

Tagore's Nationalism: Realization and Reconstruction of the True Indian Identity with Lessons from the Past

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Abstract: Benedict Anderson has argued that Europe and the Americas had provided India with the models of anti-colonial struggle and nation formation, which ultimately cut ways for her achievement of nationhood and freedom. This standpoint has been vehemently contested by Parth Chatterjee and others, who say that Nation formation process had two separate field of activities, one political and the other, spiritual. In the external, political sphere there may be some borrowings of pattern and models, especially in the Congress political programme. But the spiritual field did not allow any foreign direction and domination. Rabindranath Tagore is its classic example. Through his endless poems, songs, stories, articles, lectures, plays, novels and everything he has tried to build up an inner strength for his country. If the self honour and esteem is roused within the soul, he believed, no one could stop India from regaining her political freedom. But this preparation of the soil and soul is a serious issue and it requires extreme courage, love of truth and sacrifice. He examined the history of India, not imitating the process of foreign scholars, but in his own way, taking his cue from her silent yet vibrant culture. He, in one sense, tried to realize and reconstruct the true identity of India, a base upon which the nation was to be built. The present paper intends to examine this venture of Tagore with reference to his various representative works.

Keywords: Enlightenment, culture, nation, History, Hinduism, casteism, deliverance.

The advent and spread of Western education in early 19th century Bengal and thereafter gradually in India, with its sparks and ignition introduced a new era, that of new enlightenment. Acquaintance with the brave new world and its modern thoughts and theories; its doubt, belief, experiences and experimentation, and mostly its devoted preoccupation with the world of matter, its supreme urge to dominate there with new and newer findings in the realm of science and technology- all these together enkindled the true spirit of renaissance and gave birth to an intelligentsia, spirited, cultured and solvent. But the new education could not reach the mass, the poor, the marginalized, and even where it reached, it bore and imprinted the inevitable stamp of colonial domination and diplomacy. It intended only to prepare a group of half educated, limpid clerks, who neither could, nor would ever challenge the colonial and imperial exploitation. The English education did arouse a

sense and desire of national reawaking and independence, but tutored as it had been by foreign rulers, it set out to follow the western models blindly. Benedict Anderson appears to be right here in his insistence on the worth of Western models which India was to follow and imitate. But even though it is true that the models had been there and of course they had been used in explaining the Indian situation, it is also to be kept in mind that initially those who worked on them, had been all English and Western scholars. The Indians were never trusted to choose models for themselves; they had been mere subordinates to follow instructions of their masters. Then when the models got fixed and took roots in the native soil, nothing more was required. It bore fruits like a machine automatized to publish copy of a copy, one after another, in an endless practice. The western writers and scholars themselves imported the models, and set only those designs to the machine which had been most familiar to them and suitable for their purpose. The machine did not know how to think and every care was taken so that it could never master the art of independent thinking. Then the switch was turned on and in an expected way, it started producing copies and echoing his master's voice. It had been controlled so skillfully that it was next to impossible to come out of the allotted design. The shoe cannot walk by itself, its only duty is to obey and protect the foot. And it is never trusted, nor allowed to choose way for itself. The colonial administration considered the colony just like a shoe, caring little for what a Benedict Anderson might require to devise a face saving theory in subsequent years.

Following that Western model even Indian History was written and interpreted, -not by Indian writers, but by western scholars. The Indians had been given only the duty to read and cram those lists of historical records and to pass examinations. It is here that Tagore came forward to register his protest in *Bharatbarsher Itihas*, (Bharatbarsha: 525):

The history of India which we read and remember to pass examinations, is only the story of a stormy night and its bad dreams. It rejects everything else and records only who came from where and fought with whom for how many days, months and years. Father and son, brother and brother, each and everyone targeted the throne and played the mouse-cat game. The Pathans, the Mughals, the Portuguese, French and English all came in due course of time and complicated this chronicle.

But these coloured looking glasses fail to catch the true India. This chronicle projects only those who fought and killed and burnt one another, as if apart from these invaders, there had been no native people.¹

Even in a stormy day, the storm may not be the principal event, despite its great roaring. The daily flow of life that passes from hut to hut, under the thatched roof and behind the mud walls, itself bears the seeds of true history of India and her people. But unfortunately, as Tagore regrets in the same essay (526), the Indians do not have access there:

The son of the Englishman knows from early childhood that his father and grandfather have fought many battles... We know from our early days that our fathers and forefathers have never captured

foreign countries, never gone there for interests of trade and commerce. The chief aim of our history is to furnish this and this information only...The education we get from early childhood itself separates us from our country everyday, and thus one day we get completely detached and stand against our own motherland.

Tagore therefore, requests the native historian to make new interpretations of history, to illuminate those dark, vague spots and phases, where under thick cover of dust and neglect, mother India waits patiently for him, with her unknown events, untold stories, unidentified children and unheeded message. He is supposed to pick from these, the right path that even through variety and plurality, leads to the final destination which is the center of Indian civilization and which reveals her innermost principles. India never suppresses difference. Difference adds variety and spice to life. But underneath its external outfit, there runs a thread of unity that binds together all differences and prepares the garland of India. This is, according to Tagore, the true lesson of Indian history. In order to reach that final unity, India has always refrained from the race of political power. Domination and control, expansion and encroachment which produce political command and glory, had never drew any interest for her, because political glory and state power stand upon the force of contradiction. Tagore realized early that

...the noose of opposition within the political nature of European consolidation can protect it against the external enemy but cannot offer it any internal harmony. Hence it keeps alive the point of contradiction between individuals, between the king and his subject, the wealthy and the penniless. It is not that they assemble together and carry forward or maintain their society by individual share of work, executed with a profound inspiration to support one another. It is only that they differ and oppose one another from the beginning to the end, every one alert and careful that the other is not gaining strength and getting ahead even for one inch. (ibid: 527)

The equilibrium achieved in this artificial way, by members of a society, each neutralizing the other, cannot control, - so Tagore contends, the balance and poise required for long term prosperity and sustainable development. The government in its desperate attempt to maintain status quo, passes rules and regulations, one after another, but in vain. Seeds of contradiction take roots in the soil and burst from within. The society splits in revolts and endless fragmentation. India, as Tagore continues to explain, has taken the other way. She has tried to mitigate and overcome contradiction from within. She has never attempted to erase difference where it lies in substance and truth. For real difference can never be overcome by external force and pressure, it needs to be allocated to its proper place, it requires a proper and justified classification and allotment of authority within its circle. Only then its keen edges lose sharpness. India intended and followed this model for centuries, her call of unity and cultural superstructure stand upon this base.

India followed this particular way not playfully or accidentally, but from a system approach derived out of hard earned experience. She has always

strove to rearrange and unify diverse elements of her civilization; she never flung anybody aside, she neither rejected nor expelled the outsider marking him as harmful for her unity and a miss-match. She acknowledged all and accepted all who came to her and traded on her path of harmony and sacrifice, belittling all forces of contradiction.

Europe protects her purity by closing her door to the outsider. She does not hesitate to follow the prejudice of racial and cultural untouchability that divides man on the pretext of skin-colour. She is scared of diversity, because she lacks in her internal discipline and harmonizing power. She apprehends her own cultural plurality and intends to cast all dissimilarities into one single pattern by force. But India subdues force and overcomes all contradictions through her deep-seated faith in harmonious co-operation and co-existence. She gains by sacrifice. She teaches man not to run after matter and material profit, for there is a greater bargain, that is, the awakening of the mind and spirit. Resources to be found there are endless. Bliss and joy of that world is unlimited.

'This awakening of the spirit' India calls religion. Religion, as Tagore explains, is one and indivisible. There cannot be anything like the life of the hand, the life of the leg, or of abdomen, -for life resides everywhere in the body. Likewise India has never segmented religion into pieces like the religion of faith, religion of behaviour, religion of Sunday, religion of other six days, religion of Church or that of home etc. The religion of India is the religion of her entire society, the feet and head are not separate there, but it stands and functions like a great tree, each of its foliage offering fruits, shade and shelter to the universal man. The unity felt within is to be established among many. To discover it through endless search for knowledge, to establish it through endless sequence of works, to feel it through the profound philosophy of love and to spread it through all activities of life- this is what India is after, making way through all opposition and contradiction. So Tagore says, "the moment this fundamental effort and mission of Indian civilization we shall realize, the gap between our present and past will also be crazed" (ibid:529). His chief contribution to nationalism is to make his countrymen aware of and believe in this unsegmented and uninterrupted flow of History, which preserves the keynote of Indian civilization and reveals the secrets of its struggle towards that goal. Among many other meanings, Renaissance, in one sense means, the freedom of thought from established patterns, customs and conventions. Renaissance came to India, first to Bengal, through enlightenment due to the advent of Western Education. Rabindranath is usually considered a product of this renaissance waves. And here pointedly, the first mistake occurs (Sen: 150).² Tagore definitely took his cue from his age, but he did not stop there, he utilized and exercised the freedom of thought and delved history to reach its inner truth. At the same time, as Sen shows (35) he explained the rationale of this search, the need of exploring the past:

When the present appears dry and grain less, and famines disturb too much, we take recourse to the past, which like mother earth, offers refuge in its mother's lap. When the sun shines pitiless and the

rains do not come, we can collect life giving sap from the deep, dark entrails of Past, through our roots.³

Like a true artist of renaissance, Tagore loves this past, because it receives the collective achievement of Indian civilization, it restores her forgotten honour and glory in the memory and thus it stimulates the new age to recreate upon the resources of heritage. Unlike the other nationalists, between time and space he prefers and picks up time in order to overcome narrow nationalism. Once again Sen quotes him at large (35):

We live in time and space. But our love is mostly for our space, our country, our territory. We fight desperately for one acre of land but cares little for our right upon the far extended time!...if we lose the past, then it is an unrecompensable loss....I am not a parasite. I stand upon my past that spreads roots deeper under the earth. I have certain holy points and places in my past. Exhausted and fatigued under the heavy chains of sinful present, I make pilgrimage there and seek refuge in the melodious plot of beechen green and shadows numberless. The melody of the past keeps on ringing. To miss its call is to lose your address, path and identity.

The necessity of keeping this connection with the past, he explains in various ways with examples from individual, social and national perspectives:

Nothing lasts for ever but passes away. Still a few signs and tokens, left behind, speak of the past days and revive old memories. Who is so heartless to destroy even these!...Is there anybody in this world who has not preserved carefully a torn letter of very old days or a ring of a dear one!....That little letter is the shrine and image of my past. It has no worldly value, still it is invaluable because my past is buried deep and preserved in it.⁴

Taking cue from this, he then moves forward to justify the need of established social customs and rituals. These are, in his view, neither good, nor harmful; their only fault is that they are no longer useful; there is no need to follow them in the present age. But to reject and refuse these also leads one to reject and refuse the great heritage established and preserved among them. Appealing to emotion and nostalgia, Tagore, as Sen shows (37), writes in his own inimitable way: If the last memento of your dead mother is valueless to you, simply because it has no longer any value in the market, then your wisdom is deceived. You are not at all a son.

First, Tagore refers to the eloquent silence, lying resplendent in the walls of Indian temples. It reminds him of the basic lessons of India's message to mankind. In the essay *Mandir* he writes:

When I first saw the Bhubaneswar temple in Odissa, the experience was like that of reading a new book. It seemed that those stones stored within themselves speech, unexpressed and silenced for centuries. Their message affected the heart more. The sages in old Vedic age composed lines in rhyme. ... It signaled a wider meaning in my heart. I caught the language of stones and realized that, God does not maintain distance. (Sen:152)

Then, Rabindranath concentrates on the literary resources of India's past and restores their dazzling glory to the public eye. His enthusiasm for the classical epics was a sort of worship. He tried to probe deeper into

the inner spirit of the Ramayana and said:

The Ramayana of Valmiki should not be treated as mere poetry, but the Ramayana of India. Only then India by the Ramayana and the Ramayana by India will be realized....I read the Ramayana and the Mahabharata from this angle. In its simple Anustup metre [a kind of Sanskrit metrical pattern] the heart of India vibrates for ages. (Sen:152)

On the story of Ramayana, he composed plays like *Kal Mrigaya*, and *Valmiki Pratibha*, and poems like *Ahalya's Prati* (to Ahalya), *Patita* (The fallen woman), *Vasha o Chhanda* (Language and rhyme) etc. Similarly from the Mahabharata, he took story line for his immortal poems like *Kach O Devyani*, *Gandharir Abedan* (*Gandhari's Appeal*), *Karna Kunti Samvad* (The Meeting between Karna and Kunti) and composed a verse play, *Chitrangada*. Each of these cannot be discussed here but one or two instances can project the basic ideas Tagore intended to restore through them:

In *Karna Kunti Samvad*, on the eve of the great battle Kunti introduces herself to Karna as his mother who disowned him at the time of birth, and entreats him in every possible way to transfer his love and allegiance to the Pandavas, with the promise that he would be made king after victory. True to the tradition of honour of a Kshatriya warrior, Karna firmly rejects her offer, and adds, how could she have offered him a kingdom now when at the time of birth she denied him the love of a mother? His manliness and honour refuse to be persuaded and he prays that he may not betray the truth of a hero for the allurements of fame and kingdom. (Poddar:54-55)

After the epics, Tagore takes up the Buddhist era. He composes some of his unforgettable poems on the spirit of mercy, pity, peace and love, propagated by Lord Buddha and his disciples. *Malini*, *Natir Puja*, *Chandalika*, *Shrestha Viksha* (The Best Alms) etc. bear statements of his homage to that great idealism practiced in India and followed in various other parts of the world. Reference here may be drawn from the poem *Abhisar* (the journey to meet the beloved):

Upagupta, the disciple of Buddha, lay asleep on the dust by the city wall of Mathura. / Lamps were all out, doors were all shut, and stars were all hidden by the murky sky of August. / Whose feet were those tinkling with anklets, touching his breast of a sudden? / He woke up startled, and the light from a woman's lamp struck his forgiving eyes. / It was the dancing girl, starred with jewels, clouded with a pale-blue mantle, drunk with the wine of here youth. / She lowered her lamp and saw the young face, austere yet beautiful. / 'Forgive me young ascetic,' said the woman; 'graciously come to my house. The dusty earth is not a fit bed for you.' (Das:171)

But the Sannyasi only smiled and did not comply with her request. He assured her, however, that when time will come, he definitely will go to her. She did not have to wait for long. The spring came to the end of the year. The trees blossomed in all colours, the breeze breathed all the fragrance, the cuckoo cooed in the bower. The Sannyasi reached the cottage, where lay the dancer girl, Vasavadutta, left alone and deserted by all, suffering from the intolerable pain of small pox. She was surprised to

see his gracious face and begged for pity. The very timing of his arrival gave her a rebirth to holiness, where desire could never trespass. The lesson is well imbibed by Pujarini, the worshipping maid, in the poem of the same title. Emperor Ajatshatru passed an order forbidding worship of Lord Buddha in the temples within his land. Since law-breakers will be punished to lose life, nobody dares disobey the ruling. But the maid of the palace, Shrimati, does not have any such fear. She comes out, calls everybody to join and offers her worship to the shrine, alone, unaccompanied. The guards warn and then kill her, but she does not deviate from her decision, her dharma.

In *Horikhela* the Rajput queen invites the Pathan ruler to participate in the play of Holi. He comes with his soldiers, boiling within with the carnal desire and lust. The dance begins, the spell rises. Suddenly the queen throws down her metal dish of colours at the Pathan and the hundred maid dancers come out of disguise as hundred warriors. All his lustful desires crushed within, the Pathan was killed and conquered just playfully. Tagore employed his poetic muse even in social reformation. Two examples may drive the point home, one is the poem *Brahmana* (The Brahmin), the other *Debatar Grash* (The Toll of God). In the first one, a young boy enters the hermitage of sage Goutam and expresses his desire to take lessons from him like his young friends. But as a principle Goutam imparts his lessons only to those boys who are Brahmins. So he inquired the boy of his parentage, clan and caste. The boy did not know that and went to his mother to ask:

She clasped him to her bosom, kissed him on his hair, and asked him of his errand to the master. 'What is the name of my father, dear mother?' asked the boy. 'It is only fitting for a Brahmin to aspire to the highest wisdom, said Lord Goutam to me.' The woman lowered her eyes and spoke in a whisper. 'In my youth I was poor and had many masters. Thou didst come to thy mother Jabala's arms, my darling, who had no husband.' (Das:183)

Next day morning, Satyakama appeared before sage Goutam and informed him what he had learnt from his mother. The boys present there laughed ridiculed and scolded the ambition of an outcast to get wisdom. But sage Goutam stood up and embraced the boy and welcomed him as the greatest Brahmin who is born to the clan of Truth. The Chandal girl in the dramatic play Chandalika also shares this broad view and points to the hundreds of Brahmins who are in fact worse than the Chandals in their daily conduct, and thus pollute the Brahmin households. Tagore's point is clear. He does not believe in orthodox caste system and wants that his countrymen also come out of this dark, blind convention. Man, if he is true to his work and idealism, can achieve greatness and greatness never makes any distinction between the high and the low, the rich and the poor. –This is Tagore's message to his country, aspiring to take the shape of a nation.

The nation should equally reject superstitions. The meaningless, unknown conventions grow into customs and interfere with the meaning and truth of life itself. This is also a lesson, earned by the Brahmin, Maitra Mahasay, in the poem *Debatar Grash*:

The young widow Mokshoda appeals to the Brahmin to take her, along with others as a pilgrim to the holy point where the river Ganga meets the sea. Her little boy was supposed to stay with his aunt during her absence. But when the boat was about to start, the mother discovered her son Rakhal as a determined co-passenger. No amount of pleading and scolding could dishearten or persuade the little boy from the fatal adventure. The mother got angry and uttered that she would throw him in the water of the sea. This also could have no effect in the boy, though the mother was scared to receive the foul echo. Finally the Brahmin took pity on the poor boy and to everybody's relief included him in the party.

On the way home, a storm rose. The river was furious, its waves were about to swallow the boat at any moment. The pilgrims cried in fear and started throwing their things in the river as donation to appease the enraged God. The Brahmin declared his verdict: Mokshoda must throw the boy into the water, as she promised at the start of the pilgrimage. The mother denied and said she never really meant that. But all others pounded over the poor woman, snatched away Rakhal from her lap and threw him overboard into the river. The last cry of the drowning little boy was piercing the sky and it finally pierced the ears of the Brahmin. His conscience now revolted and to atone his sin he jumped into the river to reclaim the boy back to life.

This poem had a much more effective design as to free people from baseless superstitions. The Brahmin here is shown not only to commit a mistake and misjudge the true reason of the storm, but he finally comes forward to rectify his guilt and jumps into the river to save the boy. In a similar way the people of India also should come out of their stupor and blind faith in baseless conventions. They should jump into the whirlpool and find out the boy, a symbol of lost happiness and harmony. The poem also exemplifies that national awakening should not wait endlessly for the arrival of its leader, even a poet can give it necessary direction and shape, if he is not an idle man, preoccupied with his private dream and illusion only, if he can write poems on anything and everything to inspire man to wake up and overcome submission to untruth.

True it is that Rabindranath evoked the past glory and excavated the corridors of History, Literature and Culture to find out new resources that could renovate, reform and regenerate the national feeling, but it is not true that he found all glory and nothing wrong there. Rabindranath is never preoccupied with past, he learns from past and present equally; he confronts the challenges of his time with a modern outlook, with logic, reason, acquired knowledge of science and technology and other amenities. But in that combat he never ignores the lessons of history and he never deviates from the path of truth.

In the poem *Deena Dan* (*The Poor Gift*) he shows how God detests pride and arrogance of wealth and how does he live with the foodless, homeless multitude who do the work and bear the weight of civilization. And he prayed to his God to arouse and awaken this suffering multitude, this working populace in revolt against the accumulated untruth and oppression:

Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high;
 Where knowledge is free; /Where the world has not been broken up
 into fragments by narrow domestic walls;
 Where words come out from the depth of truth;
 Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection
 Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into the dreary
 desert sand of dead habit
 Where the mind is led forward by thee into ever-widening thought
 and action-Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country
 awake. (Das: 53)

This prayer sums up the account of his true contribution to Indian nationalism.

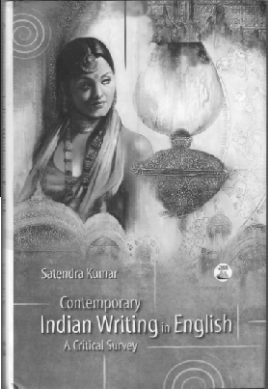
Notes:

1. Unless mentioned, translations are mine.
2. Sen says, "It is not enough to call Tagore the true child of Indian Renaissance, he is its creator too. Goethe once compared Shakuntala, the heroine of Kalidasa's great play, simultaneously to 'young years' blossom and the fruits of maturity'. This is applicable to Tagore also".
3. This is from the essay Anayabashyak (the Non-essential) by Tagore to be found in his *Criticism*.
4. This is again to be found in Sen (37).

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This anthology edited by Prof. Satendra Kumar consists of twenty papers covering Chaman Nahal, Kamala Das, Jhumpa Lahiri, Bharti Mukherjee and so on. The focus is mainly on the changing trends in Contemporary Literature. The book is novel in content and compilation. It is holistic in approach.