional disparities and incongruities in his views. In a letter to his friend Pramatha Chaudhuri in January 1885, Tagore acknowledges the presence in his mind of a constant tension between "two opposing forces [that were] constantly in action" and which worked like the "swing of the pendulum." Isaiah Berlin saw this push and pull tendency in Tagore's imagination – of not giving in to one side of the argument but considering both and trying to tread "the difficult middle path" – as "the rarest form of heroism."

Given this polarity and the subsequent incongruity and ambiguity in Tagore's imagination, it is not surprising that his critics have interpreted him in various and often contrary ways. For instance, while Tagore was appreciated as a religious and spiritual poet by his Western contemporaries, in India some have labelled him an apostate. Some critics hold the view that "Tagore was intolerant, bigoted and anti-Muslim in his consciousness," yet conversely, I have argued that he was a champion of Hindu-Muslim unity, and that his critical gaze focused primarily on the Hindu Brahmins. As prominent historian Ramachandra Guha observes, "He had been accused of being anti-Western by some, of being a colonial agent by others, seen as too much of a patriot by the foreigner and as not patriotic enough by the Indian." In 1916, Tagore was the subject of an assassination plot in the US by the Ghadr Party for his lukewarm support of India's freedom struggle, but in 1917, when he wanted to dedicate his book *Nationalism* to US President Woodrow Wilson, it was not allowed as Tagore was suspected of "being involved in anti-British plots hatched by Indian revolutionaries (Ghadrites) in America."

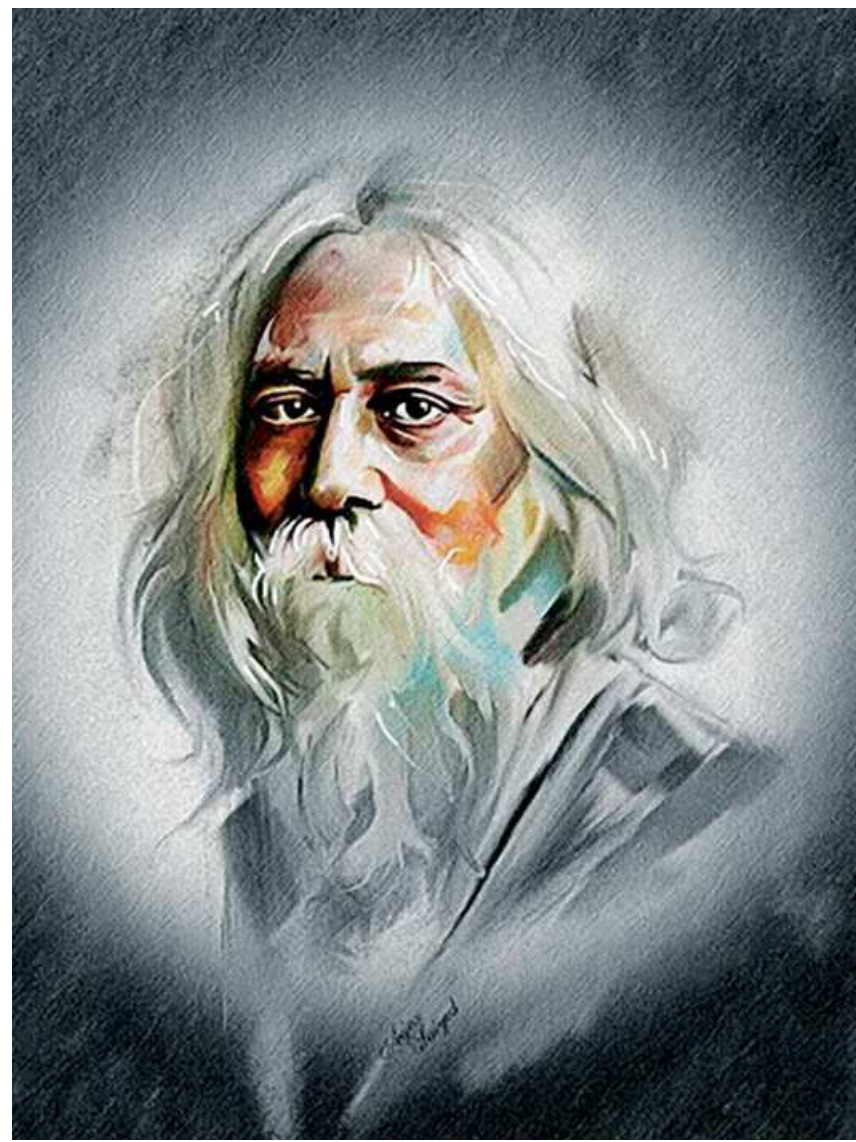
Tagore, as we know, was an avowed critic of nationalism. He lambasted nationalism in many of his works, most visibly in his book *Nationalism*, but also in various of his poems, novels, short stories, plays, letters, lectures, essays and articles. Critics generally

agree that Tagore was firmly opposed to nationalism as defined in the Western sense, and favoured a cosmopolitan worldview instead. For example, in a letter to Aurobindo Mohan Bose, dated 19 November 1908, Tagore wrote, "I took a few steps down that road [of nationalism] and stopped: for when I cannot retain my faith in universal man standing over and above my country, when patriotic prejudices overshadow my God, I feel inwardly starved."

Tagore's tirades against nationalism were so pronounced and strident that one would think that it would be almost impossible to sell him as a nationalist. Yet, in spite of all that he had to say denouncing nationalism, paradoxically a number of his critics and admirers have come to think of him as a nationalist, even a forerunner of Indian nationalism, who helped shape India's nationalist perspective. Foremost among them is Nehru, who in his book *The Discovery of India*, comments, "More than any other Indian... [Tagore] has helped to bring into harmony the ideas of the East and the West, and broadened the scope of Indian nationalism." Likewise, Guha argues that despite Tagore's strong anti-nationalist stance, his writings created formative influences on the nationalist thinking of both Gandhi and Nehru, forcing both of them to embrace a kind of nationalism that was inclusive, not exclusive, and "that sought not just political freedom for the Nation but equal rights for all its citizens."

In 2016, Trinamool Congress MP Sugata Bose had the following to say in Parliament: "I sometimes fear that those who are defining nationalism so narrowly will end up one day describing Rabindranath Tagore as anti-national if they read some of the sentences in his book on nationalism." All these indicate that in spite of Tagore's vociferous condemnation of nationalism, there is an increasing tendency, especially in India, to affiliate him with nationalism and nationalist politics, either to obtain leverage from his genius or to ensure his virtuosity cannot be used against the establishment.

Part of the enigma, of course, arises from Tagore's incongruity as a writer and his ambivalent imagination. He was an anti-nationalist who nevertheless loved and supported his country perhaps more than anyone else at his time. He always had the well-being of his country at heart, although never to the exclusion of other countries or ahead of his own moral sensibility. In other words, he was an anti-nationalist who was not necessarily opposed to the idea of "nation" for his country but to the ways in which its identity and future was being defined and charted. In *The Home and the World*, Tagore's protagonist and doppelganger Nikhil says, "I am willing to serve my country; but my worship I reserve for Right which is far greater



than country. To worship my country as a god is to bring a curse upon it." This willingness to serve the country while shunning the concept of revering Nation as Deity, undoubtedly makes his readers wonder how to arrive at a fair assessment of Tagore and his vision of nationalism; how to locate him in the context of his country vis-a-vis the ideology he opposed.

Tagore was an anti-nationalist who, paradoxically, as Pound wrote in a letter to Harriet Monroe, "[had] sung Bengal into a nation." Pound made that statement in 1912, long after Tagore had renounced nationalist ideology in his letter to Aurobindo Mohan Ghose cited above. Moreover, bewildering though it may seem, Tagore is the only person in history who has been associated with four national anthems: he wrote and composed "Jana Gana Mana," the national anthem of India; did not write but composed "Bande Mataram"; did not write but composed the national anthem of Sri Lanka; and wrote and also set to music the national anthem of Bangladesh.

This is extraordinary for someone who was an avowed anti-nationalist and saw nationalism, to quote from

his different works, as "an epidemic of evil," "a source of war and violence," a thing of "moral perversion" and "the greatest menace to man." Tagore first sang "Bande Mataram" at the 1896 session of the Indian National Congress, and it became hugely popular during the *Swadeshi* movement and later the *Swaraj* movement. It was adopted as the Congress Party's national anthem and sung by its Working Committee Members at all their gatherings. For the entire duration of India's independence movement, "Bande Mataram" remained a source of untold inspiration and sometimes even an incitement to violence for nationalist "troopers." The song attained a cultish status, especially in Hindu political circles, and was described by Aurobindo Ghosh in 1907 "as a 'mantra,' or motivating chant. "The mantra had been given and in a single day a whole people had been converted to the religion of patriotism," he stated.

Thus, ironically, although Tagore did not actively support Gandhi's *Swaraj* movement, the song he composed and first sang at a Congress gathering continued to play its magic role, as thousands of people marched in

demonstrations and went to jail for singing this song. Interestingly, when Tagore was asked by Rothenstein and Yeats to sing "Bande Mataram" at the dinner organised in his honour by Yeats in 1912, he refused to sing it but hummed the tune instead. It is unlikely that Tagore actually could not remember the lyrics of the song; it is more plausible that he chose not to perform a ritual of nationalism for this group from which he had continued to distance himself since 1907, when he decided to withdraw from the *Swadeshi* movement.

Apart from "Bande Mataram," which Aurobindo once described as the "National Anthem of Bengal" and which generally enjoys the status of India's "national song" (although it has no constitutional status), Tagore is also the author and composer of two national anthems, those of India and Bangladesh, and composer of the Sri Lankan national anthem. Obviously, these songs have been igniting nationalist sentiment in the hearts of millions of people every year in these countries. They encourage the people to embrace and extol an ideology that the author himself had so vociferously condemned and was so deeply opposed to, and they will continue to do so for who knows how long. That is where the major irony and dichotomy of Tagore's imagination lies; he who spurned and castigated nationalism, or "idolatry of the nation," was to become a source of fetishisation of the nation through two of his songs. Though a fervent critic of Gandhi's *Swaraj* that led to "unproductive hatred of the foreigner," his songs now symbolise nationalism in at least two countries.

Moreover, Tagore believed in freedom of the individual, which is to say that the individual should have absolute freedom to accept or reject an idea or practice – but so far as his two national anthems are concerned, the citizens of these countries have little choice in the matter, as it is their "sacred obligation" to stand up every time the national anthem is played. In a supreme court ruling in India in 2016, it was made "mandatory for movie halls to play Jana Gana Mana and for people to stand up as part of their 'sacred obligation' to the national anthem." In Bangladesh, too, as Farooq writes in *Banglapedia*, "There are approved rules of showing respect to the national anthem by civilians and persons in uniform, and there are rules regarding singing the national anthem at educational institutions and all other public places. For armed forces, there

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FICTION

A Pale Blue Star

ABDULLAH RAYHAN

Listening to summer breeze, smelling the raw pages of an old book my mind went wandering into the sea of nonexistent dreams. I drifted there like a lost sailor. And I hunted for a thousand-year old pale blue star.

I swiftly drifted on the soft surface of clouds. A flock of books was flying in the distant, I could see them in the light of a large moon, larger than the size of a palm. The pages of the book fluttered. I could hear the sound clearly.

The star I searched for was a thousand years old and it was pale blue. I had to find it quickly. If I didn't, the star would die.

I didn't want it to die. This was the star I prayed to when I was a child. All my prayers were granted. I got to smell all the colors, I got a new sense to understand words of a falling leaf or of a foggy ripple in the wind. It gave me a blob of cloud in a blue jar, it stands beside my bed. Its touch is like stardust with the smell of a full moon. At night, the cloud glows within the jar, it swirls around and twinkles like a herd of fireflies. It floods my room with a faded yellow spectrum and with the lights leaks the smell of damped earth.

How could I ignore the poor condition of the star after all it had given me!
To save the star I had to reach it and write

a little poem all over its body. The star would rise again when I sing it aloud. Then it will be fit again like our sun.

But where was my star? Where should I go? Which path should I follow?

I suddenly remembered something my father used to say. "Books are your true friends. They will always guide you to the right path."

I trusted my father's advice and followed the flying books.

They flew and flew and I walked and swam leaving disturbed clouds behind. A long trail of my movement curved the sky. Light glowed through it as if it was an eye of a child in the sunshine.

I fixed my gaze on the books, didn't move my eyes from them. They had my full attention and that was a mistake. I crashed into a big object. It was rectangular in size and was a bit tick. Light glowed from its surface. The light blinded my vision. The prettiest part of the poem fell out of my heart. I lost those words, and I myself was lost. I couldn't find my way around the object for quite a while.

My vision didn't help me so I took the help of my instinct. I pushed on the obstacle before me. I kept pushing it like a blind man



pushes a cart into an empty compartment, unsure of its mobility. I tried to go under it but failed. I tried to go over it but couldn't reach the top. So I kept pushing whatever was

before me and walked by my side. After a bit, I was able to pass it. I overcame my obstacle properly.

But another problem emerged before me. The flying flocks of books were out of my sight, they were gone.

I felt a tremble within me. Desperation shook my senses and my consciousness danced within like a madman. I have to find out a way to reach my star. I had to and I don't have much time.

Without thinking anything I ran toward where I never went. I ran over the soft clouds. Fireflies hit against my face, some even got stuck on my shirt. But I didn't notice them since I was in a great hurry.

The fireflies stuck and glowed against my black dress. And I ran. It was as if I was a sprinting night sky myself. Like a summer day my body started to warm up, breeze left my nostrils, sweat leaked through my skin. But I kept running. I had to keep running because I would save my star no matter what.

Finally, I reached my star, dimmed and old. There was not enough time. The sun would rise on my side of the earth soon and I would be moved to my ordinary position in existence.

I weakly knelt before my star. I touched

its pale blue body and rubbed my hands on its wrinkled skin. I could feel the curves on it under my palm. The touches were soft and smelled like pages of books.

I didn't waste any more time and set to writing on the star,

"All the breath that reached my heart For thousands of years apart, Let them merge into a single life, Let them form a single art."

I curved the lines onto the wrinkly body of my star and recited the sentences cheerfully. But my star didn't glow. I sang again but nothing happened. I sang again and again and again but my star remained true in its silence and wrinkles.

But I didn't stop, but I was starting to fade away, but I kept reciting.

It was morning. I returned back to my bed. I wept. I couldn't save my star, it died like a million others I didn't care about.

The next day when I looked across the evening sky through the veils of my window, I saw the star glowing at me.

It flew on to my finger as a firefly. It stayed there for a few moments before disappearing.

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