

RABINDRANATH TAGORE AND THE NATION

Essays in Politics, Society and Culture

Edited by

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Preface

Rabindranath and the Nation : Essays in Politics, Society and Culture is a collection of essays that emerged primarily out of presentations made at the National Seminar 'Swadeshi Samaj: Rabindranath Tagore and the Nation', organized by the Department of English and Other Modern European Languages, Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan, from 12 to 14 February 2010. This was the first seminar organized under the aegis of the Departmental Research Scheme (DRS), under the Special Assistance Programme of the University Grants Commission (UGC). Distinguished Tagore scholars and academics participated in this seminar and their papers deliberated on a wide variety of issues that the seminar addressed. We regret that we have not been able to include the essays by Himani Banerjee and Swapan Majumdar due to unavoidable circumstances; their contributions would have enriched the volume. The collection also includes some invited essays contributed by reputed academics and researchers working in this area. Our departmental colleague Ananya Dutta Gupta took time off her extremely pressing schedule to translate Malini Bhattacharya's essay into English; we owe her a special thank you.

A few words about the editorial policies adopted for this volume for purposes of standardization. First, all notes and references have been given at the end of each essay as Notes. Second, since Indian/Bangla words have necessarily entered discussions on Rabindranath and his concept of the nation and the indigenous society, hence these have neither been italicized nor placed within quote marks (so, samaj; swaraj; shakti; shastra; desh; rashtra; and so on). Only if they appear as italicized (*samaj*) or within quote-marks ('desh') in a cited extract have the original version been retained. Exception has been made for Biswajit Ray's essay, as it is full of Sanskritic words that may appear strange unless otherwise indicated (hence 'ojoswita'; 'uddipana'; 'vibhatsa'; 'rudra'; and other words have been italicized).

Rabindranath Tagore and the Nation

The authors have made a distinction between Tagore's writings in English and those in Bengali by ascribing the former to Rabindranath Tagore, and the latter to Rabindranath Thakur. This variation in the respective citations has been maintained throughout.

Though Swati Ganguly and myself had been the joint co-ordinators of the seminar and also started out as editors for this volume, it became increasingly apparent that because of my additional DRS-related work as well as other commitments, academic and otherwise, I would be unable to devote the kind of quality time required for undertaking all the editorial responsibilities. Swati stepped in and did most of the work related to the editing of this volume. She also agreed to write an introduction to the volume, despite her very busy schedule. I thank her sincerely for her efforts, without which this volume would not have been published within the timeframe we had set ourselves.

The volume, a production of the DRS programme of the Department of English and Other Modern European Languages, Visva-Bharati, has been published by Punascha, Kolkata, in collaboration with Visva-Bharati Granthan Vibhaga. We wish to thank the contributors and the Visva-Bharati officials (Rabindra Bhavana and the Director, Visva-Bharati Granthan Vibhaga in particular). We wish to thank Sudeshna Banerjee for editing the manuscripts meticulously, Rai Ganguly for editorial assistance, Nilanjan Banerjee for designing the cover and Sandip Nayak of Punascha for making possible the timely publication of this volume.

This volume is our homage to Rabindranath on the occasion of his one hundred and fiftieth birth anniversary. We hope that the volume will and contribute meaningfully to our understanding of Rabindranath and generate interest among Tagore enthusiasts, casual browsers and serious researchers, at home as well as abroad.

Introduction

Rabindranath Tagore is increasingly being viewed as our 'contemporary' even as celebrations have begun to mark his one hundred and fiftieth birth anniversary. Contemporary engagement with issues like multiculturalism, cosmopolitanism and environment can be linked to Rabindranath's firm belief in communication between cultures, acceptance of difference, commitment to larger ethical causes and the necessity for harmonious relations with nature. Rabindranath speaks to us, across the gulf of a hundred odd years, on matters that have emerged as grave current concerns. Rabindranath's oeuvre, his numerous essays and public lectures in particular, bear witness to his tireless efforts as the world's conscience keeper, addressing many of contemporary geo-political problems as they appeared in their nascent form. He appealed to the citizens of the 'West' as well as the 'East' to wake up to the lethal effects of human greed, rapaciousness and self-aggrandizement capable of hurtling civilization to an abyss, bringing in its wake untold misery for multitudes.

In his own time, Rabindranath's verses, in the original and in translation, provided solace to his many readers in the hours of spiritual desolation, the dark night of the soul. There was a period when the world averted its gaze away from him, regarding his ideas and expressions as redundant. Readers in our own turbulent and unquiet times have begun to rediscover Rabindranath's prose works—his essays, public addresses, letters, travelogues, plays and fiction. To borrow Rabindranath's own words, he has emerged as the one who 'shall answer the questions that Europe has submitted to the conference of Man'¹

This collection attempts to examine Rabindranath's responses to one of the most significant issues that have been raised in the 'conference of

Man': that of nation and nationalism; and is located at a very important juncture of a growing body of insightful literature on both Rabindranath and the idea of the nation. It has benefitted from and contributed to the semantically enriched concept of the nation and has expanded the hermeneutic field within which one can understand the depth and complexity of Rabindranath's ideas about nation. There has been a veritable hermeneutic explosion of 'nation' in the sophisticated and varied analyses of theorists like Ernest Gellner, Anthony Smith, Benedict Anderson and Homi Bhabha.² These theoretical insights, along with adequate historical and textual support, create an enabling position to grapple with the question: 'What is Rabindranath's nation?'³ This volume developed around two mutually supporting positions: first, the imperative of historicization; and second, literary forms / genres.

Rabindranath's engagement with nation and nationalism can best be comprehended by placing them in the current of political, social and cultural thinking of his times.⁴ This would necessarily involve Rabindranath's distinctive responses to the events that shaped the history of the subcontinent and the world he inhabited. He protested against atrocities committed by powerful governments—the genocide at Amritsar by the British, the Japanese aggression of China, rise of fascism in Italy. But his engagement with the Indian nationalist movement was more of a complex dialectical relationship, evolving in a number of phases, viz. a period of sharing a common agenda during the swadeshi movement, disillusionment with the violent turn of the swadeshi, especially armed revolutionary struggle, and from 1920 a sustained critique of the mainstream dominant mode of nationalist movement epitomized and led by Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. Any attempt to historicize Rabindranath in a climate seeking to establish his contemporaneity necessarily involves discovering connections between the framework of his critiques and the current discourse on nationalism. At least three currents of thoughts about nationalism can be clearly identified which might have a direct bearing on our understanding of Rabindranath's thinking: nation as a 'modern' organizational phenomenon, nation as a 'form of cultural elaboration'⁵, and nation as a re-ordering of class, ethnicities and gender in relation with each other. The second guiding principle was to explore, as much as possible within the scope of the conference, the various literary forms in which he wrote.

Thus while his Bengali and English polemical essays, written during various phases, were regarded as containing the kernel of his thinking on nation and nationalism, attention was paid to his public debates, letters, travelogues, plays, patriotic songs and of course his novels. This was necessary to counter the homogenized modes of reading that focus only on

the content without attention to the specific nature of genre. A careful and patient reading within and across these various genres reveals the multiple, sometimes conflicting, ways in which generic requirements shape the contours of his ideas.

Finally it is important to remember that Rabindranath's involvement is not limited to his vast corpus of writing but includes constructive efforts at social organization, experiments in an alternative education system and rural reconstruction. Perhaps the most well known of his attempts is his ashram community in Santiniketan, one that significantly that aligns him with Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi.

II

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) lived at a time when there was a dynamic worldwide growth in the conceptualization of nation and its grand systematic articulation by numerous political and social thinkers. Along with this, the power of nationalism in Europe manifested itself in the destructive, dehumanizing wars involving several nations, the growth of fascism and in its active collusion in the ideology and praxis of colonialism and imperialism. In his exceptionally long and active career Rabindranath was, as a subject of the British Empire and as a citizen of a world torn asunder by the two World Wars, witness to some of the cruel conclusions of nationalist logic. He resisted and spoke out against the workings of the ideological and repressive apparatus of powerful nation-states in his public addresses, lectures and open letters.

While a detailed discussion of Rabindranath's relation to his times is outside the purview of this introduction, we would like to refer to its main tenets as it pertains to his polemical essays, written both in Bengali and English. However, before doing so it may be pertinent to map some of the ideas of nation as formulated by contemporary theorists of nation. According to Anthony Smith it is possible to identify two opposite views about nation in the writings of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century thinkers. These are the 'modernist' and the 'perennialist' ideas of the nation. The modernist idea posits nations as products of modernity; thus the nation is not recent and novel, but has emerged through processes of 'modernization.' Its constitutive elements are political community, resource, and communication. The 'perennialist' or 'organicist,' view privileges an organic popular, ancestrally based cultural community.⁶

It is possible to trace both these notions of the nation in Rabindranath's English and Bengali essays. His English essays collected as *Nationalism* (1917), posit a 'modernist' idea of nation as a political organization driven

Swadeshi Samaj: Rabindranath and the Nation

Bikash Chakravarty

It is heartening to see that in the last two decades Rabindranath's ideas about nation and swadeshi samaj have received some serious critical attention from scholars. Partha Chatterjee's long and somewhat provocative essay, 'Rabindrik Nation Ki,' first published in *Baromas* in 2003,¹ immediately sparked off a debate in which quite a few distinguished thinkers participated. I have not much to contribute to this debate, except that I would like to put Tagore's thoughts as enunciated in his seminal essay, 'Swadeshi Samaj' written way back in 1904 in relation to his life-long concern with these issues, by dividing my range of discussion into three major phases of the poet's career: from 1904 to 1916; from 1920 to 1930 and finally from 1931 to 1941. Of course the phases I shall be talking about are not sealed off from one another; in most cases, one easily glides into the other. But in spite of their overflowing nature, we are able to notice an unmistakable shift in emphasis through these phases.

In what follows I shall almost entirely draw on Tagore's essays directly dealing with the relevant issues, including his historical writings now collected in a book called *Itihas* (1955). I am aware that my choice has an exceedingly limited range, for so much of Tagore's writings would be left out in the process: his novels and short stories, plays and poetry, his songs and letters. But I believe that there are multiple points of consciousness that generate various forms of discourse, which, by their repeated use in social and discursive communication, assume some sort of relative autonomy. However, the phrase 'relative autonomy' does not mean that these discourses are watertight compartments. On the contrary, they often—especially in the case of Tagore—overlap, impregnate and

even contradict one another. Nevertheless, there is a central thread of ideas running through all these overlappings and inconsistencies in Tagore's writing that we cannot afford to miss. Two such cardinal ideas are *atmashakti* and the regeneration of the village as nation. In other words, I think that the point I shall try to make in this paper will not have been any different had I considered the whole corpus of Tagore's writing.

The genesis of these ideas can be traced back to 1901, if not earlier, when Tagore wrote two consecutive articles² on the idea of nation. The first had an interrogative title, 'Nation Ki.' Drawing largely on the writings of the French thinker, Ernest Renan, Tagore comes to the conclusion that language, material interests, religious unity or geographical boundary—none of these has been an essential condition for making of the western nation. For Tagore, nation is a mental construct as well as an organic entity comprising two essential features: first, historical memory of the people; and second, a consensus among the people to live together in a specific geographical location. In the second article which first appeared under the title 'Hinduttva' and later called 'Bharatbarsia Samaj,' Tagore states a case for a clear distinction between the idea of nation in the west and the idea of society in Indian history. To quote him:

What we have to understand is that society or community reigns supreme in India. In other countries, nations have protected themselves from various revolutions for survival. In our country society has survived countless convulsions from time immemorial . . . The fact that we have not yet been driven to the bottom of degeneration through thousands of years of revolutions, tyranny and subjugation is because we have been saved by the moral values embedded in our ancient society.³

Three years later, Tagore developed these ideas more fully in a paper which he called 'Swadeshi Samaj', first read at the Minerva Theatre, Kolkata on 22 July 1904 and then again on 31 July in a slightly revised form at the Curzon Theatre, under public demand. A month later, he wrote a sequel to this essay called 'Swadeshi Samajer Parishishta' and also drafted a constitution for his proposed organization. The paper, 'Swadeshi Samaj,' immediately after its publication in *Bangadarshan* in August 1904, drew a spate of hostile criticism—just as Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj* did six years later in western India—from different corners, most of the nationalists as well as the revolutionaries dismissing it as the poet's reverie.

As we read through the essay, six years more than a century after its first appearance in print, we begin to realize how perceptively Tagore responds to the great urgency on our part today to get some clarity on

the meaning of freedom and humanistic values in a world driven by state and corporate powers and rank commercialism. Let us note some of the crucial issues—at once social, political and moral—that Tagore raises in this essay. To begin with, Tagore says that to understand Indian history one has to get away from the current preoccupations with political history and concentrate on the life of the people in society. He maintained that human civilization had throughout emphasized two forms of development. In one form, the life of the people have always been controlled by the state-power, as in the case of Greece and Rome, and following them, presumably, of modern western society. On the other hand, in the history of the oriental civilization—as is the case with India and China—society, and not the state, has been the determining agency, relegating the political power of the state to the secondary. As Tagore puts it:

What is known as *the state* in Europe assumed the form of royal power in ancient India. But there is a difference between the two forms of governance. In Europe, welfare of the society in its entirety has been vested with the agency of the state power; in India, the state power has had a very limited role to play in this matter.⁴

If therefore we look for Indian history in capital cities, in dynasties and political conflicts, we shall gather only such accounts as are of secondary importance to Indian peoples. To write the true history of Indians we have to look for them where they lived and examine how they actually lived. In other words, we must reconstruct the history of the Indian village.

Secondly, intertwined with his preoccupation with the life of the people as it was actually lived, was an attempt to understand the genius of a particular people which was shaped by the way they lived. Thirdly, this genius of India lay in an ability to harmonize the disparate. Tagore has explained this particular spirit of India in great detail in an important essay entitled 'Bharatbarsey Itihaser Dhara,' first published in *Prabasi* in April 1911 and in a number of other writings of this period. In these essays, Tagore maintains that Indian history spanning some thousands of years has achieved an ideal synthesis of diverse elements at all levels of human experience. It has been a perpetual process of reconciliation of contradictions. That is, Tagore's idea of nation-building has to be understood in terms of non-exclusion.

Finally, Tagore emphatically asserts, especially during this period and again in the last decade of his life, that the locus of Indian civilization must be sought in our villages. In fact, the village has for long been viewed

as a convenient entry point for understanding 'traditional' Indian society. It has been seen as a signifier of the authentic native life, a social and cultural unit uncorrupted by urban influence. As it entered into the nationalist discourse during the late nineteenth century and developed through the first four decades of the twentieth century, especially in the writings of Rabindranath, Aurobindo Ghose and Mahatma Gandhi, the notion of the village assumed an extraordinary significance.

Indeed, as Tagore argues in 'Swadeshi Samaj,' the village was not merely a place where people lived; it had a design in which were reflected the basic values of Indian civilisation. India had always tended her civilisation in her villages. Indian society saw to the upkeep of her culture in the way the village provided her basic needs—her health, food, education, recreation and creativity. Thus the village community in India was not dependent upon the state for any of these things, although the king could, if he did his duty, support any or all of these activities. In other words, community life in the village represented an alternative society.

This is the village we lost sometime in the early nineteenth century with the consolidation of British rule in India. Ashin Dasgupta has reminded us⁵ that the Indian village in Tagore's mind was most often the Bengali village and when he wrote about Indian reactions to British rule, he took the Bengali *bhadralok* into consideration. The disaster that ensued from the pervasive influence of the British rule was twofold. For one thing, the *bhadralok* moved away from the village in body and mind. At the same time he came to depend upon the state for matters like education and culture which had always been his own to tend. In short, the western conception of the state and what was expected from the state came to dominate the Indian mind. This is how the village—not only the Bengali village—was lost.

Implicit in these issues is Tagore's firm conviction, that the village as the centre of Indian culture which we have lost in the course of time needs to be retrieved and reconstructed. This alone can bring us real Independence, for *swaraj*, as Gandhi also believed, could be achieved only by restoring the civilizational strength of India through revival of its village communities. But how do we get down to this in practice? Few knew better than Tagore the actual despair permeating the village of his times. It has to be noted that he was not urging people to leave the city for the village because the village he saw around him was in any way better, but because he hoped that the village would recover itself in this interaction. Indeed, there is no ambiguity in Tagore's answer. He doesn't

appeal to the aids of modern science and technology—not at least during this period—in reconstructing the Indian village. Instead, he urges, much in the manner of Gandhi, that this should be done through an absolute commitment to the cultivation of love and neighbourliness, restraint and sacrifice, self-help and hard labour—through the full realization of what he called ‘atmashakti’. He believed that the Indian civilization had uniquely produced a pervasive familial feeling in society, and human relations in India, particularly in its village communities, had come to be based on the models of kinship. However, I should like to enter a caveat here. Although Tagore did not endorse the role of machinery and industrialization in the reconstruction of the village in the essay ‘Swadeshi Samaj,’ he does accept the logic of a liberal-democratic organization as is evident from the constitution he drafted for Swadeshi Samaj and from his appeal to the people to *elect* a leader for the proposed organization.⁶ Tagore says:

We can adopt and look after only a small village; the moment we try to extend our range of operation, we shall need organisational machinery . . . We did not have this machinery in our country. It has to be imported from some foreign land.⁷

Interestingly, nowhere in this long essay and in the appendix he added to it does Tagore use the word ‘Panchayat’—an indigenous organizational body in ancient India based on the principles of representational governance—which Gandhi made much of right from 1894.⁸

It is worth noting at this point that Tagore’s ‘Swadeshi Samaj’ written in 1904, in some of its basic postulates, anticipates the vision of Gandhi’s ‘swaraj’ as articulated in *Hind Swaraj* written in 1909. In his emphasis on the values of poverty, suffering, restraint and sacrifice and his idealisation of rural life, Tagore, during this phase, came quite close to Gandhi’s idea of nation-building. For both of them, ‘swaraj’ in the final analysis, ceases to be a political programme. For both of them, it was an alternative way of life. But we should also note a difference. Tagore did not hold the view, as Gandhi did, that the state was, on the basis of empirical evidence if not in essence, a body of ‘organized violence.’ That is why Tagore did not reject the concept of the state in ‘Swadeshi Samaj;’ he only refused to recognize it as the determining agency in the life of the community. To put it differently, for Tagore, the state and the community were not competing categories; they were, in the best of times, complementary.

The difference between the poet and the Mahatma widens in the next