

Chapter 2

Rethinking Tagore on the Antinomies of Nationalism

Sabyasachi Bhattacharya

In our endeavour to understand Rabindranath Tagore's approach to nationalism, we have to recognize three problems which probably hamper the current discourse on the subject.¹ To begin with, a good deal of these commentaries on Tagore is often *unhistorical* in assuming homogeneity in Tagore's thoughts on nationalism, although from the 1890s to 1941 they evolved and changed considerably. Unless we follow this evolution and identify the different stages, his best-known work, *Nationalism* (1917), is likely to be mistaken for the sum and substance of his thoughts on nationalism.

The second problem is that many commentators, as we shall see later, have *cast into a stereotype* of 'internationalism' Tagore's ideas about nationalism. When he wrote his major work on *Nationalism* in 1917 (commonly used by scholars since that is easily accessible in English), there were various concepts of internationalism (e.g. President Wilson's version, the creed of the incipient League of Nations, internationalism of the British Pacifists and even Japan's own version of internationalism which was actually a rationalization of Japanese imperialism). Tagore has been interpreted in terms of these stereotypes current in the world of politics. We need to examine whether these stereotypes appropriately accommodate the individuality of Tagore's concept of nationalism. The same caveat applies to the efforts of recent scholars like Michael Collins (2013) or Ashis Nandy (1994) who try to

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S. Bhattacharya (✉)

Department of History, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India
e-mail: bhattacharya.sabyasachi@gmail.com

S. Bhattacharya

Ministry of Culture, Government of India, New Delhi, India

assimilate Tagore's thoughts into their own version of 'post-coloniality' or 'anti-modernism'.

Thirdly, the textual study of Tagore's political writings proves to be insufficient without familiarity with the context in which he wrote, including obscure journalistic writings in those times. The fact is that even textual study, limited as it is, is hampered by the fact that not more than about one-tenth of his political writings are available in English. However, in this presentation, I will draw mainly from his works published in English. I thought that would be appropriate because those sources are accessible to all the scholars present at this conference. I have already published (2011b) elsewhere an attempt to outline his political thinking, including what he wrote in Bengali, and I may occasionally cite in the following pages some of those writings when empirical evidence seems necessary in support of my argument in this essay.

Text and Context

'The significance of a piece of writing cannot be understood if one views it in isolation, de-linked from the context in which it was written'. Tagore wrote thus in 1929 in critical response to a book on *The Political Philosophy of Rabindranath* by Sachin Sen, a prominent journalist of those times (Tagore 1929, pp. 337–338). Tagore went on to say: 'It is appropriate to view in a historical way the evolution of the writings of a man who has been writing for a long time....It needs to be taken into account that a set of political ideas did not emerge from my mind at a particular time—they developed in response to life experience and evolved over the years' (Tagore 1929, pp. 337–338). It may be useful to bear in mind this caution from Tagore against generalizing too far on the basis of one or two texts like *Nationalism* (1917) and to present a reductionist representation of Tagore.

One can broadly distinguish several distinct stages in the evolution of Tagore's approach to nationalism. It will suffice for the present if we briefly look at the different phases. Between 1890 (when he first wrote a distinctly political essay) and 1904, his writings were in line with contemporary nationalist discourse in the incipient public sphere in colonial India. What he said for instance in his strident protest against the Sedition Bill of 1898 (*Kantha-rodh*, i.e. 'On Being Throttled', 1898) and the wasteful extravagance of the contemplated Delhi Durbar (*Atyukti*, 1902)—was not unlike the average nationalist writings by Indian public men of those times. However, at the same time, a departure was also signalled in his formulation of a concept of a syncretic civilization in India (*Bharatvarsha*, 1902)—a concept which was not then a part of the creed commonly held by the nationalist intelligentsia. The second phase, 1904–1907, saw Tagore's participation in the Swadeshi agitation against the Partition of Bengal. One departure from the position of other nationalist spokesmen in Bengal at that time was Tagore's emphasis on the need to push beyond efforts to attract the British Indian government's attention, in order to develop a social reconstruction programme (*Swadeshi Samaj*, 1904) so as to attain 'self-empowerment' (*Atma Shakti*, 1905). In the third phase roughly from

1907 to 1916, Tagore became critical of the inadequacy of the militant nationalist or the *biplabi* ideology and more generally the nationalist programme of action (*Path o Patheya*, 1908). It is well known that this became a major theme in Tagore's creative writings as well, e.g. the novel *The Home and the World* (*Ghare Baire*, 1916) and later in *Four Chapters* (*Char Adhyaya*, 1934). The outbreak of the First World War deeply impacted Tagore's mind. In 1917, publication of his lectures in Japan and USA on aggrandizing nationalism leading to the World War marked a new phase. Tagore's writings in this phase are widely known because a good deal of it was written by him in English. That phase comes to an end in the late 1920s when Tagore's attention focused not so much on the evils of European nationalism, but on the fault lines in the nationhood of the Indian people. While he had spoken of the problem of Hindu-Muslim relationship and the subordination of the backward castes in his earlier writings, Tagore's thoughts on nationalism dwell on communalism and casteism more than ever in the 1930s, the last decade of his life. Commonly, Tagore's critique of nationalism from 1917 onwards monopolizes scholarly attention, but Tagore's anti-communal and anti-casteist position merits equal attention.

Many of these ideational tensions in Tagore's thoughts, on the antinomies of nationalism, appear to move towards a resolution in Tagore's approach in the last years of his life in the ideas he expounded in his Hibbert Lectures at Oxford, *The Religion of Man* (1931), in his political essays in Bengali in the late 1920s and the 1930s (*Kalantar*, 1934) and in his last public statement at Santiniketan in 1941, *Crisis in Civilization*. Perhaps we can surmise that he postulated *the resolution of the antinomies of nationalism in a philosophy of humanist universalism*.

Tagore's intellectual evolution, evident even in this very brief overview, is often out of sight in the contemporary discourse on his political thought. Michael Collins, in his recent work of 2013 on the political ideas of Tagore, writes: 'Tagore was a pioneer of the idea that anti-colonialism should take the form of a non-instrumental rejuvenation of society and religion, and hence his position stood in contradistinction to a straight forward dialectic between colonialism and nationalism' (Collins 2013: 'Introduction'). While Collins is right in underlining the originality of Tagore's views on society, it is not clear how it follows that Tagore's position was contrary to a dialectic between colonialism and nationalism in India. Arguably, what Tagore wrote suggests that he recognized a contradistinction between anti-imperialism and nationalism; that cannot be reduced to the denial of 'dialectics between colonialism and nationalism'. There appears to be an effort in the post-colonial school of thought to bring Tagore into the post-colonial fold. The view that Tagore was 'anti-nationalist' is common today; it is the consequence of dependence on a handful of his writings, chiefly *Nationalism* (1917), a reductionist reading of Tagore's writings, and lack of awareness of the different stages of the evolution of his thoughts on nationalism. Further, it is also the consequence of the fact that the large corpus of his political writings before the publication of *Nationalism* (1917), as well as a great deal thereafter, was in Bengali and not available in English translation (This may be part of the problem with Dr. Collins' work; indeed, his publisher declares that the book is an interpretation of 'Tagore's English language writings').

Reductionism in another form is perhaps in evidence in an otherwise insightful commentary on Tagore by Ashis Nandy (1994). For Nandy, Tagore was one of those who sought an alternative to nationalism which was free of the taint of ‘any Enlightenment concept of freedom’ and upheld a ‘distinctively civilizational concept of nationalism embedded in the tolerance encoded in various traditional ways of life in a highly diverse plural society’ (Nandy 1994, pp. x–xi). Thus, Nandy finds in Tagore an indigenist anti-modernist faithful to tolerance encoded, embedded, etc., in tradition. Sumit Sarkar has commented: ‘what I find difficult to accept is the attempt to assimilate Rabindranath—despite the well-known debates with Gandhi—into Nandy’s own favorite kind of anti-modernism’ (Sarkar 2008, p. 117). Here, Sarkar’s criticism is perfectly valid. Perhaps, the basic problem is that the representation of Tagore in terms of stereotypes of post-colonial or anti-modernist thought is inadequate. Tagore himself complained of that sort of reductionism in 1929 in an essay I cited earlier, his critique of the first book on his political thought written by Sachin Sen. Amartya Sen is probably right in arguing that Tagore’s was a ‘dual attitude to nationalism’; Sen points to Tagore’s admiration for Japan’s nationalism, giving her ‘self-respect’, in the early stage of her rise after Meiji Restoration, as well as his strong condemnation of the same nationalist inspiration leading to purblind ‘patriotism’ (Sen 1997: ‘Foreword’). Other commentators have usually focused upon one or the other end of the duality and essentialized Tagore’s message. E.P. Thompson, in editing Tagore’s *Nationalism* in 1991, seems to have been aware of that, as were Martin Kampchen (1991), Stephen Hay (1970) and Sujit Mukherjee (1964) in evaluating Tagore’s relationship with the Western world, but their agenda did not extend to a historical overview of Tagore’s approach to nationalism.

Even if we remain sceptical of the representation of Tagore as anti-modern, post-colonialist in spirit, etc., and even if we recognize that his critique of nationalism of 1917 was one of several phases of his intellectual life, one basic question remains: Were there through the various phases of that evolution some constant postulates? I shall argue that Tagore did indeed posit some *ideas about the antinomies of nationalism which by and large remained constant* through his entire intellectual life, and thus the break from the nationalist phase (prior to and during the anti-partition Swadeshi Movement) to what is generally perceived as an ‘anti-nationalist’ phase (signalized by the publication of *Nationalism* in 1917), and further changes thereafter till the 1930s, admit of explanation in terms of these constant postulates. In fact, Tagore himself raised this issue in 1929 when he wrote a review of a book on his political thought which I have mentioned earlier. Tagore suggested that notwithstanding changes in his approach over the decades, in response to historical contexts, there were some ideas constantly present and imparting unity to his political thoughts as a whole. ‘In the story of evolution through changes in outlook, there is beyond doubt a unity. We need to recover that unifying thread (*aikya-sutra*)...’ (Tagore 1929, p. 338).

The Tagorean Antinomies

In reflecting upon the nation-state of the West and other state forms, Tagore postulated an *antinomy between state and society*. This trend of thought originated in his critique of the political programme of the nationalist leadership at the turn of the century.

In his writings at the turn of the century, Tagore upheld the ideal of self-empowerment (*atmasakti*) as opposed to the nationalist leaders' stratagems of negotiating with the colonial state in different registers ranging from appeals to the good will of the government to, at the other end, protests against the acts of commission or omission of the government. Tagore proposed a *paradigm shift from state-centred thinking to a focus on indigenous society*. Indian society, he proposed, would be the agency of self-empowerment or development of *atmasakti*.

He expounded his views on this over and over again in many political essays for three decades, but he cited often the essay he wrote in 1904 entitled *Swadeshi Samaj* (Tagore 1986, vol. II, pp. 625–641). He counterposed the society and the state and argued that in India the society (*samaj*) was at the core of her civilization and way of life, while in Europe it was the state. 'Different civilizations have their vital forces (*prana-shakti*) in different sites', and in the European nation-state, the affairs of the state were that site, while in India, regardless of the changes in the state system, for centuries India's society had guided and protected people's way of life and provided continuity, till British rule intervened. To rebuild India despite colonial rule, India must look to her society rather than try to obtain concessions from the colonial state or replace that state with another in imitation of the European nation-state.

In upholding 'society' or in *samaj* as the ideal as opposed to the state, Tagore took a position close to philosophical anarchism, and indeed, it has often been said that this resembles Gandhi's anti-statism. As in Gandhi's thoughts, Tagore perceived an *antithesis between two organizing principles in human society, competition and cooperation*. In *Nationalism* (1917), Tagore expounded this idea: 'Let our civilization take its firm stand upon its basis of social cooperation and not upon that of economic exploitation and conflict' since at the core of human civilization there is 'the spirit of cooperation'.

[F]rom the beginning of history men had to choose between fighting one another, and combining, between their own interest or the common interest of allThe most important fact of the present age is that ...we are confronted with two alternatives. The problem is whether the different groups of people shall go on fighting one another, or find out some true basis of reconciliation and mutual help; whether it will be interminable competition or cooperation. (Tagore 1996a, p. 454)

That contraposition between cooperation and competition was, of course, at a philosophical level, its *historical manifestation was perceived by Tagore as the conflict between the humanist core of all civilizations* (including that of the West) and the *aggrandizing agenda of the nation-state* (as in Europe or in Japan). Tagore

claimed in this context, somewhat debatably in my opinion, a uniqueness of Indian civilization.

India has never had a real sense of nationalism. Even though from childhood I had been taught that the idolatry of Nation is almost better than reverence for God and humanity, I believe I have outgrown that teaching, and it is my conviction that my countrymen will gain truly their India by fighting against that education which teaches them that a country is greater than the ideals of humanity. (Tagore 1996a, p. 456)

Tagore often uses the metaphor of the machine to describe the nation-state, implicitly attributing to society an organismic character. Man in the nation-state surrenders to the ‘machine which is the creation of his intellect and not of his complete moral personality’ (Tagore 1996a, p. 458). Or again, he writes: Is it inevitable that India must turn into a Nation of the European model and accept and internalize ‘the machine....[and] the dead rhythm of wheels and counter wheels? That machine must be pitted against machine, and nation against nation’? (Tagore 1996a, p. 430).

In this denunciation of nationalism, one thing is important to note, for that is often forgotten. Tagore does *not* deny the humanist values inherent in European civilization since the Enlightenment. He saw a *conflict between ‘the spirit of the West and Nation of the West’* (Tagore 1996a, p. 425). Though nationalism had transformed Europe in the twentieth century into a ‘Civilization of Power’, there was a core of inherent humanistic values. ‘We cannot but acknowledge this paradox that while the spirit of the West marches under its banner of freedom, the Nation of the West forges its iron chains of organization’ (Tagore 1996a, p. 427).

Those chains bound India, while in Japan the people voluntarily wore their chains and were ready to ‘turn themselves into a machine of power, called the Nation’ (Tagore 1996a, p. 428).

Contrary to Ashis Nandy’s contention, Tagore held in high regard Europe’s Enlightenment tradition and the consequent moral personality of Europe. In 1917, he wrote:

Europe has been teaching us the higher obligations of public good above those of the family and the clan, and the sacredness of law, which makes society independent of individual caprice, secures for it continuity of progress, and guarantees justice to all men of all positions in life. Above all things Europe has held high before our minds the banner of liberty, through centuries of martyrdom and achievement, — liberty of conscience, liberty of thought and action, liberty in the ideals of art and literature. (Tagore 1996a, p. 451)

Tagore retained his regard for that European humanist tradition, though he rued its debasement in the twentieth century in the form of nationalist imperialism. For instance, in his tract entitled *Kalantar* in 1933, he recalled how in the nineteenth century Europe attracted the admiration of the best Indian minds.

We saw an endeavor to undo the wrongs human beings had suffered, we heard in political thought the idea of unshackling mankind, we saw efforts to stop commerce in human beings [as slaves]. We must acknowledge that there was much that was new in these ideas. Till then we [in India] were accustomed to accept that some human beings must accept denial of

certain right because of birth into certain caste or the destiny of *karma* in previous birth... (Tagore 1937b, pp. 17–18)

Tagore recalled that from the French Revolution to the abolition of slavery, the West was inspired by human values, and then, he looks at the reversal of that trend and mentions in that context of the Opium Wars in China, the domination acquired over Persia, the inhuman aspects of colonial rule in Congo, a minority's stranglehold over the majority in Ireland, and finally the rise of Fascism.

Again in 1937, in his convocation address to the University of Calcutta:

Europe has provided the world with the gifts of a great culture – had it not the power to do so, it would never have attained its supremacy. It has given the example of dauntless courage, ungrudging self-sacrifice, it has shown tireless energy in the acquisition and spread of knowledge, in the making of institutions for human welfare.

... Even in these days of its self-abasement, there are still before us its true representatives who are ready to suffer punishment in their fearless protest against its iniquities, in their chivalrous championship of its victims ... that inspiration is the truth dwelling in the heart of Western civilization. (Tagore 1937a, p. 13)

In 1941, in *Crisis of Civilization*, we find Tagore declaring that there were remnants of that great tradition in Europe (Tagore 1996b, pp. 722–726). On the one hand, 'British statesmen acquiesced in the destruction of the Spanish Republic', but 'we also noted with admiration how a small band of valiant Englishmen had laid down their lives for Spain'. Despite his 'loss of faith in the claim of Europe to civilization', Tagore looked to men like Charles Andrews to salvage 'the prospect of Western civilization' (Tagore 1996b, pp. 722–726). Thus, Tagore pays his tribute to ideals which Europe had upheld earlier, though these statements were against the grain of his denunciation of Europe in the twentieth century in the rest of his speech; the point was again the antithesis between those ideals and the debasement twentieth-century Europe had undergone.

Thus, Tagore saw an antithesis between Europe's humanist tradition and the debasement of that in twentieth-century Europe's aggrandizing nationalism. Similarly, he saw an *antithesis between the human values which at one time inspired India* to build bridges across ethnic and religious diversity and on the other hand the *intolerance and divisive outlook that prevailed in India as he perceived it in his times*. For the present, we are not concerned with the veracity of his somewhat essentialized representation of pre-modern Indian civilization. Our object is to identify the basic categories of thought, the antinomy which drove his argument about nationalism. Modern India's claim to nationhood was fundamentally flawed for she had failed to retain the unifying spirits which kept diverse peoples together for countries and had allowed conflicts between faiths and caste division to countervail that spirit. Tagore provides in 1902 an idealist description of that spirit in a seminal essay, *Bharatvarsher Itihas* (the history of India). This is, in my opinion, the first statement of the idea of India as a syncretic civilization, accommodating plurality and diversity, the idea which became a part of the nationalist creed in later times. (It was popularized by Jawaharlal Nehru in *The Discovery of*

India, published in 1946, and soon after, it was written into the constitution of the Indian Republic.)

We can see that the aim of Bharatvarsha has always been to establish unity amidst differences [or diversities], to bring to a convergence different paths, and to internalize within her soul the unity of the severalty, that is to say to comprehend the inner union between externally perceptible differences without eliminating the uniqueness of each element.... Bharatvarsha has endeavored to tie up diversities in a relationship.Bharatvarsha limited the conflict between opposing and competing elements in society by keeping them separate and at same time engaged in a common task that brought diverse elements together... (Tagore 1902, pp. 10–11; also see Bhattacharya 2011a, pp. 70–71)

Having said that about the unifying spirit in 1902, for the next four decades, Tagore wrote profusely and repeatedly about the contrary reality he saw around him in the divisive spirit in casteism and communalism, impeding the construction of nationhood by the nationalist elite.

In 1917 in his critique of nationalism Tagore writes:

We never dream of blaming our social inadequacy as the origin of our present helplessness, for we have accepted as the creed of our nationalism that this social system has been perfected for all time to come by our ancestors....This is the reason why we think that our one task is to build a political miracle of freedom upon the quicksand of social slavery.... When we talk of Western Nationality we forget that the nations there do not have that physical repulsion, one for the other, that we have between different castes.... And can we ever hope that these moral barriers against our race amalgamation will not stand in the way of our political unity? (Tagore 1996a, pp. 462, 463)

In 1922, again on that theme, Tagore believed that although India at one time welcomed all peoples and cultures, from the middle ages when Brahminism acquired a centrality, Hinduism built for itself

... a system of barriers. Its nature was to forbid and to exclude. The world never saw such a neatly constructed system against assimilation of any kind. This is not a barrier only between Hindus and Muslims. People like you and me who want freedom in conducting our life are also impeded and imprisoned. (Tagore 1922, p. 313)

In 1926, once again, Tagore recalls his own life experience and writes that the Hindu elite in Bengal were to pay a price for the way they had for years and years treated the Muslims, subjected them to social exclusion and rolled up their carpet lest the Muslims—often Muslim tenants of the Hindu *zamindar* (landowner)—should sit on it.

There comes a day when we are fighting the British Government and now we call upon them and say, “We are Brothers, you must make sacrifices like us, you must be ready for prison or even death”. And then we see on the other side red fez caps and hear the words “We are different”. We say with surprise what is the problem, are you not with us in national matters? (Tagore 1926, p. 319)²

²This essay was written a few days after the assassination of Sraddhananda. Swami Sraddhananda (1855–1926) was a prominent leader of the Arya Samaj who joined the Indian National Congress and also led what was called the shuddhi movement, i.e. the reconversion of low caste Hindus who

In 1931, Tagore reiterated the same point and insightfully equated casteist divisiveness with communalism.

Clannish exclusiveness has entered the bones of our social practices, and yet we are surprised when in politics we fail in our effort to include some people. It has been reported that these days in some places the Namashudras, without compunction, joined the Muslims in the anti-Hindu disturbances. Should we not stop and think why they were lacking in sympathy, why this denial of affinity? (Tagore 1922, pp. 326–327)³

The theme of politics of exclusion arising out of casteism and communalism was the major theme in Tagore's writings from 1926 onwards. And that trend was counterposed by him against the unifying spirit and syncretism which inspired India's civilization, as he conceived it from 1902 onwards.

Tagore's Notion of Nation

There are three interesting issues which we might address now. The first: In using the term 'nation', did Tagore mean the *state* or the *community* of people usually imagined as a nation? *The Times Literary Supplement* in a review of *Nationalism* said: 'In Sir Rabindranath's arraignment of the idea of the nation some misapprehension may be caused by his using the term 'nation' instead of the term 'state'. It is the state which, according to the German definition, is an organization for the purposes of power....What constitutes a nation is not organization as a single state (although in certain cases nation and state coincide), but a single tradition expressed in a common language, a common literature, a common body of customs and memories of things done or suffered together' (quoted in Dutta and Robinson 1997, p. 189). Leaving aside the school masterly lecture on definitions, the *TLS* reviewer did raise an interesting question, as does E.P. Thompson when he says that in Tagore's *Nationalism* 'for nationalism we might often read "imperialism"'. Tagore commented on the *TLS* review in a letter to his friend William Rothenstein: 'I suppose it is one of those words whose meaning is still in its process of formation....In human language there are very few words which have an absolute meaning' (Dutta and Robinson 1997, p. 188).⁴ He went on to say that nationalism in Europe is based upon 'the idea of competition, conflict and conquest and not that of cooperation', and 'it seems to me that the word nation in its meaning carries a special emphasis upon its political character.... And the people with an aggressively emphatic politics is a nation'. These remarks from Tagore to Rothenstein, as well as the text of *Nationalism* (1917), suggest that Tagore used the terms 'nation' and

(Footnote 2 continued)

had converted to the Islamic faith—a movement which was naturally bitterly opposed by many leaders of the Muslim community.

³For a more detailed discussion, see Bhattacharya (2014, Chap. 3).

⁴Tagore to W. Rothenstein, 26 October 1917.

‘nationalism’ to connote attitude of mind, and a people collectively sharing that attitude, as well as the nation-state which is motivated by that attitude and assumes agency on behalf of the people. More often than not, he seems to be talking of the latter, the nation-state. Although this was not satisfactory in terms of terminological precision, perhaps Tagore’s intention was to suggest the interconnectedness of these phenomena.

Ideological Dissent and Participation in the Freedom Movement

It is perhaps necessary to raise the question whether ideological differences from the mainstream of nationalist politics in certain phases alienated Tagore as a public intellectual from the freedom struggle of the Indian people. A disproportionate emphasis in some scholarly writings on his critique in *Nationalism* (1917) and a simplistic representation of Tagore as ‘anti-nationalist’ may create an altogether wrong impression in this regard. I think it will be more accurate to say that although he maintained his independent position on many issues, such as the failure of the nationalist political leadership to develop a constructive social programme (1904), the ineffectiveness of *biplabi* or militant nationalist strategy (1908), the dangers of nationalist chauvinism (1917), the limitations of the Gandhian Congress’s programme focusing on the *charkha* and boycott (1921, 1926), the failure of the nationalist political leadership to address the communal issue (1930s) and the infighting among the top leaders of the Congress (1938–39), Tagore remained a participant in the independence movement in the role of a public intellectual, as a critic from within. Since I have tried elsewhere to offer a historical account of his complex relationship with the nationalist movement in detail (Bhattacharya 2011b), I will only provide here a brief outline.

In the early days, this relationship was tenuous, but his first major public speech in 1893 (with Bankim Chandra Chatterjee in the chair) was definitely nationalistic in tone. In 1896, he rendered the song ‘Vande Mataram’ at a reception accorded to the Indian National Congress delegates at the Tagore family residence. In 1897, he set up a Swadeshi Bhandar to promote handicraft near his residence in Calcutta. In 1898, he was one of the nationalist spokesmen selected to speak on the Sedition Bill at a meeting in the Calcutta Town Hall. Between 1894 and 1908, he was the editor of literary journals, *Sadhana*, *Bharati* and *Bangadarshana*, which carried occasional political articles by Tagore and others. In these years, his journalistic writings included about thirty-five major political essays; some of these were republished in book form under the titles *Atma-sakti*, *Bharatvarsha*, *Raja-Proja* and *Patheya*, all published between 1893 and 1908. Tagore’s role in the Swadeshi Anti-Partition agitation in Bengal in 1905–1907 is well known. From 1908, Tagore’s writings suggest that he was disillusioned with the potentials of the *biplabi* or militant nationalist wave which swept all before it for a while in Bengal. Tagore immersed

himself in the task of building his *ashram* he had founded in Santiniketan earlier and in writing the so-called spiritual poems, later to be translated into fame in *Gitanjali* (1912). Tagore's long friendship with Gandhi begins in 1914 when Gandhi meets him at Santiniketan along with his Phoenix Ashram students from South Africa.

The impact of the outbreak of the First World War on Tagore's mind is evident in his speeches in Japan and USA in 1916–17, collected in *Nationalism* (1917). His rhetoric, his denunciation of the aggrandizing nation-states of Europe, did not make him very popular in North America and England for the World War was on, his book sales and royalty fell drastically but he continued to maintain his position and cancelled his lecture tours. About this time, he issued a strong protest statement against the arrest of the nationalist leader Annie Besant in the middle of 1917—which made him a political suspect under the surveillance of the Intelligence Department of the Indian Government. It seems that the nationalist leadership continued to value his support, e.g. we find C.R. Das, Bipin Chandra Pal and Fazlul Haq trying hard to persuade him to the president of Calcutta Congress session Reception Committee in 1917, which he declined, but he attended that session. Needless to say, his most celebrated action was the letter to Viceroy Chelmsford on 29 May 1919 renouncing his Knighthood in protest against the government's atrocities in Punjab, including the Jallianwala Bagh massacre. From then onwards, Gandhi and Tagore became close friends—and adversaries in debates on national issues in *Young India* and *Harijan* and the *Modern Review*, as well as in private correspondence (Bhattacharya 2012).

In the last years of his life, Tagore's support and public intervention were sought by nationalist leadership repeatedly and Tagore on his own often intervened. In December 1930, the nationalist leaders, assembled in London at the Round Table Conference convened by the British Government, invite him to a discussion. In June 1931, Tagore publicly felicitates the political prisoners at Buxar jail in return for their greetings to him on his seventieth birthday. In September 1931, he joins political leaders of Bengal in denouncing the incident of jail officials firing upon political prisoners at Hijli jail. In January 1932, he writes a letter of protest regarding imprisonment of Gandhi to Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald. Tagore expresses his anxiety about the political consequences of the Poona pact in January 1933. In January 1934, Tagore engages in a famous debate with Gandhi to question his statement that the Bihar earthquake which took thousands of lives was divine punishment for the sins of casteism. In July 1936, Tagore issues press statements against MacDonald's Communal Award. In August 1937, he presides over a meeting in Calcutta to express public sympathy with Andaman prisoners then on hunger strike. In October 1937, he is invited by the AICC to discussions with Congress leaders, and a few months later, he meets Gandhi again in Calcutta to step up efforts to obtain the release of nationalist political prisoners. He is deeply disturbed by the conflicts within the Congress in 1938–39, and in February 1939, he tries to bring about reconciliation between Nehru and Subhas Chandra Bose, though that proved to be impossible. After that, Tagore's interaction with nationalist leadership attenuates and the few political statements he made were not issued by

him from a political platform. The most memorable of these statements was his last public speech, a forthright critique of imperialism, shortly before his death, later published as *Crisis in Civilization* (1941).

It will be evident from this account that Tagore, notwithstanding his critique of nationalism and despite having been away from the centre of the stage in the independence movement, played his role as a public intellectual whatever might have been his reservations about the conventional ‘nationalist’ creed derived from European exemplars.

‘Faith in Man’?

One final question about the Tagorean antinomies. Did Tagore perceive the possibility of a resolution of the antitheses he posited—such as that between cooperation and competition, between interdependent mutuality in relationships and conflictual relationship, between the organic unity of men in society as opposed to the machine of power man builds in the nation-state, and between the humanist tradition and nationalist aggrandizement in his times? It is probable that he did see such a possibility and hence the quite unexpected conclusion of his last public statement, *Crisis in Civilization*. Contrary to the spirit of the entire speech, he ended with the words: ‘I see the crumbling ruins of a proud civilization strewn like a vast heap of futility. And yet I shall not lose faith in Man’. What was the basis of this faith?

We can only surmise that this faith was founded on the universalist humanism he spoke of in his Hibbert Lectures at Oxford in 1930, published as *The Religion of Man* (1931), and elaboration of ideas there in another set of lectures published under the title *Man* (1933). These lectures are in a spiritual vein, and I do not claim to understand a good deal of what he says. These writings do not directly address the political themes, but in extending Tagore’s earlier ideas, the antinomies he postulated, these later writings elevate the older issues to a higher ethical level. ‘The conflict of “It is” with “It ought to be” has raged from the beginnings of human history. In discussing the reasons of this conflict I have said that in the mind of man there is on the one hand *the Universal Man* and on the other the *animal man* limited by his self-seeking’ (Tagore 1996c, p. 209). Man is impelled from within—and here, we have shades of Immanuel Kant and the categorical imperative—to recognize what is good and true. A ‘religion of man’ is conceivable because ‘all men have honoured the reality of the good’ despite ‘differences of opinion on the ideal of the good’ in different countries and times and individuals. ‘There are men who lead a “life of self-seeking”, but one also sees “man who dedicates his life for Truth, for the good of his country and for the good of man”, and “transcends his self-interest”’. Contrary to a strong Indian tradition, Tagore is not concerned with sages outside of society, but with man in human community. He uses the analogy of cells forming living organisms to say that human community is bound in interdependence like the cells; man finds ‘his own larger and truer self in his wide human relationship’, in his

unity with the humankind, and that inherent interdependence demands that man should cultivate the spirit of cooperation (Tagore 1996d, p. 88). These philosophical musings help us understand why Tagore's last words in his last public speech ends with an assertion that in 'the spirit of service and sacrifice' he saw salvation in the conflict-ridden world he was leaving behind. 'A day will come when unvanquished Man will... win back his lost human heritage'.

In Conclusion

I have tried to offer some analytical constructs, a set of antinomies which I see in Tagore's writings, in place of a chronological narration of what he wrote—which is also a perfectly valid approach. Arguably, his construal of the past and of his own times is open to question, e.g. the idealization of pre-modern Indian civilization as free of domination and conflict, the generalizations about the freedoms inherent in the humanist tradition in the European polity before the rise of imperialism, the exaggeration involved in attributing centrality to the state in Europe and the society in ancient India or the suspension of reasoning that may be required if his declaration of his 'faith in Man' is read as a prognosis of the future. It is possible to question and criticize all of these propositions. But the object here was not to examine the veracity of such statements but to try to understand some basic categories of thought in Tagore's writings over many years and to search in his evolving ideas about nationalism the inner unity and continuity. My purpose will have been served if this effort to identify the basic antinomies in his writings leads to further research rethinking about Rabindranath Tagore and his recurrent theme, nationalism.

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