

Rabindranath Tagore: Nationalism

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Rabindranath Tagore, born in Calcutta in the latter half of the 19th century, has left a literary legacy encompassing many themes and genres, and was the first Asian to be awarded the Nobel Prize in 1913 (Literature). He published Nationalism in 1917 after a lecture tour abroad on the subject, and in it, spoke of human destiny and the duality between mind and spirit. He also deplored the effects of nationalism and denounced patriotism, arguing instead for the appreciation of spiritual and humanistic values as well as greater cross-cultural understanding. The following are excerpts from student book reviews written under the guidance of Owen Griffiths, Ph. D., and Associate Professor of History at Mount Allison University.

The beginning of the First World War heralded a new era in political theory. Doubts as to the validity of certain political ideologies began to emerge in intellectual circles as Europe, followed by the world, deteriorated into conflict. In Europe, doubts centred on state interactions and the nature of man, while in the colonies, doubts centred on the previously unchallenged idea of European superiority. Questions regarding Europeans' natural right to govern so-called inferior peoples emerged as civilization in Europe crumbled. Until recently, the contributions of nationalism to the rapid cascade of war in the years preceding World Wars One and Two have been sidelined. In this respect, Rabindranath Tagore was astoundingly prescient in his series of lectures published in 1917. Published collectively under the title "Nationalism," the lectures propound that nationalism was the cause of what was then believed to be the war to end all wars, and cautions audiences against the "anaesthetizing" influence of the quest for nationalism (57).

At the time of Tagore's writing, Social Darwinism was the geo-political catch-phrase and, as in scientific Darwinism, only those deemed fit by survival were successful. Those that were

unfit "must go to the wall – they shall die, and this is science," (45). The problem with adapting 'survival of the fittest' to international relations is the perception of death resulting from unfitness: only nations could be fit – and as a result, the perception that "As long as nations are rampant in this world we have not the option freely to develop our higher humanity" (38). Individuality has no place in success as it is defined under social Darwinism, and so we are hindered by our "fetich [sic] of nationalism," (39). It is through competition that each society will be drawn into this fetish (38-39). The alliances of the First World War further reflect (and lend support to) Tagore's concern that nationalistic "machines will come into an agreement, for their mutual protection, based upon a conspiracy of fear;" a type of international social contract that is not unlike that suggested by Thomas Hobbes at the domestic/societal level. Furthermore, this survival of the fittest at the international level encourages a 'beggar-thy-neighbour' sort of policy: the motto of nations becomes "Help yourself, and never heed what it costs to others," (96-97). Thus he justifies doubt in English superiority, tracing the means by which nationalism has underscored the morality

of their actions and subsequently undermined their strong position in the world: “the West has been systematically petrifying her moral nature in order to lay a solid foundation for her gigantic abstractions of inefficiency” through the machinery of nationalism, which supersedes any human characteristic (46). “The veil has been raised, and in this frightful way the West has stood face to face with her own creation, to which she had offered her soul,” (59). That the West had begun to doubt itself further legitimated doubt in the colonies and enabled intellectual circles in those territories to create alternative paths, that would emerge later in the twentieth century. (Young)

Although the lectures are presented as discrete units, metaphors across the three serve to link them to one another, and an overarching theme of heart versus mind can be discerned. This debate has been a popular one throughout history since the emergence of science and rational thought in the Enlightenment and the subsequent attempt at reconciliation between two means of understanding the universe that are frequently presumed to be diametrically opposed. (Young)

[Tagore’s] use of language throughout [*Nationalism*] is beautiful and many of his ideas enduring, but definitions and scientific evidence are mostly absent. It is quite probable that Tagore abhorred the overtly methodological use of language to express deep thoughts, simply because it so resembles the stark mechanical character of capitalist production within the European nation itself. As a result though, what happens is that many of his most important statements are seemingly lost within broader descriptions and hidden in the middle of paragraphs...since they do not always follow a coherent logical sequence. For instance, he states at one point: “I am not against one nation in particular, but against the general idea of

all nations. What is the Nation? It is the aspect of a whole people as an organized power” (131). This quotation, as much as any, sums Tagore’s theses, yet it is found in an obscure section of the text on nationalism in India. Rather than to criticize his writing style, which again is admirable, I would simply like to draw attention here to the difficulties that exist in trying to uncover Tagore’s inner logic and rationality. (Gautreau)

[Tagore] is criticizing, with much wit and inspiration, the direction the entire human race is taking. The West, he insists, is embarking on a dangerously dehumanizing path. “The vital ambition of the present civilization of Europe is to have the exclusive possession of the devil,” (101). The Nation, for Tagore, is based on many things, some worthy but many entirely abject: organized self-interest, greed for wealth and shallow power, fear of exploitation by an alienating and mechanical mode of production, the delusion of freedom, the fall of virtue, unconsciousness, an unsustainable future that will either lead to catastrophe or a necessary spiritual rebirth, and so on. Conversely, those that avoid nationalism (he longed that India, Japan, and the rest of Asia would do so) and maintain their spiritual integrity thus avoid this grim fate and have no need for so-called rebirth. “The East with her ideals, in whose bosom are stored the ages of sunlight and silence of stars, can patiently wait till the West, hurrying after the expedient, loses breath and stops” (81). His message is simultaneously naïve and visionary; his stance futile and courageous. *Nationalism* challenges the power of words, because the task of showing the decline of spirituality in the West is far from easy. (Gautreau)

Tagore is addressing his argument specifically to a Western audience. To this end, although he writes from an Indian

perspective, his main goal is to convince the people of the West of the danger which the Western Nation poses to their own freedom. This argument introduces one of Tagore's most potent ideas, that the very idea of the nation itself is an anaesthetic that blinds people to the truth of its nature and deludes them into ignoring its oppressive force. Tagore believes that there is a disconnect between the ideals of the Western spirit and the reality of the Western Nation to which the people of that nation are blind. Tagore points to the paradox of the West, "while the Spirit of the West marches under its banner of freedom, the Nation of the West forges its iron chains of organization," (37). In Tagore's opinion the people of the West have deluded themselves into sacrificing their own freedoms for the good of the Nation, naively believing that the good of the nation is the same as the good of the people, when in reality they have simply bartered their "higher aspirations in life for profit and power," (40). (MacLachlan)

It is easy to accept [Tagore's] assertions of an Eastern civilization "devoid of all politics" and concerned only with the soul (17) while the West is characterized by a scientifically organized scramble for material wealth. These distinctions at first may not seem remarkable because we have internalized these ideas of the Orient and the West and the values that each supposedly hold. However, the legitimacy of these assumptions is certainly deserving of some examination. The second aspect of these essays that can perhaps be considered a weak point is Tagore's idealism of the pasts of both the West and the East. Throughout the three essays, Tagore makes reference to an Asia of the past that "...was united with India in the closest tie of friendship..." and where relations between countries were "not that of self-interest, or exploration and spoliation of each other's pockets..." (75).

However, we know that Asia has not been exempt from the forces that have ruled the rest of human history; she has seen her share of states in conflict and wars of expansion and invasion. Tagore has equally laudatory words for the Middle Ages of Europe – according to him, "Europe owes all her greatness in humanity to that period..." (47). A period, if looked at honestly, characterized by religious persecution in Europe and perpetrated by Europeans abroad, and an extremely rigid, religiously inspired hierarchy that kept the majority in abject poverty. Therefore, it is hard to take seriously Tagore's analysis of history, and these statements seem intended to appeal to a colonized people resentful of their present situation and proud of their past rather than as facts supporting his thesis.

Perhaps, however, the above weaknesses are only facets of the kind of writing Tagore has undertaken. He is not a scholar, but a poet, and he is not writing for academia, but to get a message out to the population at large. Appealing to peoples' sentiments, with messages that have emotional, if not entirely factual truth, is undeniably a powerful method of promoting and spreading ideas. That today, for a Canadian university student, some aspects of Tagore's essays are a little hard to swallow may just prove his point about the scientific, narrow bent of the Western mind (Williams).

Nationalism provides a rich commentary on the concept of the Nation. Since *Nationalism* was written, the world has seen the rise of Nazi Germany, Imperial Japan, and Soviet Russia propelled by intense patriotism. America, the world hegemon of the moment, has also been fuelled by patriotism and found itself in several international situations viewed as less than humanitarian. If the evils of Tagore's Nation have been illustrated several times since 1913 and continue to be

today, the book must have some value, despite the fact that Tagore's solutions lay in a fictional East. (Durrant).

Tagore's prophecy that the nation will decline like the sun setting in his poem has yet to be fulfilled. Today the modern nations of the world persist, but we are faced with the growth of a new beast, one that in many places rivals the power of the nation: the Corporation. Reading Tagore's book from a modern perspective one could almost completely substitute the use of the word "Nation" with "Corporation." In many ways their definitions are the same and the destructive power they possess is identical. The parallels between the two mechanisms are many, but what is truly remarkable is how Tagore's writing can act as a lesson about both. His treatise is still magnificent because it is still applicable to its intended purpose but has also come to mean more than Tagore intended. One could still read his book as a comment on the modern nations which have spread out around the globe, but it could also now be read as a warning about the powerful Corporations which have sprung up and now threaten to

exceed the destructive power of even the Nation. (MacLachlan).

Indubitably, Tagore's cautionary tales have high relevance in today's international arena. As Durrant highlights, the largest conflicts of the 20th century have been inspired by nationalistic sentiment – and as MacLachlan so provocatively suggests, although nationalism may be on the decline, we are witnessing the emergence of a new threat, similar in its disregard for humanity, in the rise of the multinational corporation. Yet the novelty of this threat should in no way overshadow the original purpose of Tagore's lectures. Nationalism still plays a crucial role in the events that occur on the world stage, even in the new 21st century, post 9/11. The attacks of 9/11 may have been based in differing ideological sentiments, but they were executed both on and through symbols of national pride: the successful free-market economy, as represented by the World Trade Centre; and nationally-based airlines. *Nationalism* should thus remain a fundamental international relations text.

Works Cited

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