

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

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Like nationalism, Tagore's perspectives on patriotism are also characterised by certain paradoxes and ambiguities; he was a fervid patriot, yet he openly denounced and deplored the sentiment of patriotism. We know that Tagore wrote many songs celebrating his native land and paying homage to its beauty and fecundity, of which, as mentioned earlier, two have become the national anthems of India and Bangladesh. Yet he loathed being called a patriot and derided the concept vehemently in many of his writings. For example, in a letter to Aurobindo Mohan Bose, responding to some harsh comments on his view of nationalism by Abala Bose, wife of the celebrated scientist Sir Jagadish Chandra

So why this dichotomy in Tagore's sensibility? Why did he reject something that seemed at once an integral part of his imagination? There are various possibilities. First of all, Tagore saw nationalism and patriotism as inseparable twins; both had a cultish nature that amplified the "vulgarity, cruelty, [and] greed" in people and sought to replace humanity and God with a bloated sense of self and the nation. As pointed out by Aurobindo in a previous statement, patriotism was a sort of a "religion," which, like religious orthodoxy, could engender, in Tagore's own phrases, "abnormal vanity," "moral callousness" and "a spirit of persecution" in its followers. In this context,

It is perhaps because of this inherent danger in the sentiment of patriotism – that it could easily translate into jingoism and reveal itself either on the battlefields of Europe (as in the case of the two World Wars) or in the religious riots in South Asia (as it is happening right now in Delhi, instigated by Modi's ultra-Hindu-nativist-xenophobic nationalism, as I write this article for *The Daily Star*) – that Tagore remained ambivalent about the concept.

Another possible explanation is that, to Tagore patriotism was a personal experience that "comes out of a quest." It was not a matter of fancy or whim, simply because one was born in a particular land. "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," Tagore stated. To make desh into *swadesh*, a country into one's own country, one had to apply one's *atmasakti*, or the power of self-making, and reimagine the land through "one's own knowledge, intelligence, love and effort." Therefore, to Tagore, patriotism possessed added meaning and significance to its political and popular usage; it had an imaginative and a spiritual side that eluded most people, who professed their love and loyalty to a country merely because they were its inhabitants.

Moreover, Tagore believed in the harmony and co-existence of the opposing spirits of attachment and detachment. "In their union dwells the ideal of perfection," he wrote in "The Fourfold Way of India." In the context of patriotism, this means that while one should love one's country, one should still remain spiritually detached from it. "The harmony of bondage and freedom is the dance of creation," Tagore explained. He developed this idea beautifully using the metaphor of walking: "In the act of walking, attachment is in the step that the foot takes when it touches the earth; detachment is in the movement of the other foot when it raises itself." Given this metaphysical aspect to Tagore's understanding of the concept, it is no surprise that he actively distanced himself from and disparaged the same idea when it was discussed among politicians and the masses in mundane everyday speech.

A similar kind of ambivalence appears in Tagore's treatment of the concept of cosmopolitanism. We know that throughout his writings Tagore spoke about creating a world culture and bringing humanity together in "one nest." He longed for a world

that was "free from all antagonisms of race, nationality, creed or caste" and that "[had] not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls." In his Nobel Prize acceptance speech in 1913, Tagore categorically stated, "India is there to unite all human races." In a letter to his son Rathindranath, dated 11 October 1916, he further stated, "The age of narrow chauvinism is coming to an end – for the sake of the future, the first steps towards this great meeting of world humanity will be taken on this very fields of Bolpur" (where Tagore's institutions Santiniketan and Visva Bharati are located).

In spite of such supra-national aspirations and desire to create a *mahajati* (grand human community) through the harmony of all human races, Tagore – somewhat curiously – spurned the idea of cosmopolitanism on at least one occasion. Pairing it with nationalism in his book *Nationalism*, he disdainfully stated, "Neither the colourless vagueness of cosmopolitanism, nor the fierce self-idolatry of nation-worship is the goal of human history." This statement seemingly undercuts everything that Tagore envisioned with regard to creating a global fellowship of humanity and cultivating cultural cooperation and an international mind.

So why did Tagore make such a dismissive comment on cosmopolitanism? Perhaps it was his attempt to reject the type of specifically *political* cosmopolitanism that was developing in Asia around the same time, in which the British Empire was expected to evolve into a new cosmopolitan super-state, and nationalism to be realised in a federation of nations. The leaders of this project included such cosmopolitan visionaries as Dr. Lim Boon Keng in Singapore, Anand de Souza in Sri Lanka and the Theosophists in India, headed by Anne Besant. These individuals, as Mark R. Frost explains, did not give up their "nationalist aspirations" but rather, wanted to tie it "to demands for a 'reconstructed' British Empire, an imperial federation and even a League of Nations that would... eventually (following the end of global hostilities [after World War I]) usher in a new age of peace and brotherhood."

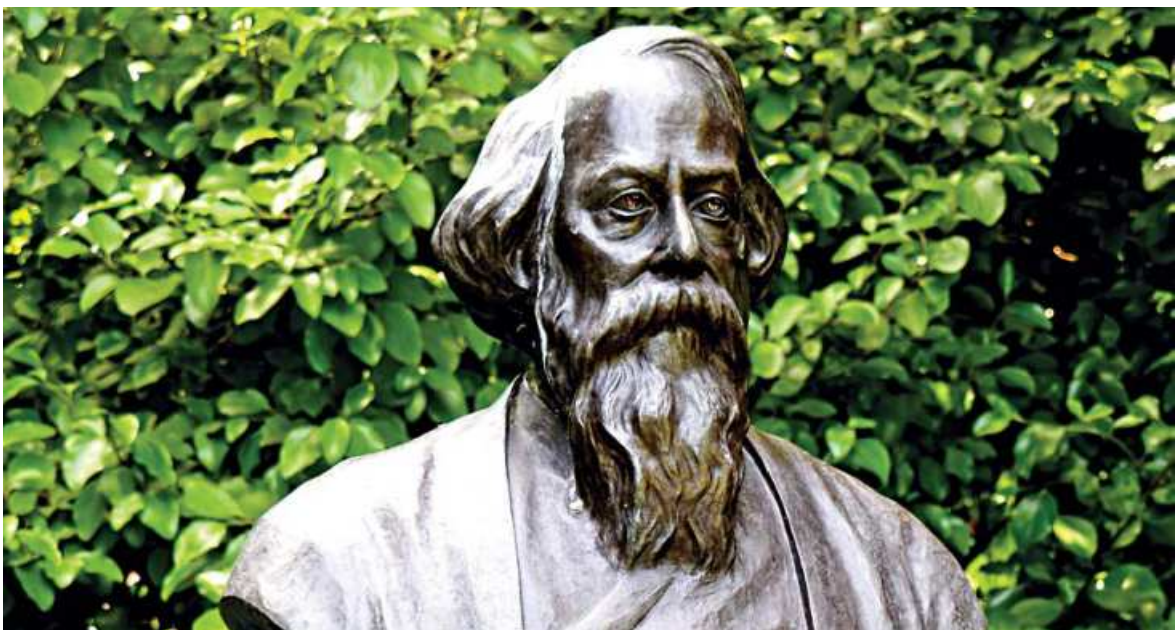
For example, Dr. Lim Boon Keng, a Chinese nationalist and Empire loyalist, envisioned the great potential of the British Empire to bring about a "great union" and a "cosmic harmony" in which the Empire itself would act as the vehicle. To attain such "unity" and "oneness" of

humanity, Lim "advocated the further extension of English as the *lingua franca* of the British Empire." In Sri Lanka, likewise, de Souza dreamed of a "World-Britain" in which the British Empire would turn into a "commonwealth of nations," wherein "No more shall we be two empires – 'White' and 'coloured' under a single name – but one, where all shall have rights as they are able to bear responsibility." Similarly, in India, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, one of the adherents of Besant's political ideas, when asked why he was not in favour of India separating from the Empire like the Sinn Feiners in Ireland, replied, "We want to be in the Empire on terms of equality. We do not want to separate ourselves, but we want to extend within the League of the Empire."

Tagore was not interested in any such political cosmopolitanism that would transform the Empire into a gigantic nation, in which the individual would still have to sacrifice his/her moral qualities for some political and commercial gain and surrender his/her spontaneous self to a virulent self-seeking and artificial life, which would bring power and prosperity but no inner fulfilment or lasting peace.

Tagore's cosmopolitanism was more cultural and spiritual in nature, in which the individual would be expected to share a sense of hospitality and sympathy towards all fellow human beings, and maintain a sense of openness to the world around him. Kwame Anthony Appiah is of the view that a principle characteristic of cosmopolitanism is a feeling of obligation to others, beyond family and kinship ties, "or even the more formal ties of a shared citizenship," an interest in the values and practices that lend significance to other people. Tagore's cosmopolitanism shares these spiritual-cultural qualities advocated by Appiah and others, as opposed to the League of Empire type of cosmopolitanism championed by those contemporaries named above. Thus, rejecting political unity vis-à-vis spiritual unity, in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech Tagore affirmed, "Therefore, no superficial bond of political unity can appeal to us, can satisfy us, can ever be real to us.... We must discover the most profound unity, the spiritual unity between the different races."

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Bose, Tagore commented, "Patriotism cannot be our final spiritual shelter; my refuge is humanity. I will not buy glass for the price of diamonds, and I will never allow patriotism to triumph over humanity as long as I live." In a letter to C.F. Andrews, with whom Tagore had a friendship of, in Uma Das Gupta's phrase, "largeness and freedom," he further wrote, "This is the ugliest side of patriotism. For in small minds, patriotism dissociates itself from the higher ideal of humanity. It becomes the magnification of self, on a stupendous scale – magnifying our vulgarity, cruelty, greed; dethroning God, to put up this bloated self in its place."

Nussbaum's response to Richard Rorty's appeal to Americans not to "disdain patriotism as a value" seems pertinent. Comparing Nikhil's cosmopolitan worldview in *The Home and the World* to Rorty's, Nussbaum explains, "I believe, as do Tagore and his character Nikhil, that this emphasis on patriotic pride is both morally dangerous and, ultimately, subversive of some of the worthy goals patriotism sets out to serve.... Richard Rorty's patriotism may be a way of bringing all Americans together; but patriotism is very close to jingoism, and I'm afraid I don't see in Rorty's argument any proposal for coping with this very danger."



FICTION

The Hunt

HASAN MARUF

The crunch of snow beneath our pads was cracking like the breaking of bones between our teeth. The tundra, echoing for miles, a vast white desert, and our breath is the only warmth in the barren winterscape. The quickstep of our feet, pacing in time with one another; our bellies empty, senses sharpened because of it. Smells hang in the air like dead men at the gallows. She - weak, injured, alone and out of breath. Five miles had we followed the trail of her scent! Blood from her wound, blood from her menstruation; her fear is the engine that drives her on. Soon she could sleep on the blanket of crisp, white snow; her throat opened and stomach emptied. Liver first, that's our prize. We claimed first our triumph, later the clan feast on the carrion that we had left.

She was slowing down but we quickened our pace. It was not speed that we had in our favour, its endurance, our steadfastness, focus and will, like the sea that washed stones smooth. Ahead, in a clearing, she stumbled and I took her flank, she toppled like cards. Your jaws around her throat, her eyes, an obsidian abyss, her blood was pouring out like a red carpet against the white snow appeared brighter than a ruby. Her life: ebbing away--- she fell silently, quickly, into her sempiternal slumber.

The metallic throng of her liver slipped down my throat and my sister came to take her fill.

"Wait your turn!"

I ordered. She lowered her head

and falls back in line. Your mouth was incriminated in scarlet, your steely eyed gaze flashed me a glance and for a moment I wondered if I too would be reprimanded, but you buried your face again in the caribou and feasted on her warm, tender flesh. The last twitches of her body faded, she took longer to leave than most, her will was strong, and she must have had young ones.

Our stomachs were full; we stepped aside and let the clan devour the leftovers. They snarled and gripped at each other like humans around a thanksgiving dinner. The lone one waited... he did not eat unless everyone else had finished. It was either that or -- die alone in the wasteland out here. Vulnerability was seemingly a reward like The Crown's golden jubilee. He had tolerated, to a degree, but my King would open his throat if he displeased him at all.

We headed back to the river where the young ones whined at our return. An old fox hole we took last winter was a favourite place to have this year's litter. Four pups, three male and a bitch, ran up to me and licked the fresh blood from my mouth, I regurgitated and they fed on the partially digested flesh. My sister took them off to the water's edge to drink where they would like to chase the birds.

Defunct almost deadened, we tumbled onto the ground and slept for a few hours in the warmth of the den, bedded with leaves and fur. The smell of urine permeated; the pups still in



infancy had yet to go outside when they needed to empty their bladders. It did not stop us slumping into this

quiet torpor, only the smell of humans would do that, and they had not been here in three seasons.

The nightfall came and the temperature dropped depressingly low, the thick coats we had protect us from the cold, but we still huddled together for warmth and a pleasant interlude. I needed to stretch my legs so I ambled outside into the bitter night's air. The sky was dark violet aqua chiffon, littered with stars; the moon--- a silver disc, the lake of the gods, reflected in the heavens. While the others slept you came to me and we mated under the moonlight. Afterwards, we called out in a vociferous celebration.

We howled for the offering of flesh the caribou gave to us. She was the Hades incarnate; audacious yet indissoluble, she would sustain our pack until we needed to be fed again. We honoured her under the moonlight; we honoured the land--- the place we call home, the fruitless snow for protecting us from too many humans. We honoured the sky, for the light that was given to us so that we could hunt and live; we honoured our family, our unity, and the bonds we shared. We honoured the moon herself--- that pale goddess--- this is our call; we honoured it now and it echoed through us into future generations. We are the wolves; wild, rapacious and free, and the royalty of the North.

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