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‘Crisis in Civilisation’: Rabindranath Tagore’s Perspectives on Nation and Nature

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Abstract

European colonialism had its devastating effects not only on the native cultural traditions of India but also on the uniquely divergent environments of the Indian subcontinent. Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), as a colonial subject and as one of the leading intellectuals of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, critically engaged himself with both the issues. He was critical of the erosion of native cultural values as an inevitable effect of Eurocentrism, and bitterly castigated the Western concepts of nation and nationalism that, he believed, were at the root of colonialism and imperialism. He believed that Western civilization was obsessed with power, materialism, and consumerism. Mastery over science and technology had not only given them the power to dominate over the non-European nations; it was also the source of power for them to exploit nature. While denouncing Europe for its unbridled greed, Tagore had advocated the harmony between not only man and man, nation and nation, but also between man and nature, and the human world and the ecosystem. In his essay “Crisis in Civilization”, written in the final year of his life, Tagore seriously denounced Europe for its aggressive nationalism, imperialism, and racial chauvinism, and apprehended a cataclysm for the human civilization. Today, more than eighty years after the composition of the essay, the world is confronted with yet another great ‘crisis’ in the form of environmental degradation. The ugly forms of the nation and nationalism—cultural chauvinism, racial arrogance, xenophobia, sectarianism, fundamentalism—show no signs of disappearance; rather these are the guiding forces of modern politics. Added to these are the problems of pollution, global warming, loss of biodiversity, and the recent phenomenon of the Covid-19 pandemic, which sadly reminds us that we have entered into a new phase of human history, the Anthropocene, the ruthless annihilation of Nature by human beings. Tagore's engagement with both the problems and his critical understanding of the issues makes him highly relevant in contemporary times. If he was a cosmopolitan and a



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universal humanist in his political ideology, he was an eco-cosmopolitan in his environmental philosophy. Through a comparative analysis of the selected writings of Tagore on nation, nationalism, and nature, the paper argues that the Upanishadic concept of the spiritual oneness of the universe was at the root of his critique of the nation and nature.

Keywords: Tagore, nation, nationalism, environmentalism, the *Upanishads*.

Rabindranath Tagore was born only after four years of the Sepoy Mutiny (1857), which is believed by many historians to be the first ‘national movement’ in India. The late nineteenth century was the period when the Indian intellectuals and political activists thought that the idea of a ‘nation’ was an urgent necessity for the Indians to combat the forces of European colonialism and imperialism.¹ It was during this time the idea of the nation entered into the Indian political domain, mainly as ‘derivative discourse’². But, by the early decades of the twentieth century, there was a strong reaction against the monolithic notion of the Western nation. Tagore was, to use Ashish Nandi’s phrase, a ‘dissenter among dissenters’³ with the idea of the nation. He fiercely denounced the Western concept of the nation with the conviction that it was never in consonance with the Indian ethos, which celebrates heterogeneity. For him, “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 mechanical purpose” (*Nationalism* 37). The nation is an organisation established to pursue the commercial and political interests of the nation. The nation is a ‘fabrication’; it is not a natural phenomenon in history. The critics like Ernest Gellner think that the idea of the nation is the byproduct of the Western industrialisation and capitalism. Tagore also believed that the capitalistic and political motives were the cardinal aspects of the Western nation and nationalism. He repudiates the tendency of the nation to expand its boundaries to gratify its commercial motives: “It (nation) is carnivorous and cannibalistic in its tendencies, it feeds upon the resources of other peoples and tries to swallow their whole future. It is always afraid of other races achieving eminence, naming it as a peril, and tries to thwart all symptoms of greatness outside its own boundaries, forcing down races of men who are weaker,



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to be eternal fixed in their weakness” (8). The Western nation is based on competition and conflict; hence, the idea of exclusion is integral to the idea of the nation: “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). Benedict Anderson thinks that the nation is an “imagined community”, which means that the nationalist sentiment creates an all-embracing sentiment by disregarding the issues of inequality. Anderson argues, “regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship” (Anderson 7). This understanding of Anderson largely ignores the issue of exclusion that is crucial in the process of nation-formation. The nation, which speaks of the “deep, horizontal comradeship”, excludes, exterminates and marginalizes a large section of the people on the grounds of caste, creed, gender, religion, ethnicity, skin-color, etc. Tagore opposed the idea of the nation because he thought that the hallmark of the Indian culture is inclusion, not exclusion. He gave an eloquent expression of the spirit of India in his famous poem “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....⁴ (12-20)



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The history of India shows that, from the time immemorial, diverse human races have merged into the mainstream cultural tradition of India. The spirit of harmony and cooperation is the quintessential feature of Indian history and culture. He expressed similar views in *Nationalism*:

We have to recognize 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. (42)

It is for this reason he said that “India has never had a real sense of nationalism” (70). Nationalism creates a sense of conflict and competitiveness, disharmony; it is based on divisiveness and intolerance. The locus of the Indian civilization is its society, or what Tagore called, ‘Swadeshi Samaj’, where the people live in harmony and amity; it is an alternative space beyond the intervention of the State-power.

Time and again, Tagore calls the nation a ‘mechanical organisation’, and compares it to a machine. The nation is the organization of power, politics, commerce, and scientific knowledge. Although India had been invaded by many foreign races, Tagore distinguishes between the invasion of the Central Asian nomadic tribes and the European races and thinks that, while the Mughals and Pathans were human races the Europeans were the nations. He makes this distinction with the use of an analogy of the hand-loom and power-loom: “...the difference between them and the government by the Nation is like the difference between the hand-loom and the power-loom. In the products of the hand-loom the magic of man’s living fingers finds its expression, and its hum harmonizes with the music of life. But the power-loom is relentlessly lifeless and accurate and monotonous in its production” (43-44). The underlying motive of Tagore's comparison of the nation with the power-loom is to emphasize the soulless, mechanical, and impersonal nature.



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The nation is “the creature of science and selfishness” (52). Tagore’s critique of the nation is invariably linked with his critique of science. It was his conviction that the nation is ‘scientific’ but not ‘human’, because science is not man’s nature, and life based upon mere science is superficial. Science does not have any value system; it is objective and impersonal in its application and accuracy. Tagore did not fail to understand that the mastery over science and technology had given the West not only power over the weak nations of the world; it had transformed the West into a veritable culture of consumerism and unmitigated greed. However, there was never a blind rejection of the West in Tagore. Even while repudiating the West, he believed that the West was necessary for the East: “...the West is necessary to the East. We are complementary to each other because of our different outlooks upon life which have given us different aspects of truth” (41). Reconciliation of the opposite views is necessary for what Tagore called 'Truth'. An internationalist or a cosmopolitan, his vision was never restricted by the narrow provincialism or prejudice. The observations made by Irfan Habib, the eminent historian, demand 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)

While opposed to the Western nation for its exclusive, aggressive, commercial, political, mechanical, and scientific nature, Tagore advocated the idea of love, harmony, brotherhood, and cooperation. He did not see any insurmountable walls of discrimination between man and man, community and community, nation, and nation. He envisaged a seamless world, a spiritual ‘Commonwealth’, where the boundaries of race, nationality, religion, class, caste, and creed would collapse completely to build the edifice of the confederation of mankind.



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If the basic premises of Tagore's criticism of the nation are its exclusive, materialistic, commercial, scientific, mechanical aspects, these are also the elements of his critique of the attitude that had gone into exploiting nature and environment, inviting unforeseen dangerous to mankind and civilization. It is very interesting to note that, he accelerated his denunciation of Western nationalism after the First World War, which he explained in terms of expression of unmitigated human greed for power and commerce of the European nations. He realized that the same spirit of greed and commercialism was at the root of exploitation of the environment: "The temptation of an inordinately high level of living, which was once confined only to a small section of the community, becomes widespread. The blindness is sure to prove fatal to the civilization which puts no restraint upon the emulation of self-indulgence" (Qtd. in Sen and Sircar xvi). The greed for power and wealth is not only at the heart of man's desire to conquer other nations, but also the fundamental force behind the ruthless plundering of natural resources:

When they had reduced the limited store of material in their immediate surroundings, they produced to wage various wars among their different sections, each wanting his own special allotment of the lion's share. In their scramble for the right of self-indulgence, they laughed at moral law and took it to be a sign of superiority to be ruthless in the satisfaction each of his own desire. They exhausted the water, cut down the trees, reduced the surface of the planet to a desert, riddled with enormous pits and made its interior a rifled pocket, emptied of its valuables. (Qtd. in Sen and Sircar xvi)

Tagore saw the violation of moral law in the expansion of the nations as well as in the exploitation of nature. The mindless plundering of the environment is also a violation of the ethical norms. Tagore thought very deeply about the issues of the environment, which are of contemporary relevance. He was primarily concerned with the issues of harmony, progress, and preservation. Progress, he believed, could be achieved not by destruction but by the preservation of the environment. He sounded the dangers of exploitation of environment decades before the environmentalist movements gathered momentum. If environmentalism is the social, political, and ethical movement to protect the environment from the destruction and pollution caused by



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man, Tagore was one of the earliest Indians to start his movement against environmental degradation.

The modern triumph of science and technology has given man enormous power with which he aspires to conquer not only other nations but also to conquer nature. But the success of science and technology has its limits. If man's aspiration to conquer nature ultimately amounts to aggression on nature, it is bound to be counterproductive. The aggressive attitude to nature was mainly fuelled by the European colonialism in India. India from the Vedic times had developed a reverential attitude towards nature because nature provides man not only sources of livelihood and sustenance but also an integral part of man's moral, spiritual, and aesthetic aspects. India had its 'tapovan' culture in the past, and the religious texts propagate the principle of harmonious co-existence with nature. But the European conquest of India had not only established its physical dominion over the country, but it had been responsible for the disease, destruction of natural flora and fauna of the country, the deforestation, and the exploitation of natural resources and environment, causing unprecedented ecological disasters and environmental hazards. Tagore had numerous writings on the issues of deforestation, soil erosion, air pollution, which are of contemporary relevance. In his notable play *Muktadhara* (The Waterfall, 1922), Tagore had portrayed the conflict between man and machine. The allegorical message of the play is that the mindless obsession with machine and power can bring unpredictable catastrophes to the human world. But one should not think that Tagore was opposing the modern science and technology. What he suggested was the judicious application of those skills and knowledge for the betterment of mankind.

In his essay "Aranya Debata" (God of the Forest), he spiritualizes nature and suggests that it is a universal problem to save the forest resources from the uncontrolled greed of man. It is the rapacity, the unregulated greed of man, which leads him to commit aggression on nature. Transgression of God's scheme by greedy humans has invited man's catastrophe. It is an instance of callous ignorance to destroy trees and vegetations that purify the air and make the land fertile and thus creates a conducive atmosphere of living for human beings. Tagore's



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understanding and representation of nature in his writings are deeply perceptive and idiosyncratic, as Amit Chaudhuri observes:

For Tagore, nature is *the* site of civilization, refinement, of certain ideals of the secular enlightenment, such as the ideal of living in harmony with the world—and it's a specifically Indian location for these things. Tagore, audaciously, not so much critiques the Western enlightenment and humanism, and the idea of 'civilisation' itself, but snatches them away from their expected location and gives to them another source and lineage in India and its antiquity; cheekily, he implies this lineage might be the more authentic one. (100-01)

Tagore's discourse on nature thus radically departs from the Western attitude to nature, which looks upon it as the object of exploitation and destruction. The establishment of Shantiniketan was a living example of his vocation of the harmony between nature and human beings. He introduces the programmes of "Briksharopan" (Tree Planting Festival), "Varshamangal" (Monsoon Festival), "Pous Utsav" (Winter Festival), "Basanta Utsav" (Spring Festival) to develop the spirit of harmonious coexistence with nature.

Tagore's philosophy of environmentalism was linked with the issue of sustainable rural development. He was a great teacher of environmental economics. He experimented with rural reconstruction in Sriniketan, a village near Shantiniketan. He was aware of the need for the revival of the rural economy by introducing modern scientific techniques. He sent his son Rathindranath abroad to study agriculture and animal husbandry. What he preached was a symbiosis of the rural and urban civilizations. The environment was part and parcel of his conception of integrated rural development. Environmental imbalance causes property, so there must be a balance between man and plants, earth and atmosphere, nature, and human life. Tagore warned of the imminent dangers of deforestation and environmental degradation. His concept was to draw sustenance from nature, but sustain it and replenish it in a spirit of mutual respect and reciprocation. Tagore's was an eco-cosmopolitanism⁵, which as Swarnalatha Rangarajan



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explains, “conceives of an ‘environmental world citizenship’ by upholding the vision of a ‘planetary imagined community’ comprising both human and non-human members” (177).

Tagore's poems and songs are pervaded with a sense of unfathomable mystery, limitless joy, and spiritual delight. Nature is not a mere backdrop; it is the living presence, a source of man's endless creative activities. Like Wordsworth, Tagore also felt the presence of the Universal Spirit in the natural world. Indeed, Tagore “combines the imaginative vitality of Shelley, the richness of Keats' imagery and the detection of an infused spirituality of Wordsworth” (Sen and Sircar xii). Tagore's songs on nature embody the poet's multiple emotional shades and spiritual delight. The song entitled “Akash bhara surja tara” embodies the poet's cosmic consciousness and his sense of oneness with the whole universe: “The sky studded with sun and stars, the universe throbbing with life, / In the midst of all these have I found my place— / I wonder whereof gushes forth my song” (Ghose 46, ll. 1-3). The song epitomizes the Upanishadic philosophy – the immersion of the individual consciousness with the universal soul.

Tagore was deeply rooted in the *Upanishads*, which shaped his philosophical outlook, which he interpolated into his thoughts on nation and nature. Drawing from the Upanishadic tradition, he felt the presence of the Omniscient Bramha within all living beings as well as in nature. This presence fills his mind with a profound sense of joy and mystery that he sought to capture in his poetry. Tagore was aware that the universe is a single entity, Omniscient Bramha. If the Bramha is indivisible, the multifarious creations of the universe are bound to be indivisible. This conception of the oneness of the universe is the nucleus of his philosophical premise on nation and nature.

The world today is witnessing the ugly manifestations of nation and nationalism. The rampant growths of neocolonialism, racial aggression, cultural chauvinism, xenophobia, fundamentalism, terrorism, and sectarianism make the world a highly dangerous place for living. Moreover, we are in an age of Anthropocene, which means that the human agency has become the dominant force to modify the earth's ecosystem with enormous rapidity. The issues of extinction, species loss, deforestation, pollution, global warming, climate change, environmental hazards pose



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serious threats to mankind today. The worldwide spread of Covid-19 brings to the fore the issue of environmental degradation. The pandemic about to erupt is not only the issues of climate change, destruction of ecosystems, and other environmental problems, but it shows the dangerous signs of the disturbances of the international relationships, particularly the relationship between China and America. The virus would, one might hope, come under control in near future; but the virus of intolerance, racial hatred, cultural chauvinism that the people today carry within them may cause even more deadly destruction than the Covid-19. Under such circumstances, it is imperative to re-read Tagore for an understanding of the problems related to nation and nature for a better understanding and solution to the problems, for the betterment of mankind.

Notes

1. According to Sudipta Kaviraj, Bhudev Mukhopadhyaya (1827-1894), an intellectual from Calcutta, was the first to propose this idea.
2. The phrase, used by Partha Chatterjee in his work *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?*, has now obtained critical currency.
3. Ashis Nandy uses the phrase in *The Illegitimacy of Nationalism: Rabindranath Tagore and the Politics of Self* (Oxford University Press, 1994), p. vii.
4. Rabindranath Tagore, "Pilgrimage to India" ("Bharat-Tirtha"), translated by Sukanta Chaudhuri in *Rabindranath Tagore: Selected Poems*, edited by Sukanta Chaudhuri, p. 200.
5. The term was introduced by Ursula K. Heise in her book *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet* (2008).

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