

The Vision of an Inclusive India: Contextualizing Tagore in the Contemporary Crisis of Indian Secularism

Dr. Samit Kumar Maiti

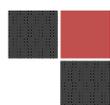
Abstract

There were multiple and often conflicting imaginaries of nationhood in the pre-independent India. While all those versions of nationhood had either religious or regional characters, Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) in his literary works projected the vision of a broad, inclusive and secular India. A “dissenter among dissenters”¹ with the idea of the Western nationalism, Tagore rejected nationalism because of its grossly political, commercial and exclusionary nature. He considered India as a sacred place, where an astounding variety of race, religion, language and culture had congregated from time immemorial, and the unique mission of India had been to assimilate all those cultures into its tradition. Tagore strongly resisted the monolithic concept of the Western nation and asserted that the principles of tolerance, inclusion and heterogeneity were the quintessential cultural values of India. Secularism, as embodied in the Indian Constitution, is in keeping with Tagore’s ideas of religious pluralism and universal tolerance. But, the rise of aggressive nationalism, communalism, fundamentalism threatens to disturb not only the perennial Indian ideals of harmony and fellowship among the people of diverse cultures and religions, but also the democratic and secular values of the Indian Constitution. The paper argues that Tagore’s vision of an inclusive India can act as antidote to the current political crisis.

Keywords: nationalism, fundamentalism, secularism, inclusive India

The growth of nationalism in India had usually been associated with the anti-colonial struggles against the British. In general, nationalism works as “a double-edged sword: it can be a binding force or a deeply divisive instrument” (Habib 3). Indeed, nationalism worked as a ‘binding force’ in Asian and African countries during the phase of decolonization. Particularly for India, nationalism generated a sense of over-arching political passion that conveniently bypassed the issues of class, caste, gender, religion, region, and language during the struggle for liberation of the country. However, in its ugly form, nationalism also proved to be a ‘deeply divisive instrument’ as it provoked the expression of violent and aggressive religious sentiments, leading to the several communal riots, perpetual religious conflicts among the diverse religious communities, and finally culminating in the Partition of India. India under the colonial rule witnessed the growth of the multiple imaginaries of nationhood. There was the idea of the Hindu Rashtra, originated in Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay’s *Anandamath* (1882), and elaborated and propagated later by V. D. Savarkar (1883-1966). The concept of an Islamic state that began to take shape in the imagination of the Muslim leaders from the early decades of the twentieth century became much stronger in 1940, when the All-India Muslim League passed the Lahore Resolution and demanded a separate nation for the Muslims. The demand for Khalistan, first made in the pamphlet called “Khalistan” in 1940, consolidated in the subsequent years in the northern part of India, particularly in the Sikh-dominated regions. The southern part of India claimed for an independent Dravidsthan for the non-Brahmin and Dravidian-language speakers living mainly in Andhra Pradesh, Kerala and Karnataka. There were also the Dalits who, under the leadership of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, claimed for “separate settlements” for untouchables in order to fight against discriminations of the caste Hindus. Although this demand for “separate settlements” is not equivalent to the demand for a separate nation or separate state, it cannot be denied that there developed a caste consciousness and class consciousness that provoked the Dalits to see themselves as distinct from the Hindus in time of nation formation. The diverse, and often conflicting, versions of nationhood obviously speak of the religious, linguistic and cultural heterogeneity. The multiple imaginings of nationhood in the colonial India also suggest the strong relationship between region and religion, and the nation. If nation is conceived as a “deep, horizontal comradeship” (Anderson 7), the ideologues of such propositions of nationhood assumed fraternity only among the people of their own religious community, and among the people belonging to a particular geographical space. This shows the inherent limitation of the nationalist ideology. Indeed, nationalism in India had expressed its strong communal nature; it was the root cause of several violent conflicts among the religious communities, particularly between the Hindus and the Muslims. Anti-colonial movement in India had mainly been controlled by the political leaders, activists and intellectuals belonging to the Hindu religious community. This gave currency to the idea of Hindu nationalism, marginalizing other forms of nationalism.

Amidst this cacophony of nationalist imaginings, it was Rabindranath Tagore who could rise above the regional prejudice and narrow nationalism to think of India as a composite whole, a country where the people of multiple religious communities, cutting across class, caste, language and culture could co-exist peacefully. His was the vision of an inclusive India, where every individual would enjoy equal rights and freedom, giving priority to none. When the leading intellectuals and political activists like Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Bipin Chandra Pal, Lala Lajpat Rai, Aurobindo Ghosh, Chittaranjan Das, and even Mahatma Gandhi, felt it urgent to embrace the ideology of nationalism to counter the



forces of colonialism and imperialism, Tagore unhesitatingly denounced nationalism for its exclusionary and divisive nature. In *Nationalism*, he writes: “The political civilization which has sprung up from the soil of Europe and is overrunning the whole world, like some prolific weed, is based upon exclusiveness. It is always watchful to keep the aliens at bay or to exterminate them” (8). Nationalism, a by-product of European industrialization and capitalism, gives birth to the spirit of conflict and conquest, and aims at fulfilling the political and commercial motives of the nation states; hence, it spoils the atmosphere of brotherhood and cooperation. Despite the fact that anti-colonial nationalism had acted as a unifying force among the people in their struggle against the colonizers in many South Asian and African nations, Tagore remained, what AshisNandy calls, a “dissenter among dissenters” with the idea of nationalism, and fiercely condemned it for its tendency to create an atmosphere of distrust, intolerance and sectarianism. He emphasized the need of rising above the euphoria of national sentiment to assert the abiding human values. The observation made by the eminent historian, Irfan Habib, demands special attention in this context. Habib thinks that Tagore:

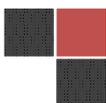
saw the darker side of nationalism that stifled the innate, instinctive qualities of the human individual and its overemphasis on the commercial and political aspects, at the expense of man’s moral and spiritual qualities. Tagore emphasized humanitarian intervention into the self-seeking and belligerent nationalism, through the introduction of a moral and spiritual dimension. His internationalist and cosmopolitan vision was contrary to the narrow sectarian nationalism being espoused by nations across Europe and Asia. (118)

Achampion of the ideal of universal humanism, Tagore aspired to build an inclusive society, barring all barriers, political and geographical, for the unity of all human races. Behind the rejection of the idea of nationalism was his unflinching faith in the ideal of cosmopolitanism and universal goodwill and tolerance.

India, for Tagore, is not merely a geographical place; it is an imaginary space. He said: “I love India but my India is an idea and not a geographical expression” (*Letters to a Friend* 119). In the National Anthem, he projects the image of India as a secular country; it is remarkably free from the provincial narrowness and sectarian prejudice. The poet thus addresses the very soul of India, which for him is the Lord of the Universe: “Thou art the ruler of the minds of all people, / Thou Dispenser of India’s destiny” (“Thou art the Ruler” 1-2). The poet imagines India as a place where the perennial ideals of love, humanity, cooperation and fellowship have fully been realized:

Day and night, thy voice goes out from land to land,
Calling Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs and Jains round thy throne
and Parsees, Mussalmans and Christians.
Offerings are brought to thy shrine by the East and the West
to be woven in a garland of love.
Thou bringest the hearts of all peoples into the harmony of one life . . .
(12-16)

The song is a celebration of the spiritual harmony of the people of India. While the song encapsulates the spirit of tolerance for all religions and culture, it reveals that Tagore’s love of India is neither narrow nor parochial.



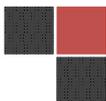
Indeed, the spirit of inclusiveness is the hallmark of Indian culture. In the early decade of the twentieth century, when the political leadership failed to provide an agreeable solution to the religious tension, mainly between the Hindus and the Muslims, Tagore came forward with the grand vision of transforming India into a sacred land that embraces the values of humanism and the indivisibility of mankind. In such essays as “Path o Patheya” (Ways and Means), “Samashya” (The Problem), and surely in his famous song “Pilgrimage to India”, Tagore gives a cogent expression of his ideal vision of India. The central argument of these writings is that from time immemorial an astounding variety of race, religion, language and culture had congregated in India, and the unique mission of India had been to harmonize multiple human races into one. The sages in this country as well as the religious scriptures have all laid emphasis on the principle of unity of mankind. The sages, while they have acknowledged that men are different in colour, custom, language and creed, have laid a great stress on the devotion to truth and realization of all humanity as one entity. Thus the uniqueness of Indian civilization had been to prioritize man’s humanistic values over other issues that create division between man and man. This vision has found its most exquisite poetic expression in “Pilgrimage to India”:

No one knows at whose great call
Streams of humanity
In a mighty tide flowed who knows whence
To mingle in that sea.
Aryan and non-Aryan came,
Chinese, Dravidian,
Scythian, Hun, Mughal, Pathan,
In body blent as one... (12-20)

History tells us that in the last thousand years, India suffered several attacks by the Central Asian nomadic tribes, Portuguese, French, Dutch and English, and the motive behind those invasions had been either to plunder the natural resources and the riches, or to colonize India. But Tagore is not much interested in the materialistic aspects of those invasions, rather he believes that there is a metahistoric implication of those foreign invasions. India, for Tagore, is:

‘Bharattirtha’... a holy place, where pilgrims from races all over the world have congregated and melted into a composite whole gradually absorbed in this great civilization and culture, which is more intent on the unification of the world than living in isolation and simple national advancement and aggrandisement of individual nations. (Basu Majumdar 15)

Hence, the habits and customs that stand in the way of harmony between man and man, religion and religion, nation and nation must be eroded for the attainment of the noble ideal of unification of mankind. India would be unique for its unity in diversity. The predominant spirit of unity among diverse religions, linguistic and cultural communities is what distinguishes India from other countries in the world. As Mohammad A. Quayum remarks that the “earnest wish to create a united India, where Muslims, Hindus, Christians, Aryans, non-Aryans, Brahmins and untouchables would live side by side in reciprocity, candour and comradeship, and as integral parts of India’s Great Humanity, was central to Tagore’s imagination” (“A Herald of Religious Unity” 78).



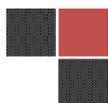
But while putting his emphasis on the ideal of unity, Tagore did not forget that uniformity is not unity. He believed that divergent perspectives do not weaken but strengthen the sense of harmony. In the essays like “Samajbhed” (Difference in the Social Organization) and “East and West”, he identified an essential contrast between the European civilization and the Asian civilization, particularly the Indian civilization. Tagore argued that if the Western civilization is based on racial unity, the basis of the Indian civilization is its society, or what he calls “Swadeshi Samaj” (Indigenous Society). For Tagore, the distinctions in terms of custom, tradition and civilizations must not turn into impediments in the way of unity of mankind. Even when he was fiercely critical of Europe, he had the conviction that the West was essential for the East: “...the West is necessary to the East. We are complimentary to each other because of our different outlooks upon life which have given us different aspects of truth” (*Nationalism* 41). He further writes:

we have to recognise that the history does not belong to one particular race but to a process of creation to which various races of the world contributed—the Dravidians and the Aryans, the ancient Greeks and the Persians, the Mohammedans of the West and those of central Asia. Now at last has come the turn of the English to become true to this history and bring to it the tribute of their life, and we neither have right nor the power to exclude this people from the building of the destiny of India. Therefore what I say about the Nation has more to do with the history of Man than specially with that of India. (42)

The amalgamation of people of different races is what makes humanity great. India plays an important role in the evolution of mankind, and it gives supreme importance not to the national identity, or cultural identity of man, but to the principle of universal humanism.

Tagore could not live to see the freedom of India; he died in 1941, but his ideas had a crucial impact on the formation of the Indian republic. Ramachandra Guha considers Tagore as one of the ‘makers of modern India’.²The impact of Tagore’s ideas on the founders of the nation, particularly on Gandhi and Nehru, had been enormous. While evaluating this, Guha pertinently comments: “It was through the poet’s provocation that these two men developed a theory of nationalism that was inclusive, not exclusive; a nationalism that sought not just political freedom for the Nation but equal rights for all its citizens.” He continues, “Where other nationalisms insisted on a homogeneity of attitudes and worldviews, the idea of India respected and celebrated the linguistic, cultural and religious diversity of its people” (lv). With the Independence of India, the values of equality, freedom, tolerance and self-respect have been guaranteed to the citizens of India by the Constitution. The Preamble of the Constitution of India defines India as “a sovereign, socialist secular democratic republic”, committed to ensure for all its citizens justice, liberty, equality, and fraternity. The Constitution of India guarantees ‘justice’ to each of its citizens in the social, economic and political spheres; ‘liberty’ in “thought, expression, belief, faith and worship”; ‘equality’ in status and opportunity; thereby creating a ‘fraternity’ that will promote “the dignity of the individual and the unity and integrity” of India.

However, with the unprecedented growth of communalism and the forces of divisiveness in recent years the secular identity of India is under serious threat. India is a ‘secular’ country, which means that the State ensures the fundamental rights of equality and freedom, and it does not interfere with the religion of an individual. Secularism does not mean the abolition of religion altogether, but it regards religion as a matter of



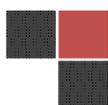
personal faith and speaks for the peaceful coexistence of all religious communities in a free and liberal atmosphere. Democracy is thus essential for the complete realization of the values of secularism. “The democratic ethic,” observes Hamid Dalwai, “is liberal and is therefore heterodox. It is thus necessary for a democracy to be secular, that is, totally dissociated from religion, to be a democracy at all. All communities and individuals in a democratic society have to conform to the basic liberal democratic ethic” (497). A perfect co-ordination of the democratic and secular values creates a favourable climate for the development of the true spirit of multiculturalism. India is the common home of multiple religious faiths. Diversity is the cornerstone of the Indian secularism and democracy. Since secularism is a vital element of democracy, the violation of the secular principles has inevitably impoverished the democratic values in India.

Tagore’s idea of India was shaped by his deep understanding of India’s civilization. In “Pilgrimage to India”, he stoutly declares: “None will excluded be / From India’s ocean-shore of great humanity” (23-24). The diverse human races have merged into one grand human race in India; not a single race or religion is alien here. He expressed the similar views in his “The Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech”:

I do not think that it is the spirit of India to reject anything, reject any race, reject any culture. The spirit of India has always proclaimed the ideal of unity. This ideal of unity never rejects anything, any race, or any culture. It comprehends all, and it has been the highest aim of our spiritual exertion to be able to penetrate all things with one soul, to comprehend all things as they are, and not to keep out anything in the whole universe—to comprehend all things with sympathy and love. This is the spirit of India. (965)

However, the growth of religious intolerance, religious extremism and the politics of exclusion manifested in the present Indian context reminds us of the grim fact that the country had travelled far away from Tagore’s vision of India. Tagore’s idea of India was that of an inclusive India, as envisioned by Gora in the final section of the eponymous novel. Gora, who in early section of the novel was a staunch Hindu nationalist, rejects his religious orthodoxy and aggressive nationalism in the final section of the novel to embrace the ideal of universal humanism: “To-day I am really an Indian! In me there is no longer any opposition between Hindu, Mussulman, and Christian. To-day every caste in India is my caste, the food of all is my food!” (*Gora* 863). He says to Paresh Babujubilantly: “To-day give me the *mantram* of that Deity who belongs to all, Hindu, Mussulman, Christian, and Brahmo alike—the doors to whose temple are never closed to any person of any caste whatever—He who is not merely the God of the Hindus, but who is the God of India herself!” (865). This is an epiphanic moment for Gora when he recognizes that man’s true identity is his humanity, not religious orthodoxy or nationality. The final vision of Gora’s India is a country in which the Hindus, the Muslims and the Christians find their place. Tagore’s idea of India was based on the ideals of tolerance, fraternity and universal humanism. In a letter to Reverend Foss Wesott, dated 1 June 1941, written shortly before his death, he reiterated his vision of an inclusive world:

I have as you are no doubt aware, worked all my life for the promotion of racial, communal and religious harmony among the different peoples of the world. I have also, at considerable personal cost and often at risk of being misunderstood by my own people, set my face against all claims of narrow and aggressive



nationalism, believing in the common destiny and oneness of all mankind. (Dutta and Robinson, *Selected Letters* 525)

The letter is an epitome of Tagore's political philosophy—the supremacy of the ideal of “the common destiny and oneness of all mankind” against the “claims of narrow and aggressive nationalism”.

Tagore was not only concerned about nationalism; he was also seriously engaged with the issue of communalism. While addressing the issue of the Hindu-Muslim relation in India, Tagore categorically dismissed the question of religious identity of man and emphasized the need to recognize the humanity of man. In an essay called “Byadhi O Pratikar” (“Problems and their Solutions”), he wrote:

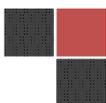
The fact is that we live in the same country, sharing common joys and sorrows. We are human beings; if we fail to attain unity among us it is a shame, a sin. We (Hindus and Muslims) are the children of the same motherland. Shame on our humanity, if we do not come forward to take joint responsibility of the land in recognition of the God-given compulsion.³ (my trans.; 783)

Tagore thus advocated the urgent necessity to identify man's innate humanity for the Hindu-Muslim unity. So, for him, humanism was the antidote to communalism and religious bigotry. He had been a tireless crusader against the evils of injustice, inequality, and any form of discrimination on the basis of caste, class, race, religion, language and nationality. He nourished the conviction that any form of discrimination on the basis of a man's religious identity is an insult to man's dignity and honour. His was the vision of a country free from religious bigotry, narrowness of outlook and cultural prejudice, as embodied in the song:

Where the mind is without fear, the head held high;
Where knowledge is free; where through the night and day
The homestead walls have not, within their yard,
Shut up in small space a fragmented earth;
.....
With ruthless blows from your own hand, awaken
India, O Father, into that heaven.⁴ (1-4, 13-14)

Moral and spiritual emancipation, rather than political ‘swaraj’, was the poet's aspiration. Although the country has become independent, the dream of an ethical, spiritual, humanitarian, and liberal democracy remains largely unfulfilled.

The growth of the spirit of intolerance and exclusivism is not typically an Indian phenomenon. The issue of citizenship in nation-states has made a resurgence across the globe. Today's world is threatened with cultural chauvinism, fundamentalism, terrorism and aggressive nationalism. These are but the various facets of exclusivism and discrimination. These problems, aided by the problems of migration and infiltration, make the world a horrible place. The evil forms of nationalism, communalism and fundamentalism in the national and global contexts made Tagore aware of the need of espousing the abiding human values. With the passage of time, the significance of Tagore's observations on these issues did not lose their validity. On the contrary, the need for upholding Tagore's idea of inclusiveness as a remedy to the ugly forms of nationalism, communalism and fundamentalism is being urgently felt at a time troubled with the problems of hyper-nationalism, fanaticism and sectarianism. Re-discovering



Tagore and understanding his message of universal love and tolerance can act as a remedy to this unprecedented global political crisis.

Notes:

¹Ashis Nandy uses the phrase to describe Tagore in the 'Preface' to his highly influential work on Tagore, *The Illegitimacy of Nationalism: Rabindranath Tagore and the Politics of Self* (Oxford University Press, 1994), p. vii. The phrase rightly captures Tagore's distinct position as a critic of the Western ideas of nation and nationalism during the heyday of Indian nationalism.

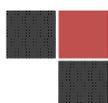
²The title of the book edited and introduced by Guha is "Makers of Modern India" (Penguin India, 2012) in which Guha includes the writings of Tagore along with the other intellectuals whose thoughts have shaped the modern India.

³Rabindranath Tagore, "Byadhi O Pratikar," in *Rabindra Rachanabali*, vol. V, pp. 779-86.

⁴Rabindranath Tagore, "Where the Mind is without Fear", translated by Sukanta Chaudhuri, p. 170.

Works Cited:

- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Verso, 2006.
- Chaudhuri, Sukanta, general editor. *Rabindranath Tagore: Selected Poems*. Advisory editor Sankha Ghosh. Introduction by Sankha Ghosh. Notes by Sankha Ghosh and Sukanta Chaudhuri. Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Dalwai, Hamid. "The Challenge of Secularism." *Makers of Modern India*, edited and introduced by Ramachandra Guha, Penguin Books India, 2010, pp. 497-500.
- Das, Sisir Kumar, editor. *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, vol. One, Sahitya Akademi, 2011.
- , editor. *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, vol. Three, A Miscellany, Sahitya Akademi, 2012.
- Dutta, Krishna and Andrew Robinson, editors. *Selected Letters of Rabindranath Tagore*. Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- Habib, S. Irfan, editor. *Indian Nationalism: The Essential Writings*. Aleph Book Company, 2017.
- Menon, Sadanand. "From National Culture to Cultural Nationalism." *On Nationalism*. By Romila Thapar, A. G. Noorani, and Sadanand Menon. With a Foreword by David Davidar. Aleph Book Company, 2016, pp. 105-48.
- Nandy, Ashis. Preface. *The Illegitimacy of Nationalism: Rabindranath Tagore and the Politics of Self*. Oxford University Press, 1994, pp. iii-viii.



- Quayum, Mohammad. "A Herald of Religious Unity: Rabindranath Tagore's Literary Representation of Muslims." *The Poet and his World*, edited by Mohammad Quayum, Orient Blackswan, 2011, pp. 68-95.
- Ray, Bibekananda. "Wanted: A Single Identity Card." *The Statesman*, 23 Jan. 2020, Kolkata ed., Perspective sec.: 7.
- Tagore, Rabindranath. *Nationalism*. Introduction by Ramachandra Guha. Penguin Books India, 2009.
- . *Gora*. Translated from the original Bengali by various writers. Macmillan India Limited, 2002.
- . *Letters to a Friend: Rabindranath Tagore's Letters to C. F. Andrews*. Rupa, 2009.
- . "Pilgrimage to India." Translated by Sukanta Chaudhuri. *Rabindranath Tagore: Selected Poems*, edited by Sukanta Chaudhuri, Oxford University Press, 2004, pp. 200-02.
- . "The Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech." Das, *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, vol. Three, Sahitya Akademi, 2012, pp. 961-66.
- . "Thou art the Ruler of the Minds of all People." Das, *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, vol. One, Sahitya Akademi, 2011, pp. 345-46.

