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Nationalism and the Japanese connection: Rabindranath Tagore's perspective

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Abstract

Rabindranath Tagore was aware of the admiration of the concept of nationalism and its universal recognition as the only legitimate form of political organization but he himself was not ever been eager to get overjoyed about this concept. Tagore was a worshipper of creativity who has put his faith on imagination over reason, natural over the artificial, has vehemently condemned the mechanical, need based, and goal oriented aspect of nationalism which is way apart from the puritan patriotism. His patriotism called for true freedom for the people, freedom of the spirit as much as freedom from external control. Tagore was in favor of interaction, sympathy and harmony among nations which could give birth to a morally and politically enlightened community of nations. Tagore cited the example of Japan and described this country as 'old and new at the same time'. This is because when most of the Asian countries unquestionably admitted the decline of their past glory, culture, style of living in the face of Western modernity then only Japan withheld the belief that she can rise again and in general beyond the submissive nature of 'Asia'. Tagore was of the view that unity and plurality of consciousness could only be achieved through proper education of the people, cultivation of freedom of thought and imagination.

Key Words: Nation, Nationalism, Indigenous, Modernity, Culture.

While discussing the multi-faced excellence of the legend known as Rabindranath Tagore, one has to stumble on the point of marking him as a theoretician of nationalism. Perhaps this is the 'light and shade' area of his career where rays of clarity hesitates to fall upon. Tagore's political viewpoints can never be codified in any single document as they are sporadic and on the very concept of 'nation' and 'nationalism' his ideas have remained dubious and controversial. Tagore's opinion in his book *Nationalism* evoked the notion that he was against nationalism, however according to many scholars Tagore's idea on nationalism cannot be judged from this book alone, as it was a periodic essay written on the background of First World War. Even later on Tagore himself attempted to amend some of the thoughts expressed in 'Nationalism' in a revised version which unfortunately never came in public domain. We need to make sincere efforts to understand his concepts on nationalism. In the present era of globalization the very concept of nationalism is continuously struggling to find out its relevance and without referring to Tagore's thoughts the indigenous study on nationalism can never become complete. At this point one may raise a justified question that why 'Japanese connection' be studied while focusing on his ideas on nationalism? Perhaps the answer is the 'uniqueness' which Tagore noticed in Japan's attempt of blending Western pattern of nationalism with her own culture, taste and necessity and which according to him can be cited as a pioneering instance for rest of the world.

Before going into detail it would be better to remember that Tagore never felt the necessity of creating a mere Bengali translation of the term 'Nation'. In his essay '*Atmashakti*' he stated that the word '*jati*' can never become a suitable synonym of the word 'nation' rather it could be used as a synonym for the word 'race'. Tagore was very much influenced by the French Philosopher Renan's idea of nation. In his 1882 discourse on '*Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?*' (What is a Nation?) Renan said that the essence of a nation is that all its people have a great deal in common, and also that they have forgotten a great deal. Renan essentially meant that a nation, in the words of Benedict Anderson, is an 'imagined community', a group of people sharing a common story, a community by choice. 'Nationalism', the other side of the coin 'nation', has got numerous explanations from worldwide

veteran scholars. According to Ernest Gellner "nationalism is primarily a political principle that holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent". He also argues in his book *Nations and Nationalism* that nationalism has become a sociological necessity in the modern world. But in modern society, work becomes technical. One must operate a machine, and as such one must learn. There is a need for impersonal, context-free communication and a high degree of cultural standardization. The concept of nationalism as a political expression with people sharing a common geographical boundary and some cultural or political similarities is in fact not very old, but cultural nationalism is a much older concept. While one group of scholars have attributed the growth of nationalism to the rise of enlightenment and reason the other group has related it with the birth of industrial capitalism in eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Asia's first Nobel laureate poet Rabindranath Tagore was very much aware of the admiration of the concept of nationalism and its universal recognition as the only legitimate form of political organization but he himself was not ever been eager to get overjoyed about this concept. Tagore was a worshipper of creativity who has put his faith on imagination over reason, natural over the artificial, has vehemently condemned the mechanical, need based, and goal oriented aspect of nationalism which is way apart from the puritan patriotism. The poet actually made a clear distinction between '*deshoprem*', that is patriotism and '*jatiyatabad*' or nationalism, the ideological foundation of the nation state. The former is rooted in culture; the latter is an implant from the West. He was a patriot per excellence but not a nationalist in traditional sense. His patriotism called for true freedom for the people, freedom of the spirit as much as freedom from external control.

Tagore opined that as nationalism is the product of industrial-capitalism it can do no good to humanity as it is only an 'organization of politics and commerce' that brings 'harvests of wealth' or 'carnivals of materialism' by spreading greed, violence and destroying basic human instincts. He was opposed to the kind of nationalism that found its expression in Thucydides' ancient maxim- "large nations do what they wish, while small nations accept what they must". Tagore was in favor of interaction, sympathy and harmony among nations which could give birth to a morally and politically enlightened community of nations. He raised his voice against all types of parochial, self interest based attitudes and cordially invited inter- civilizational alliances. He has written at one place, "believe me, nothing would give me greater happiness than to see the people of the West and the East march in a common crusade against all that robs the human spirit of its significance". In most of his writings, essays, poems he has depicted nationalism as a source of war, death and destruction. His perceived anti-nationalist thought has received eyebrows from many of his contemporaries e.g. Georg Lukacs, D.H. Lawrence etc. After the publication of Tagore's anti-nationalist, anti-revolutionary novel *The Home and the World* in 1915 Lukacs condemned Tagore as 'a wholly insignificant figure', while Lawrence said that Tagore by his attempt of placing East and West on a similar platform was trying to encourage barbarism as the culture of the West is superior than the East in every respect.

In spite of these criticisms Tagore's idea on nationalism was proved to be correct with the outbreak of two World Wars which destructed millions of lives and enormous properties. Tagore was skeptical about the fabricated aspects of nationalism which overwhelms the inner qualities of human beings. In his famous novel *Ghare barire* he expressed his thoughts against narrow, self-satisfying aspects of nationalism. Tagore robustly criticized the British imperialism which was the result of industrial capitalism. His grievance seems more justified when he exposed the true nature of the British colonial power which in the name of nationalism never hesitated to dominate the underprivileged, forlorn countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America. The colonizers never thought of improving the prevailing conditions of the colonized countries rather they were keen to maximize the revenue. No sincere attempt has been made on their part to convert their 'hunting grounds' into 'cultivated lands'. In Tagore's expression the Western civilization was based on cruel power play politics where it had become rule rather the than exception that the rich and affluent countries should possess the right to dictate and dominate the poorer ones.

So far Indian nationalism is concerned it can be said that Tagore opposed to India joining the bandwagon of nationalism. He never acknowledged India to imitating the Western concept of nationalism as Indian culture, civilization, politics and society were markedly different from the Western world. He felt that the problem of India is not political rather social, and therefore India has to seek her solution in a way distinctly different from the West. India itself is the world in miniature as different caste, creed and race lived here since ages. Hence she must try to resolve the diverse issues associated with caste, religion and society. Imitation might be necessary at the beginning and

acceptable up to a point, however one has to keep in mind that blind imitation might lead to complete disaster as the culture, taste, and the social background of two nations can never be the same. More important is the appropriate and proportionate blending of the two, essentially which means adopting the finer qualities, traits from the ideal and thereafter modifying them to adopt to the realistic needs of own nation.

Tagore sited the example of Japan the 'land of the rising sun' at this point and described this country as 'old and new at the same time'. This is because when most of the Asian countries unquestionably admitted the decline of their past glory, culture, style of living in the face of Western modernity then only Japan withheld the belief that she can rise again and in general beyond the submissive nature of 'Asia'. She had complete faith in her own potentialities, in her humanitarian quality which all in turn became her greatest weapon while dealing with modernity. Like a magician Japan has transformed her land into a place decorated with all the contemporary facilities, infrastructure, industries that one could usually witness in West. She acted as the Asian mirror where reflection of West was seen clearly. Tagore in his book *Nationalism* described the situation in the following words "it was done in such an incredibly short time that it seemed like a change of dress and not like the building up of a new structure". Another interesting expression can be found in this regard in the book *Politics, society and colonialism: an alternative understanding of Tagore's response* that –"it was not like getting gradually adjusted to new education and adding (gradually) to it; not like rearing it as a child to develop him into a full-blown man in youth-but rather like welcoming an outsider in the flush of his full youth into her family as son-in-law". Credit of Japan lies in the fact that neither has she rejected her past, the close bondages of her society nor has she complained against those shekels which her country as a part of Asian community had to face; in spite of these she ignited her mind to open up the new vista, to accept the contemporary in a unique way. May be this became possible due to Japan's simplicity and devotedness in everything. In *Japanjatri* at one place Tagore has mentioned about a tea invitation ceremony where he found it surprising that with how much care and creativity a host can offer tea. What revealed from this is the sense of beauty in Japanese mind. People are simple there, habituated in leading a simple life and everywhere a touch of cordiality could be realized. In his lecture 'The spirit of Japan' Tagore said that Japan is such a country where one can come across the triumph of humanity over mechanization. While in the West stunning display and extravagance in everything would take one's breath away by wonder, in Japan simple love and admiration for mankind would leave footprint for ever in ones heart. Most appreciating part is that Japan has prepared her mindset according to the need of the time so that she could easily move forward with all that she has possessed by inheritance. Rabindranath Tagore who was a creator in every aspect was fascinated by this originality of Japan and perhaps this is the reason why Japan made an everlasting impression in his mind. Tagore's another link to Japan was his friend Okakura Tenshin (Kakuzo), the Japanese curator. The chemistry of their friendship was quite amazing. There was no documentation, or records of their exchanges to provide evidence that they shared a cordial relationship. In fact they met only twice in their lives, once in Calcutta in 1902 and later in Boston in 1913. In between they did not speak of each other's work. Their friendship was not affected by this detachment rather in the words of Rustom Bharucha it 'acquired an iconic quality'. Okakura for the first instance influenced Tagore's mind by his concept of 'Asia is One' that is Asia is 'one' in its humiliation, of falling behind in achieving modernization, and thus being colonized by the Western powers. Tagore on the other hand enabled Okakura to travel deep into another Asia that in spite of its fuzzy ideals has greater emotional depth and humanitarian insight. Contrast adds variety to any discussion and gives it a new insight; therefore gap in Tagore's and Okakura's thoughts and ideals helps the readers to realize their friendship chemistry in a better way. It is mention worthy that while Tagore was against of the concept of nationalism and preached against its parochial, self-centered attitude. Okakura Tenshin in most of his famous writings like *The Ideals of the East: with special reference to the art of Japan*, *The Awakening of Japan* supported nationalism. Both have divergent constructions of Asia. Tagore was critical of the violent face of nationalism that was potentially destructive of civilization while Okakura's vision of Asian unity was hierarchical and even racist.

From the above statements it may appear Japan was a near ideal case which Tagore wanted to exemplify. In fact Japan's emergence as a great Asian power is truly remarkable, however the overall experience was not as romantic as it was perceived to be. Tagore in his later half of life became

increasingly alarmed of the transformation of Japan into mechanical civilization, sacrificing her heterogeneous culture she was known for. Tagore commented that at the imitative age of schooling one remains unaware of his needs, unable to distinguish between the indispensable and redundant but as life gradually unfolds one has to take an appropriate choice to make the life meaningful. Same is applicable for a Nation which is engaged in endless conflicts in order to explore her potentialities. At the maiden stages admiration in the name of replication was acceptable but Japan has to remember that contextual differences of the West and the East. In this era of modernity, West is busy in devising a strategy with a principal objective to make all the players identical; a strategy better expressed by the name: 'homogenization of nations'. Asia is distinguished by her diverse character, diverse flavors would become captive in their own land, if the 'wonder child' of Asia, Japan, decides to be a participant in the Western plot. Tagore was not opposed to the idea that Japan should acquire the contemporary weaponry of self-protection, rather he made a conscious attempt to alert Japan not to move beyond her instinct of self preservation. According to him actual modernity lies in freedom of taste and not in mere capitulation. With great anguish he pointed out that Japan is gradually losing her internal qualities by recklessly accepting the Western approach of civilization, the Western life style and above all, putting emphasis on political aspects of civilization while negating the human bond. The prodigious corollary of Darwinism: 'survival of the fittest' can be a magnificent axiom to explain evolution, but its wide spread application in social life essentially results in ruthlessness, brutality and self-centered attitudes.

A broad analysis of Tagore's idea of nationalism makes it evident that at the same time he was in favor and opposed to nationalism. Although it sounds contradictory but from his writings and discourses it becomes noticeable that he was not in favor of drawing any 'Laxman Rekha' (a particular circle intended to restrict one's mobility) based on geographical boundary. He said that if nationalism is something imaginary then humanity has to open up a new panorama by adjusting their mind. National boundary is an evil that builds a wall of separation between human beings and halts the spontaneous interactions, an essential ingredient for setting up of the world civilization. Mohammad A Quayum in his article 'Imagining "one world": Rabindranath Tagore's Critique of Nationalism' said that "Tagore's process calls for a two-way ambiguous negotiation so that nations or communities can flourish and find their own fulfillment and yet rise above exclusivism and provincialism to forge an international community". In his *Creative Unity* on the chapter 'Nation' at one place Tagore commented that in spite of man's reliance in moral laws and the exercise of self-control, evil exists in human mind. People have turned to be materialistic and aggressive for survival and ready to snatch out the best for themselves, while the lofty ideals of patriotism is adding zing to this venture. True love for the nation is a 'holy grail' to be worshipped by all but as the motive of supremacy or ego sneaks in the way, the aim becomes filthy. A fundamental change is required to overcome this situation. Today nation has become a political or commercial institution whose foundation is wealth and power and only objective is to accomplish the material needs of her inhabitants. However, in order to enkindle the real spirit of nationalism one has to restore his/her soul. Any change completed by mere brainwork may or may not stay forever but when the heart and soul work in unison with the brain, the transformation becomes historical. But how to bring out that change? Tagore often attracted criticism from his friends that although he was always instrumental in pointing out the problems, but did not provide their solutions. Admitting this to a certain extent in *Creative Unity* he said that no alternative institution can become the guarantee of a better choice. It is human being who can bring the rational choice. In this case only education can guide them. Tagore was of the view that unity and plurality of consciousness could only be achieved through proper education of the people, cultivation of freedom of thought and imagination.

To many Tagore's vision seemed idealistic and unattainable. Tagore can be charged with the allegation of becoming only a cultural nationalist who was not keenly interested to explore the political content of nationalism. But as we explore his ideas deeply, we find that again and again he emphasized that nationalism is not something which is a nation's invention rather it is a political provocation which the West has witnessed since the inception of industrial capitalism and attempted to impose on the rest of the World. Therefore he did not feel the urge to discourse on its political aspect. In today's world where the violence and cruelty are spreading its tentacles everywhere like lethal virus and the power of devastation is ever increasing by each passing day, one has no other

option but to seek refuge in the principles laid down in Tagore's ideology in order to save the mankind. We can conclude with Tagore's maxim: "Freedom of mind is needed for the reception of truth".

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