

Rabindranath and the Question of Nationalism

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To read Rabindranath Tagore's lectures on Nationalism delivered in 1916 in Japan and in America is to feel that he positively detested it. And yet he himself was, in his own characteristic way, an eminent nationalist. He believed in his Indian identity and, next only to M. K. Gandhi, was the most well-known and effective promoter of the unity of India. When he spoke to the West, in the three lectures and also in other writings, his voice was that of an Indian taking pride in his eastern background. The fact is that the two positions he takes with regard to nationalism are not paradoxical; they

is that India does not believe in Capitalist-Imperialist control over people anywhere in the world.

That Rabindranath believed in Indian national identity is clear. Early in his career in 1901, he wrote an essay in Bengali on 'nation' in which he said that Indian nationhood is founded on the collective memory of the past and the desire to build on that memory. In a 1905 essay, 'Abastha o Babastha' (the situation and the measures), he permits himself the use of the mixed metaphor of a male and a female figure in suggesting that there is a deity that invites all Hindus, Muslims, Christians in India, irrespective of their separate identities, to a grand festival. She makes them sit together and serves them food with her own hand. In a more well-known essay called 'Swadeshi Samaj' (the society of our own country), which he wrote in 1904, Rabindranath hopes that in India, Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists and Christians won't kill one another; instead, they will work for unity, albeit one Hindu in character. What is notable is that the spiritual unity of India that Rabindranath has spoken of in this, and in some of his other essays, takes on a religious character. Writing in a very different vein, and on a different subject, he, however, said in 1938, that we, Bengalis, are Bengalis because of our language. ('Bangalvasha Parichay,' Introduction to the Bengali language).

His objection to the European nationalism of politics and commerce was clear and well-founded. He found that kind of nationalism to be characterized by plunder, loss of sympathy for human beings, arrogance and dehumanization through organized selfishness. He felt it turned human souls into commodities, divided them into compartments, and empowered scientific organizations at the expense of humanity itself. The evils of political nationalism he speaks of and the images of its operation he draws suggest that what he has in view is the phenomenon of Imperialism and Capitalism, working together.

In the lectures Rabindranath's farsightedness and insight are, not

surprisingly, remarkable. He notes, "Whenever power removes all checks from its power to make its career easy, it triumphantly rides into ultimate crash to death." While it is certain that he was not thinking of the world-shaking, emancipatory Russian Revolution of 1917 which was imminent, his sensitive mind seems to have been apprehensive of another great world war, that of 1939.

One of the limitations of these lectures is that they do not give proper attention to the anti-imperialist struggle in India and in other countries. Just as there is a capitalist-imperialism kind of

rather unexpected from the spokesman of a subjugated country fighting for freedom and putting up with the repression of all kinds perpetrated by the British, Rabindranath says in one of his three lectures, "we [the Indians] neither have the right nor the power to exclude this people (the British) from the building of the destiny of India." (Nationalism, 49-50). He thinks that the coming of the British was 'providential' for the Indians to achieve progress and national unity.

The third answer to this question lies perhaps in the very nature of his idealism. He was a liberal, and liberalism decries Commercialism, but falls short of identifying it as Capitalism. This happens precisely because of the inability of the liberals to disaffiliate themselves from trust in private property, despite their full awareness that private property creates inequality and allows the rich to oppress the poor. Rabindranath has spoken of the immorality of the possession of private property, but was unable to visualize a social system without it. More importantly, to have identified Capitalism as the villain would have made it imperative for him to recommend a cure, a task he was not ready to take upon himself.

One recalls that in his play *Rakta Karabi* (*Red Oleanders*, 1922), Rabindranath offers a very realistic picture of the devastation Capitalism is capable of causing, but stops short of calling it by that name. Instead he suggests that the play is centered on a conflict between two contrary civilizations, one of agriculture and the other of industrialization. In the play, the king, who is the victimizer as well as a victim, is rescued from his confinement in the industrial-capitalist system by a girl, called Nandini, who represents the spirit of both freedom and open-space in the agricultural fields. The entire system would have broken down had there been an uprising which was, indeed, brewing among the deracinated and oppressed workers in the kingdom.

In a beautiful and very appropriate simile used in one of the lectures,

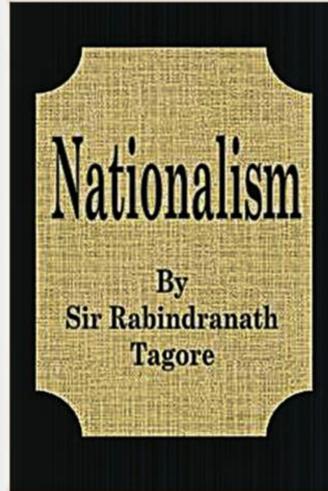
Rabindranath likens the modern state to the railway heading towards a terminal station and society to the tree with no definite movement. But to speak in terms of the reality obtaining in modern times, society is more like a collection of trees than a single tree, and these social trees are isolated from one another and are obliged to fend for themselves, individually and not collectively. As for collective welfare the need is not for alienated trees but for a river connecting the people. What would obstruct the flow of that river is the unevenness of the ground produced by inequality. What is required, therefore, is the dismantling of the capitalist system itself with a view to bringing people into a unity, ending both alienation and profiteering. The moral man we need is really the democratic man, who does not usurp power and believes in cooperation with fellow human beings. When Rabindranath recommends, as remedy for social evils, the promotion of virtues like cooperation among individuals, regulated passions and appetites in the interest of harmonious development of man, cultivation of disinterested love for fellow creatures and solution of problems through regulation of difference, and spiritual recognition of unity, he is not, it seems to us, speaking of a mythical past, but of a possible future to be founded on the democratic ideology of equality of rights and opportunities.

Rabindranath's political ideas are of a noble mind that wanted man to be free – morally, economically and intellectually. His views deserve to be considered with care, not only for understanding him but also for knowing the historical and ideological context to which they belong. His insight, foresight and poetic power of expression may remain unattainable for others, but his sympathy for the misery of the people of his own country and of the world at large, his courage of conviction and his refusal to compromise is exemplary and can guide future generations.

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don't contradict each other. For while denouncing nationalism he was not speaking of nationalism *per se*, but of it written with a capital N, and also of the Nation, spelt likewise. The target of his attack was the political nationalism of the West, by which he really meant Capitalist Imperialism. For him it is both an abnormality and an abstraction. Although he does not differentiate between the western and Indian dispensations of nationalism clearly in his lectures, a distinction is certainly implied, particularly when he suggests that the problem in India is social and not political. The implication



nationalism, there is also the defensive nationalism of the people ruled by the Imperialists. Rabindranath was fully aware of the anti-imperialist struggle. Why is it then that he did not give that struggle the importance that it deserved? Three answers to the puzzle suggest themselves. The first is that he was addressing an audience who were engaged in the advancement of the aggressive kind of nationalism, and therefore needed to be criticized on that score. The second answer is of a negative character. Perhaps he did not like India to be completely separated from the British empire. In a manner

Bichitra: The Making of an Online Tagore Variorum

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This remarkable book records a unique feat. In sequenced essays, its many contributors led by their mastermind, Professor Sukanata Chaudhuri, Professor Emeritus at India's Jadavpur University and a founder and ex-Director of its School of Cultural Texts and Records, describe/discuss various aspects of the "making of an Online Tagore Variorum." The project they articulate involved assembling, scanning and transcribing 47,520 pages of Bengali and English manuscripts, and 91,637 pages of printed works (also in English as well as Bengali) by the prolific author Rabindranath Tagore, and then making these pages available for Tagore scholars/lovers in a digital collection where they would be able to browse through them easily. Clearly, the scale and the ambition that guided these digital bibliographers, the extent of their devotion to the incomparably fecund author, and the immense scholarship and inventive computer textual work they deployed for the purpose are all noteworthy.

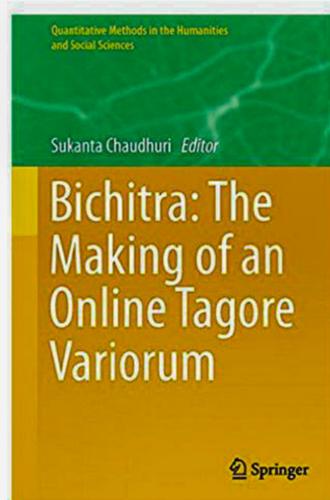
Tagore, of course, had attracted amazing worldwide attention in mid-career as a writer for a very slim volume of verse called *Gitanjali: Song Offerings* that he published in England in 1912. Subsequently, he continued to be admired for a steady outpouring of his work—poems, fiction, plays and essays and lectures—in many parts of the world, although he had faded from the centre stage of the international literary scene by the time he had passed away in 1941. In his native Bengal, however, he continued to hold pride of place for his writings; generations of Bengali scholars (and a few overseas ones) have

been nurturing his reputation assiduously for decades now. Their efforts intensified at the beginning of this decade, which saw not only the anniversaries of the publication of the English *Gitanjali* (2012) and the Nobel Prize it had garnered (2013), but also the Tagore sesquicentenary celebrations (2011).

It was with the sesquicentenary year in mind that the project to create "a comprehensive website of Tagore's works in English and Bengali in all available versions" (1) began in Kolkata in 2011. It was funded by a grant from the Indian government as part of its "grand commemoration of India's de facto national poet". The tasks before the 30 plus Tagore lovers/scholars and computer programmers of the project were undoubtedly formidable ones, for not only were there thousands of manuscripts and printed pages to gather, collate, scan and organize for a virtual archive in the two year time limit set for the team, but there was also the major problem of dealing with two languages and with multiple variants of a prodigiously energetic author who habitually rewrote and revised his varied literary productions. So diverse was Tagore's output, so wondrous the range of his imaginings, and so intense his writing habits that the project was given the name of *Bichitra*, a word which in Bengali connotes anything that is "variegated", "beautiful", "strange", "wonderful" and "many-coloured."

What can be easily said about the essays Sukanata Chaudhuri has collected and edited on behalf of his team in *Bichitra: the Making of an Online Tagore*

Variorum is that they too are varied in tone and intent and are written in a manner that captures the team's ingenuity and diverse interests and capabilities adequately. The task before the team was certainly daunting: for one thing they were dealing with a "primary corpus" that "came to nearly



140,000 pages..." a third of which "was in manuscript". What is more, most of these pages were "in Bengali with its cumbersome keyboard". The Bengali language itself, so full of "single consonants" and "innumerable conjunct glyphs of two, three or four consonants, each combinable with ten vowel markers" had to be negotiated to create "the world's biggest integrated

literary database". Once the manuscripts, books and journals by Tagore had been amassed they had to be imaged adequately for digital processes. The fact that within them there were all sorts of generic variations and Tagore's own idiosyncrasies such as the doodling that he was addicted to while writing posed specific challenges for the Bichitra team. After these primary problems were solved the next difficult challenge to be met was one of data and file management. To quote, this task necessitated "an exercise in metadata management". It was a task of epic proportions since the ultimate goal was to create an "integrated website," or what the project's team claim to be the world's first "hyperbibliography". For the project all of Tagore's works would have to be arranged in a format whereby all readers could have ready access to them. Another objective was to create a chronology of his works so that scholars could trace the growth of the poet's mind as he wrote and rewrote his works or translated them from Bengali into English or vice versa. The next and crucial challenge was to come up with a search program, a "hyperconcordance" as it were. The goal here was to find a way of collating "comparable text blocks from different versions of a work". A final goal was to "provide single-window access to the full range of primary material on Tagore, as well as detailed analytic information through facilities like the hyperbibliography, hyperconcordance and collation engine".

Bichitra: the Making of an Online Tagore Variorum details the tasks set, the

goals adopted, the methods followed, and the obstacles encountered and overcome in coming up with the online Tagore Variorum. In lucidly written and lively chapters; with elegance, wit and the kind of assurance that comes from having traversed awe-inspiring but troublesome, variegated and slippery territory; with pride derived from making the impossible possible in record time, but also with humility in knowing that not all problems had been solved; and with the knowledge that there was still some work to be done to arrive at a definitive variorum of an indefatigable author, Sukanata Chaudhuri and the other members of the Bichitra team offer us in the book a fascinating account of what must have been an incredibly difficult task. It was a task that must have surely sapped the veins of them all. What is endearing about the attitude of the authors of this book is that despite all that they have done, they seem to be convinced that theirs is still a work in progress. Looking at the website and reading the book has convinced this reader that though the Bichitra team has scaled Olympian heights in their Tagore variorum, they are heroically bent on extending their reach infinitely to scale even greater heights in their bid to go much further in the brave new world of digital bibliography. All subsequent Tagore scholars and variorum aficionados will surely owe the team members a large debt. They beckon those scholars and aficionados to the brave new world on view here as well!

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