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Imagining a Borderless World: A Comparative Study of Rabindranath Tagore and Swami Vivekananda

Sandip Sarkar, Ph.D. Candidate

Abstract

In the wake of globalised market economy we often talk of global village without taking into account the praxis of 'shadow lines' indicating the political sovereignty of a particular country. The birth of a nation is a historical phenomenon. Some scholars may consider it as a 'commodity' imported from the West to suit the changing outlook of "indust-reality." However, through this paper, the researcher tries to present a cohesive view of nation, analyzing the work of Rabindranath Tagore and Swami Vivekananda who were firm believer in the notion that "There's only one history – the history of man. All national histories are merely chapters in the larger one" (Das, Sisir Kr. ed. "The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore", Vol.-2)

"Imagine there's no countries
It isn't hard to do...
You may say that I'm a dreamer
But I'm not the only one
I hope someday you'll join us

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And the world will be as one”
(John Lenon : “Imagine There’s no Country”)

Nations in Narrations

Nations survive in narration, “...and lose their origin in the myths of time and only fully realize their horizon in the mind’s eye” (Bhabha, Homi. K. ed. “Nation and Narration”)

Very often the contours of narration shape the history of a nation. For posterity comes to know about their nation only through textualized version of history. Nation is an artificial construct drawn on a piece of paper and enforced through material agencies like immigration office, military, passport and visas. (Nair, Pramod Kr. “Postcolonial Literature: an introduction)

Nation as an Imagined Political Community

Much before the appearance of Anderson’s famous book *Imagined Community* which paved the way to the portrayal of nation as imagined political community, Tagore viewed nation in the same way. Nation and nationalism depend sometimes on the way we look at them. In 1911, while deliberating on the occasion of Sister Nivedita’s death (an Irish born woman who took the discipleship of Swami Vivekananda), Tagore recounts the incident which impelled Nivedita to serve an alien country most of whose people were illiterate and ignorant. This was because she had been able to love the country and moreover she “could pierce the veil” of that which was objectively real: “we hear about Europeans who came to India with the feelings of devotion toward her, having been attracted by our scriptures or by the character or the words of some of our holy men...but they returned empty-handed,...their sense of devotion waning over time and discarded in the end. They could not pierce the veil of poverty and incompleteness in the country as a whole to see what they had read about the scriptures or what they had seen in the characters of holy men”(Chakrabarty, Dipesh. Provincializing Europe, Post Colonial Thought and Historical Difference)

Tagore’s Portrayal of the Indian Nation: Laxmi or Durga

Tagore’s nationalist poetry written during the *Swadeshi* movement employs this same mode of viewing “the act of seeing that transcended the objective and historical vision” (Chakrabarty, Dipesh. Provincializing Europe, Post Colonial Thought and Historical Difference)Through the poems composed during these times one come across Tagore’s portrayal of the country as an all powerful deity, sometime as Goddess Laxmi, sometime as Durga.

Nation Against Nation

Tagore was born at a critical juncture of history when the whole country was surging with the spirit of nationalism. In the early phase of his life, he too enthusiastically participated in the

Swadeshi movement writing songs, giving speeches and taking part in mass rallies. Tagore's vision of *Swadeshi* received a severe jolt; particularly through the incident of Kshudiram Bose's hurling of a bomb in 1908 left Tagore completely disillusioned. Seven years later his voice was heard in the novel *Ghare Baire* translated as *Home and the World* by his nephew Surendranath Tagore.

Tagore was very much against this institution of nation and nationalism which bred hatred and selfishness towards others, for, "The Nation, with all its paraphernalia of power and prosperity, its flags and pious hymns, its blasphemous prayers in the churches and the literary mock thunders of its patriotic bragging cannot hide the fact that the Nation is the greatest evil for the Nation, that all its precautions are against it, and any new birth of its fellow in the world is always followed in its mind by the dread of a new peril" (Das, Sisir kr, ed. The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore, Vol.-2)

Champion of Creation, Not Construction

The very fact that nation is a social institution, a mechanical organization, modeled on certain utilitarian objectives in mind made it unpalatable to Tagore, who was a champion of creation over construction, imagination over reason, natural over artificial. Tagore was a firm believer of the symbiosis of East and West - "Earnestly I ask the poet of the Western world to realize and sing...with the great power of music which he has, that the East and West are ever in search of each other, and they must meet not merely in the fullness of physical strength, but in the fullness of truth; that the right hand, which wields the sword, has the need of the left, which holds the shield of safety" (Quayum, A. Mohammad, Imagining "One World": Rabindranath Tagore's Critique of Nationalism).

Birth of a Nation – A Historical Phenomenon

The birth of nation is a historical phenomenon. To most of the Indian scholars nation is a strategy of the West as a part of their policy of subtle imperialism, for Europeans had come to India and other parts of the world driven by their blind patriotism and love for their nation. They plundered other nations to further the progress of their own country. It is a fact that someone has to go down in order to raise somebody. So, the Britishers had used the natives as a lamp stand to enlighten their own nation back home and left poor Indians to feel the heat of burning oil which was trickling down the stand.

A Working Definition of Nation

In today's world the issues of nation and nationalism are contending **ones**, and no single definition or description is adequate to capture the whole gamut of this multifaceted concept.

A working definition may be cited from Tagore “A nation, in the sense of the political and economic union of a people, is that aspect which a whole population assumes when organized for a mechanical purpose” (Das, Sisir kr, Ed. The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore, Vol.-2)

The concept of nation has its roots in the western world for “... here is India, of about fifty centuries at least, who tried to live peacefully and think deeply, the India devoid of all politics, the India of no nations, whose one ambition has been to know this world as of soul, to live here every moment of her life in the meek spirit of adoration in the glad consciousness of an eternal and personal relationship with it...with the wisdom of the old, upon which burst the Nation of the West”(Das, Sisir kr, Ed. The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore, Vol.-2)

Birth of Nations

Nation was born at a critical juncture of history, when the first wave society, i.e., agricultural phase, could not support the life styles of its inhabitants; the advent of another wave was imminent. Some critics find industrialization and “indust-reality” (Toffler, Alvin. “The Third Wave”) in Europe as the factors which signaled the change that was about to come to the face of the society once and for all. Other critics find the root somewhere else.

Whatever be the origin, one thing is certain. That is, it is the form of expression which depicts one’s love for one’s country which on the flip side upholds the love for self. That nationalism is a source of war and carnage, destruction and divisiveness rather than forging an international solidarity which may bring into effect a more expansive vision of the world – is a well-known fact. Nationalism in its extreme form has acted like opium which while singing lullaby to its admirers tends to push the humanity to the brink of disaster.

Nation and Artificial Construct

Tagore, the messianic poet, finds fault with the very concept of nation, which is sweeping over the human world and eating its moral vitality. It is an artificial construct which stifles the free flow of humanity, for God has made us as human beings and we are segregating ourselves into different names. This, however, is an ignorance which treats the world as ‘other’ and differentiates between ‘self’ and ‘other’. And according to Tagore, this duality is the cause of present menace of society; salvation will come only by realizing that what is present in macrocosm is also present in microcosm.

Brihadaranyaka Upanishad illustrates this duality through a conversation between Yagnavalkya and Maitreyee :

“As long as there is duality, one sees *the other*, one hears *the other*, one smells *the other*, one speaks to *the other*, one thinks of *the other*, one knows of *the other*; but when for the illuminated soul the all is dissolved in the Self, who is there to be seen by whom, who is there to be smelt by whom, who is there to be heard by whom, who is there to be spoken by whom, who is there to be thought of by whom, who is there to be known by whom?” (Quayum, A. Mohammad, *Empire and Nation: Political Ideas in Rabindranath Tagore’s Travel Writings*)

As a holistic thinker, Tagore had this vision that in the commonwealth of nation, no nation would deprive another “of its rightful place in the world festival” and every nation would “keep alight its own lamp of mind as its part of the illumination of the world” (Quayum, A. Mohammad, *Imagining “One World”*: Rabindranath Tagore’s Critique of Nationalism).

Believer in the Freedom of the Human Spirit

Tagore was a firm believer in the freedom of the human spirit, and wanted to liberate the country through imparting liberal education. For if the mind itself is sunk deep in the quagmire of caste and superstition, how can its people understand the true meaning of freedom.

Gandhi popularized non-violence as a language of protest. Tagore’s protagonist Nikhil also embarked on *Satyagraha*. Like Gandhi, Tagore too had deep faith that force cannot prevail for a long time: “...use force? But for what? can force prevail against truth?”(Tagore, Rabindranath. *Trans Tagore, S. “Home and the World”*).

In the novel, *Ghare Baire*, through his alter ego Nikhil, Tagore wanted to visualize a dream which he had often dreamt:

“It was Buddha who conquered the world, not Alexander. This is untrue when stated in dry prose oh when shall we be able to sing it? When shall all these most intimate truths of the universe overflow the pages of printed books and leap out in a sacred stream like the Ganges from the Gangotrie?”(Tagore, Rabindranath. *Trans Tagore, S “Home and the World”*).

Gandhi and Tagore

As apostles of peace and non-violence, Tagore and Gandhi were on friendly terms, but in some cases Tagore simply refused to support the latter’s view, particularly when the *Swadeshi* movement turned violent. In a letter from Paris, Tagore earnestly urged Gandhi –

“I shall be willing to sit at his feet and do his bidding if he commands me to cooperate with my countrymen in service and love. I refuse to waste my

manhood in lighting the fires of anger and spreading it from house to house”
(Quayum, A. Mohammad, Empire and Nation: Political Ideas in Rabindranath Tagore’s Travel Writings)

Vivekananda’s New Perception of Nation

Moving a step further, if we look into the writings of Swami Vivekananda, we find a completely new perception of nation “... say, " the ignorant Indian, the poor Indian, the Brahman Indian, the Pariah Indian, is my brother"(Vivekananda, Swami. “Modern India”) In one of his lecture series delivered on 11th September 1893 at the Chicago Parliament of World Religions, we find an illustration of the spirit of India:

“I am proud to belong to a nation which has sheltered the persecuted and the refugees of all religions and all nations of the earth. I am proud to tell you that we have gathered in our bosom the purest remnant of the Israelites, who came to the southern India and took refuge with us in the very year in which their holy temple was shattered to pieces by Roman tyranny. I am proud to belong to the religion which has sheltered and is still fostering the remnant of the grand Zoroastrian nation”(Vivekananda, Swami. Chicago Lecture)

Religion from Marxist and Vivekananda Points of Views

Unlike the Marxist view which treats “Religion ‘as’ the opium to the people” (Wikipedia) to Vivekananda, religion is the binding factor which kept India united; while to other nations it is only one of the major facets of their society. To Indians it is the very root of their existence. So, in order to understand the spirit of the nation and nationalism in India, one should take recourse to its religion.

The Role of Education in Nation Building and Nation Consciousness

Like Tagore, Vivekananda too finds the root cause of India’s problem in the monopolization of education. The difference of class in East and West are almost the same, but the distance between them in India is unbridgeable. Since education in the West reaches out to the poorest of the poor, in India it remains confined to the elite classes only. The British could conquer us because “...they are a nation, we are not. When one of our great men dies, we must sit for centuries to have another; they can produce them as fast as they die... It is the dearth of great ones...because the number of educated men and women in those nations is so great... This is the great defect in our nation” (Vivekananda, Swami. My India, the India Eternal)

Macrocosm and Microcosm

Each one of us has his ego and love for self. Sometime the first one becomes so prominent that we often forget to accept others as true. Likewise, every individual loves to dwell in self spun cocoon, and whenever that complacency is challenged, they either strike back or perish there, like a wounded creature.

Tagore has identified these two as *Baro Ami* and *Chhoto Ami* which are somewhat akin to macrocosm and microcosm. To illustrate the point, we may take Swami Vivekananda's Chicago lecture delivered on 15th September 1893.

Long time ago there lived a frog in a well. It was born and brought up there, everyday it used to cleanse the water where it resides. One day another frog from sea fell into the well. Seeing an unknown entity the old frog asked 'where are you from?'

New Frog: I am from sea.

Old Frog: The Sea! How big is that, is it as big as my well?

New Frog: What nonsense you speak to compare the sea with your well?

Old Frog: Nothing can be bigger than my well, there can be nothing bigger than this, this fellow must be a liar, so turn him out. (Vivekananda, Swami Chicago Lecture)

Thus, each nation is sitting in their well and thinks there is no existence beyond their well. So, solution will come only when we realize and accept all other nations/religions as true and for this –“The Christian is not to become a Hindu or a Buddhist, nor a Hindu or Buddhist to become Christian. But each must assimilate the spirit of others and yet preserve his individuality and grow according to his own law of growth” (Vivekananda, Swami. My India, the India Eternal)

‘Human beings are essentially place makers, creating order by utilizing our capacity to physically and mentally demarcate the difference between social, political, cultural, and economic’ (Diener, Alexander C. and Hagen, Joshua. Theorizing Borders in a ‘Borderless World’: Globalization, Territory and Identity.)

We live in a world crisscrossed with lines signifying varied jurisdiction of varied authority. For some, borders are increasingly becoming irrelevant since the revolution in the information sphere has enabled people to live in a global village, at least insofar as earning their livelihood and

making money. In the post- globalization mindset, there is ample scope and opportunity to turn the world into flat. On the other hand, some scholars argue that the process of trans-cultural, trans-national, trans-migration requires something to ‘trans’, hence border is perennial in the mind which perceives it. Still, geographical frames like locale, culture and milieu hold immense significance which lends concreteness to our imagination.

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