

## Rabindranath's Nationalist Thought: A Retrospect\*

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**Abstract :** *Tagore's anti-absolutist and anti-statist stand is predicated primarily on his vision of global peace and concord—a world of different peoples and cultures united by amity and humanity. While this grand vision of a brave new world is laudable, it is, nevertheless, constructed on misunderstanding and misreading of history and of the role of the nation state in the West since its rise sometime during the late medieval and early modern times. Tagore views state as an artificial mechanism, indeed a machine that thrives on coercion, conflict, and terror by subverting people's freedom and culture. This paper seeks to argue that the state also played historically a significant role in enhancing and enriching culture and civilization. His view of an ideal human society is sublime, but by the same token, somewhat ahistorical and anti-modern.,*

**Keywords:** Anarchism, *Babu*, Bengal Renaissance, *deshaprem* [patriotism], *bishwajiban* [universal life], *Gessellschaft*, *Gemeinschaft*, *jatiyatabad* [nationalism], *rastra* [state], romantic, *samaj* [society], *swadeshi* [indigenous]

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## Introduction

On January 1, 1877, a charismatic and well-cultivated Calcutta aristocrat of superlative charm, Raja Sourindramohan Tagore (1840-1914), a distinguished musicologist, celebrated Queen Victoria's (1837-1901) assumption of the title "Empress of India" (declared on January 1, 1877 in Delhi by the Viceroy Lord Robert Lytton, r. 1876-80) at his home hailing Her Imperial Majesty in a song composed and tuned by himself:

*Jai, jai, rajarajeshwarir jai!*  
*Aji re Bangarajya atul anandamay!*  
[Victory! Victory! Victory!—  
Success to our Empress!—  
To-day is a day of perfect joy  
For thee, O Land of Bengal]!<sup>1</sup>

Recalling the same occasion a month later, Sourindramohan's kin the handsome precocious genius, the teenager Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), defiantly struck a discordant note of protest:

*British bijay kariya ghosana*  
*Ar ye gai gak, amra gabo na,*  
*Amra gabo na harasa gan,*  
*Eso go amra ye kajan achhi*  
*Amra dharibo arek tan.*

[Let anyone, who desires, Proclaim the triumph of the British, But the rest of us will not sing paeans to them, We shall start a different music].<sup>2</sup>

Rabindranath sang at the nationalist association *Hindu Mela* [Hindu Fair] organized by the so-called "National" Nabagopal Mitra (c. 1840-94). The sensitive youth was imbued with patriotic ideas sweeping the world of Bengali *bhadralok* [genteel class, somewhat akin to *effendiyya*]. In the previous year he had joined a secret organization called Sanjibani Sabha [Regeneration Society] founded by the Brahma intellectual Rajnarayan Basu (1826-99) and Rabindranath's elder brother Jyotirindranath (1849-1925) at an abandoned homestead in an obscure Calcutta lane. This society was modeled after the Italian secret political society *Carbonari* (named after the Italian charcoal-burners' brotherhood founded in 1808).<sup>3</sup> Rabindranath had also published in 1877 "Jhansir Rani," a biographical essay on the princess of Jhansi Laksmibai (1828-58), who died on June 18, 1858, fighting against the British force. His interest in ancient Indian history and culture and in the lives of heroic patriots could be seen in numerous stories, poems, and essays all published before his fortieth year.<sup>4</sup>

Less than a decade later, in 1884, in his adult youth, Rabindrababu, the blossoming Renaissance genius, recalled the achievements of his famous forbear Rammohan Ray (1772-1833), one of the earliest educated *babus* of colonial Calcutta and the first *uomo universale* [universal man], of the Bengal Renaissance:

*Rammohan Ray, aha, tumi yadi aj banchiya thakite. Tomake Bangadesher badai abashyak haiachhe. Amra bakpatu lok, amadigake tumi kaj karite shikhao. Amra atmambhari amadigake atmabisarjan dite shikhao. Amra laghuprakriti...amadigake atal thakite shikhao. Amra bahirer prakhar aloke andha, hridayer abhyantarstha chirojjwal aloker sahayye bhalomanda nirbachan karite o swadesher pakshe yaha mangal tahai abalamban karite shiksa dao.*

[O Rammohan Ray, how I wish you were with us today! Bengal needs you badly. We are all talkers, teach us how to be doers. We are self-centered, teach us self-denial. We are irresolute, teach us how remain steadfast in crisis by the strength of our character. We have been blinded by the glare of foreign shine, teach us how to discriminate between right and wrong with the enlightenment of our heart and choose that which is good for our country at all times].<sup>5</sup>

Rabindranath's invocation of Rammohan was not just a respectful remembrance of the founder of the Brahma Samaj to which Tagore belonged but a tacit approval of Ray's wonderful assimilation of Indian tradition—his Brahma belief essentialized the monism of Hindu Vedanta—and Western Christian *Weltanschauung*. Ray favored English education and opposed the establishment of Sanskrit College in Calcutta in 1823 and pleaded before the Parliamentary Select Committee in London for the increasing importation of British capital and technology.<sup>6</sup> And yet his Vedanta hermeneutic, highlighting the quintessential messages of pristine Hinduism, was so powerful and persuasive that it frightened the Christian missionaries of his day into thinking that “modern minds which had turned away from Hindu idolatry, would be attracted to Vedanta, and thereby prevented from accepting Christianity.”<sup>7</sup>

Tagore came to appreciate the salutary effects of Western contact as he grew older and as he had come to acquaint himself with Western thought through further study, reflection, and travel. In one of his essays in *Kalantar* [Fin de Siècle] published in 1937, the Nobel Laureate (1913) Rabindranath, famously called *Bishwakabi* [Poet Laureate of the World] by the Bengalis, made an unabashed admission in his mature old age:

*Manus hisebe ingrej raila musulmaner cheyeo amader kachh theke anek dure, kintu Europer chittadutrupe ingrej eta byapak o gabhirbhabe amader kachhe esechhe ye, ar kono bideshi ar konodin eman kare aste pareni.*

[As people the English, more than the Muslims, are vastly different and distant from us, but as Europe's intellectual ambassadors the English have come so close to us as no other foreigners did].<sup>8</sup>

And yet the poet retained his native pride till his dying day. Barely two months before death (August 7, 1941) the ailing octogenarian remonstrated in his response to Eleanor Rathbone's (1872-1946) open letter of indictment dated May 28, 1941 to the Indian nationalists:

It is not so much because the British are foreigners that they are unwelcome to us...as because while pretending to be trustees of our welfare they have betrayed the great trust and have sacrificed the happiness of millions in India to bloat the pockets of a few capitalists at home. I should have thought that the decent Britisher would at least keep silent at these wrongs and be grateful for our inaction, but that he should add insult to injury and pour salt over our wounds, passes all bounds of decency.<sup>9</sup>

The above documentation of Rabindranath's changing attitude to the colonial authorities notwithstanding, he was never impervious to the beneficent impact of Mughal India's contact with the West. He indeed was a supporter of India's independence but his priority lay in social upliftment of the people through education and cultural and economic freedom before they could aspire for political freedom. It must be recognized that the poet actually made a distinction between *deshaprem*, sentiment of

love of land, that is, patriotism, and *jatiyatabad*, nationalism, the ideological foundation of nation state.<sup>10</sup> The former is rooted in culture, the latter an import or implant from the West. He was a patriot *par excellence* but no nationalist. His patriotism called for true freedom of the people, freedom of the spirit as much as freedom from outside control.

On this score, Rabindranath remained an unabashed anglophile because of his admiration for British civilization. By the same token he found the colonial state a poison breathing Leviathan that must be tamed. He deemed nationalism narrow, divisive, violent, anti-culture, and anti-life, and thus his *deshaprem* dove-tailed into his personal ideal of *bishwajiban* [Universal Life], which ran athwart to the contemporary ideology of nationalism.<sup>11</sup> This paper anatomizes Rabindranath's concepts of nationalism and nation state and suggests that anti-statist and anti-nationalist outlook are imbricated in his conception of Universal Unity and Universal Life. This worldview colored his understanding of the rational and national role of the state both in India and in the West, including Great Britain. Nevertheless, this lacuna or bias does not devalue his grand vision of human life in a world of unity in diversity.

### Rabindranath's Ideas of Nation and Nation State

Tagore conflates nation with nation state or, just *state*, and appears to use an essentialized dichotomy of emotional community (*Gemeinschaft*) and rational community or civil society or state (*Gesellschaft*)<sup>12</sup> identifying the former with precolonial India and the latter with modern West in general and Great Britain in particular. Tagore's views on nationalism—arguably a Western theory and praxis—were predicated on his twin assumption that it is coercive at home and predatory in the world.<sup>13</sup> He considered it as “an applied science” and even compared it to “a hydraulic press, whose pressure is impersonal.” He preferred informal, even coercive but personal, government—feudal, monarchical, or imperial—and a deep distrust for impersonal and legalistic and structured authorities, however efficient. If both the personal and the national governments appear coercive, then, in estimation, the former is the handloom operated by human touch, while the latter the power loom—“relentlessly lifeless and accurate and monotonous.”<sup>14</sup> These two assumptions, based undoubtedly on his experience and disenchantment with the aggressive nationalist states of pre-War and inter-War Europe and the extremist nationalist agitations in India, resulted in a skewed understanding of the historical role of nationalism.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, his Romantic sensibilities—on his own admission he was spiritually as well as aesthetically influenced by some leading Romantic poets and thinkers of England—led him to formulate his notion of what he considered government by nations, that is, nation states.<sup>16</sup>

Then, Tagore misreads both Indian and English history in his nationalist critique. He believes that India never sought nationhood, its historical mission being assimilative, not adversarial. Ever since the settlement of Aryavarta by the Aryan invaders it encountered numerous other tribes over the centuries: the Hellenistic Greeks, Bactrians, Scythians, Kushanas (Yueh-Chi), Afghans, and the Mughals. All these conquerors were not “nations” but “human races” who were eventually absorbed in the diversity of cultures, customs, and peoples of the land. Thus pre-British India was a multicultural social organism pulsating with life, social interaction, cooperation, and a spirit of tolerance. With the British conquest, however, as Tagore writes, “we had to deal, not with kings, not human races, but with a nation—we, who are no nation ourselves.”<sup>17</sup>

We do know, however, that as early as the third century B.C.E., the Indian statesman and political theorist Kautilya (c. 350-275 BCE) had written elaborately about *rastra* [state] and *dandaniti* [the rule of the rod or the rule of law].<sup>18</sup> The imperial Mauryas (323-185 BCE) and Guptas (320-550 CE) had built up a massive state apparatus and rule of law. Hindu culture and civilization thrived under the protection of and patronage of the state. Moreover, “self-aggrandizement and self-assertion” are not the exclusive behavior of the nation states of Europe. Kautilya was unequivocal in his endorsement of a *vijigisu* [he

who wants to conquer] who aspires to become a *chakravarti* [universal ruler] or a *sarvabhauma* [world sovereign] or a *dominum omnium* [lord over all].<sup>19</sup>

Ironically, the historical experience of imperial Britain was almost similar to that of India. Celtic Britannia, a motley congeries of rival small kingdoms and chiefdoms, was conquered, colonized, and Latinized by imperial Rome in the first century. Thereafter, during the fourth through the sixth centuries, Romano-Celtic Britain was invaded by the continental Germanic tribes, who from the seventh century onward developed seven independent Anglo-Saxon states, the *Heptarchy*, until these coalesced in King Alfred's (r. 871-99) nation state of England. At the same time, this fledgling nation coexisted with another state, the Danelaw, in the northeastern and the southeastern parts of England—a state within a state created by mutual agreement between the Vikings and the Anglo-Saxons. This political coexistence resulted in cultural and ethnic commingling, a process that underwent further racial and cultural infusion from the Norman Conquest in the late eleventh century. The point to note is that despite their historical odyssey England did eventually emerge as a single nation state from the sixteenth century much like India from seventeenth under the imperial Mughals, albeit with a difference. The Islamic Mughals could never completely absorb the vast Hindu culture to forge a truly integrated nation. India's lack of nationhood thus was not caused by any consciously constructed anti-statist ideology or philosophy but by the exigencies of history.

At the same time we need to recall that the predatory Western states, their autocratic nature and structure notwithstanding, never repressed free thinking, open criticism of social or political abuses, innovation, and experiments of their peoples. On the other hand, such monumental cultural efflorescence as the Renaissance, Reformation, the Scientific Revolution, and above all, the Enlightenment, not only thrived under state patronage and support, but the humanists, reformers, scientists, and *philosophes* were protected from the reactionary, oppressive, and repressive religious institutions by their governments. Louis XIV, the absolutist Grand Monarch of France (r. 1643-1714), who is reported to have claimed "*l'état cest moi*" [I am the State], was a builder, an indefatigable workaholic, and a patron of arts and learning—in fact the Enlightenment movement was born during this time—even though he dissipated his country's resources in multiple military engagements toward the latter part of his long reign. Similarly, the rulers of Mughal India could boast a well-organized state with a sophisticated bureaucracy and a well-trained and-equipped army that sponsored and patronized some of the world's best architectural achievements, a flowering Indo-Persian culture that produced a refined court language, poetry, painting, music, religious and reformist movements (especially the Vaishnavism of Shrichaintanya [1486-1553] and Sikhism of Guru Nanak [1469-1539]), as well as elegant social manners and morals. Mughal India was an organized state that could never be considered as a quaint community or a *Gemeinschaft* of Tagore's imagination.

Tagore's emphasis on a self-regulated, self-sufficient, and egalitarian society of community and culture makes him a votary of Epicureanism on the one hand, and Anarchism on the other. Epicurus (341-270 BCE) enjoined avoidance of politics, war, and competition and a hassle-free life to obtain and maintain equipoise [*ataraxia*] with his celebrated admonition: "Not what we have but what we enjoy constitutes our abundance."<sup>20</sup> The nineteenth-century Anarchist Peter Kropotkin (1842-1921) envisioned a free society in which people entered into free agreements for their production and consumption with their belief that freedom of each was freedom for all.<sup>21</sup> Like Kropotkin, Tagore's vision of the ideal society in *Palli Prakriti* [Nature of the Village] is centered on the idyllic sylvan countryside and he laments the loss of the self-sufficient rural republics under the aegis of colonial administration. As he wrote: "Once the village community was alive, and the vital force of the society used to flow from it. It was the seat of all our education and culture, religion and rituals. The great soul of the country used to find its expansion and nourishment in the villages."<sup>22</sup> His Romantic yearning is elegantly expressed in "Janmantar" [Next Life]:

*Ami chhedei dite raji achhi susabhyatar alok*  
*Ami chaina hate nababanger nabayuger chalak.*  
*Ami nai ba gelam bilat*  
*Nai ba pelam rajar khilat—*  
*Yadi parajanme pai re hate brajer rakhal balak*  
*Taba nibiye deba nijer ghare susabhyatar alok.*  
[I'm ready to give up enlightened civilization.  
I don't wish to be a leader of modern Bengal.  
I may not visit England  
Nor receive a reward from the king.  
I would like to be a cowherd of Braja in my next life.  
I'll put out the light of civilization in my own home.<sup>23</sup>

Yet we note that Rabindranath is neither a starry-eyed indigenist nor a diehard xenophobe. In fact he is an unabashed admirer of the British as cultured and civilized people. "I have a deep love and a great respect for the British race as human beings. It has produced great-hearted men, thinkers of great thoughts, doers of great deeds....We have felt the greatness of this people as we feel the sun," he wrote.<sup>24</sup> He also admitted with disarming candor that Indians suffer tyrannical social restrictions, lack imagination, are intemperate in their habits, have been an easy prey to greed and manipulation.<sup>25</sup> He thus lent his unqualified support for English education that would liberate the Indians from superstition and intellectual stagnation.

### **Rabindranath's Ambivalent Attitudes to the West**

Rabindranath's ambivalent attitude to the West—respect for its intellectual accomplishments but revulsion for its crass materialism and stifling organizational structure and control—is not unique, but in fact quite in line with similar attitudes discernible in the West itself. Writers and thinkers such as Pierre J. Proudhon (1809-65), Karl Marx (1818-83), John Ruskin (1819-1900), and William Morris (1834-96) had warned against the disintegration of society and the degradation of human values under the impact of industrialization and mechanization. Such human protests against the inhuman behemoth of "progress" mandated from above fueled the social, political, and especially national, revolutions of the nineteenth and early twentieth century that sought to heal the disrupted social bonds, harmony, and equality and awakened a desire to restore love and respect between peoples.

The nationalist movements that Tagore witnessed or read about were triggered by stark disparity between Europe's powerful and resourceful states and those that were struggling to become nations and states. Those movements had been energized by an "awareness of shortcomings, a conviction of backwardness or inadequacy, and an anxiety to learn from the superior culture or nation, so as to emulate it and reach equality, to obtain recognition by peaceful means, or to extort it by violent ones."<sup>26</sup> The situation was the same in colonial India where, as Stanley Wolpert writes,

All Indians, whatever their religions, caste, or regional origins may have been, were immediately conscious of the "foreign" character of the white Christian *sahibs* who ruled their land, if they had any direct contact with these new rulers at all....The influx of missionaries, the funding of English education,

the opening of India to private trade, and the continuing process of British unification and modernization, served only to intensify Indian perceptions of their “native” differences, cultural, socioeconomic, and political, from the officials who ran the Company Raj.<sup>27</sup>

The passage cited above provides the context and part explanation of Rabindranath's attitude to the metropolitan masters of his country. However, Tagore never endorsed violent opposition to the British government. His youthful adversarial stance mellowed and matured during his adulthood. “I am not for thrusting off western civilization and becoming segregated in our independence. Let us have deep association,” he averred in his lectures in the US in 1916.<sup>28</sup> Quite naturally he disagreed with Mohandas Gandhi's (1869-1948) nationalist campaign of non-cooperation, boycott of British goods, and production of home-spun cloth [*khadi*] and faith in the spinning wheel [*charkha*]. His disagreement with Gandhi's political program was also based on a broader philosophical conception of global unity: “Let India stand for the *cooperation* of all peoples in the world. The spirit of rejection finds its support in the consciousness of separateness, the spirit of acceptance in the consciousness of unity.”<sup>29</sup> He opposed the aggressive Swadeshi (movement 1906-12) activist, the Cambridge educated Aurobindo Ghose (1872-1950), who had declared that “nationalism is immortal...because it is...God who is working in Bengal.”<sup>30</sup> Similarly he wrote a stern letter to the popular novelist and short story writer Sharatchandra Chattopadhyay (1876-1938) after having perused his blockbuster novel *Pather Dabi* [Rights of Passage, 1926] that it was sure to incite people's antipathy toward the government as well as cause its aggravation.<sup>31</sup> Rabindranath's controversial novel *Char Adhyay* [Four Chapters, 1934] exposed the ugly underside of animated terrorism of Bengal's benighted youths and brought as much acrimony to the author as unqualified accolades had been heaped on Sharatchandra's *Pather Dabi* eight years earlier.

At the same time Tagore is acutely aware that the benefits accruing from colonial contact remained essentially alien to the Indians unless they elevated themselves to the level of the foreigners. As he declared in a public speech in 1908: “What the British have set up may be good but they do not belong to us...It will never do if we seek to use somebody else's eyes because we have lost our own.”<sup>32</sup> What he demands of the British is not justice but humanity and equality. The universal unity that he frequently invokes has to be unity of equals. The weak, the oppressed, and the humiliated must be allowed to develop on their own natural resources, on their own tongue, and on their own terms. Isaiah Berlin considers Tagore's demand as “the eternally valid element in nationalism, the true and only case for self-determination.”<sup>33</sup>

Thus it would be grossly unfair to regard the poet a quiescent non-violent dreamer. Actually he endorsed a relentlessly resolute struggle against apathy, cowardice, pettiness, and moral decadence in place of the terrorists' agenda of murder and mayhem against the colonial government in the name of patriotism and nationalism. In his article “The Way to Get It Done” (1921), he admonished his readers in no uncertain terms:

When sitting in judgment on British behavior toward ourselves, it is well to note their human fallibility and the difficulties which they face; but when searching out our own lapses, there must be no excuse or palliations, no lowering of standards on the basis of expediency. The rousing of indignation against the British government may be an easy political method, but it will not lead us to our goal; rather the cheap pleasure of giving tit for tat, of dealing shrewd blows, will detract from the efficient pursuit of our own path of duty.<sup>34</sup>

In one of his significant poems, titled “Suprabhat” [Blissful Morn], invoking the terrible Rudra, the annihilator of *tamas* [indolence and apathy], who challenges us to transcend our love of self and fear of mortality, he proclaims “he who is ready to sacrifice his life will never die” [*Nihshese pran ye karibe dan, kshay nai tar kshay nai*]. In a later stanza of the poem he vows to offer his fear of death to the feet of the lord of his life [*Jibaneshwar*] with a view to sublimating his mortality into veritable ambrosia [“*mrityure laba amrita kariya tomar charane chhonyaye*”].<sup>35</sup> In another poem, titled “Mrityunjay” [Conqueror of Death], he thus seeks to shed his fear of death by defying the mortal blows of the high and

mighty proclaiming with adamant vehemence before breathing his last that he is greater than death itself [*“ami mrityu-cheye bada ei shes katha bale yaba ami chale”*].<sup>36</sup>

### Rabindranath’s Humanism and Its Limitations

Tagore’s intellectual assumptions and convictions, above all, his poet’s vocation or *kabi-swadharma*, colored his *Weltanschauung*.<sup>37</sup> His views on human life on this planet are squarely situated in his vision of an idealized world where all contradictions, conflicts, and differences are resolved and dissolve into a cosmic consciousness of unity upholding and undergirding the life of the world of beings. This humane outlook prompts the poet to confess: “I have arrived as a pilgrim on this great planet [*mahatirtha*] where the Deity of humanity [*Naradebata* sometimes referred to as *Paramatman* (Supersoul) or the Innermost Overman] presides over the history of all places and races. I sit under His throne to perform the uphill task of shedding my ego and all sense of discrimination.”<sup>38</sup> As he proclaims in a poem titled *Prabasi* [Nonresident]:

*Sob thain mor ghar ache, ami sei ghar mari khunjiya.*

*Deshe deshe mor desh ache, ami sei desh labo jujhiya.*

[I search for my home that exists everywhere.

I’ll struggle to get to my country that exists in all countries].<sup>39</sup>

For Tagore, a real and concrete human being is never the arbiter of his destiny. His life remains unfulfilled and imperfect until he is able to express the Universal Man in him in thought and action. However, this innermost being (Innermost Overman) remains hidden, accessible only to a man of equipoise [*samahita*] who has undergone a rigorous regimen of ascetic moral exercise and contemplation. The goal of human life’s journey cannot be found in the real world of real people with their real sufferings, strivings, struggles, triumphs, and tragedies. It resides in the abstract world of spirit. Sadly, the purity and sincerity of such a sublime vision (that has a venerable antiquity in India’s intellectual history) notwithstanding, it cannot explain why human beings, supposedly blessed with their inner treasure and strength, and in spite of their being united by universal tie, have not been able to reconstruct or reorder their society. He thus pays his tribute to the Lord God of the universe, who Brought so many strangers near to Him and provided them shelter in so many homes endearing so many distant others.

[*Kato ajanare janaile tumi*

*kato ghare dile thain—*

*durke karile nikat bandhu,*

*parke karile bhai.].<sup>40</sup>*

According to Arabinda Poddar, “Rabindranath placed an unquestioning reliance on the Upanisadic philosophy without bothering to examine critically its usefulness for the ongoing problems of life or the evolving newer thoughts. He was perhaps unconscious of any need for this.” For Poddar, herein lies Tagore’s philosophical failure.<sup>41</sup>



Though Tagore provided a general idea of his attitude to a communitarian rural life in *Palli Prakriti*, he did not provide a blueprint for his preferred polity like a Thales (c. 624-c. 546 BCE) who planned a confederation for the Ionian cities, or a Plato (c. 427-c. 347 BCE) who wrote the *Republic*, or a Rousseau (1712-78) who wrote *Le contrat social* (1762) and a constitution for the Polish-Lithuanian state, *Considérations sur le gouvernement de Pologne* (1772; it greatly influenced the Constitution of Poland, May 3, 1791). Indeed his ideal *Gemeinschaft*, propelled by consensus among enlightened and free spirited citizens, was actually a Utopia, a “Nowhere.” But as Sibnarayan Ray observes, “those who envision any utopia and want to work towards its realization in society...run counter to entrenched institution, vested interests and established habits and mores.” While these problems do stare the visionary reformers in the face, they do not nullify the meaningfulness of their visions. On the other hand, concludes Ray, the problems constitute “challenges to our moral and imaginative resourcefulness, but the utopias offer us valuable direction towards worthy alternative lifestyle.”<sup>42</sup> In fact Tagore himself was quite aware of the idealistic dimension of his critique of nationalism. In the conclusion of his lecture “Nationalism in India” at the University of Illinois, Urbana on December 30, 1916, he admitted:

I am not an economist. I am willing to acknowledge that there is a law of demand and supply and an infatuation of man for more things than are good for him. And yet I will persist in believing that there is such a thing as the harmony of completeness in humanity, where poverty does not take away his riches, where defeat may lead him to victory, death to immortality, and where in the compensation of Eternal Justice those who are the last may yet have their insult transmuted into a golden triumph.<sup>43</sup>

Tagore's so-called Utopia thus becomes, what Seyla Benhabib has called a “practical-moral imperative.”<sup>44</sup>

### Conclusion: An Estimate of Rabindranath's Worldview

Clearly Tagore's personal intellectual and spiritual make up prompted him to plead for an ideal world of bliss and bonhomie, and for an endowment mentality that delights in giving rather than gathering. Such a human habitation, reminiscent of the Augustinian City of God, cannot be ushered in the mechanized, organized, regulated, regimented, and *quid pro quo* transactional world of nation states that resembles, to cite St. Augustine's (354-430 CE) terms once again, the City of Man.<sup>45</sup> Although Tagore failed to work out a satisfactory alternative worldview from the reigning paradigm of the Enlightenment notion of progress, power, and prosperity via a vision of the reformed state that conduces individual freedom and even local autonomy, in other words, a viable democracy, his vision of a communitarian Utopia, adumbrated in *Swadeshi Samaj* [Society of Our Country] (1902), cannot be easily dismissed as a variety of metaphysical nonsense.

On the contrary, we must acknowledge the merits of the vast expanse of Tagore's philosophy that inspires us to exert ourselves to seek ways and means to achieve our true freedom. The rich repertoire of his thoughts forces us to break out of our individual boxes—our selfish ego—and keep on moving in search of something greater, more glorious, and ultimately more meaningful. The great troubadour [*baul*] of Bengal has given his clarion call to humanity to sublimate itself from being mere *homo sapiens* [thinking man] to becoming *homo viator* [pilgrim man], a perpetual wanderer in search of the magic Touchstone [*Parashpathar*], God, who is actually present in the interiority of our heart:

*Pathero sathi name barambar—*

*Pathikjanero laho namaskar.*

.....

*Jibanarather he sarathi, ami nitryapathero pathik,*

*Pathe chalar laho namaskar.*

[Comrade of the road,

Here are my traveler's greetings to thee.

.....

My guide,

I am a wayfarer of an endless road,

My greetings of a wanderer to thee].<sup>46</sup>

Thus Tagore's noble and sublime humanistic vision, despite its apparent idealistic preponderance, beacons us to the possibility of bringing down the lofty and sublime *Empyrean* into the world that he saw bleeding to death. To revive and heal it, he turned his face against self-destructive nationalism and its problem child the nation state.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> S. Tagore, *Victoria Samrajyan* [Empress Victoria], trans. idem (Calcutta: I.C. Bose & Co., 1882), 162. For Sourindramohan's international reputation and connection, see Lokenath Ghose, *Kalkatar Babu Brittanta* [History of the Calcutta Babu], trans. Shuddhodan Sen (Calcutta: Aryan, 1983), 161-74.

<sup>2</sup> Cited in Anuradha Roy, "Bangali Buddhijibir Chokhe British Shasan" [British Administration as Viewed by the Bengali Intelligentsia] in Swapan Basu and Indrajit Chaudhuri, eds. *Unish Shataker Bangalijiban o Samskriti* [Bengali Life and Culture in the Nineteenth Century] (Kalikata: Pustak Bipani, 2003), 255.

<sup>3</sup> Krishna Kripalani, *Tagore: A Life* (1986, 2<sup>nd</sup> rpt. New Delhi: National Book Trust, 2001), 29.

<sup>4</sup> Niharranjan Ray, *Bharatiya Aitihiya o Rabindranath* [Indian Heritage and Rabindranath] (Calcutta: Det's Publishing, 1410 BE), 104-5. Tagore's fully fledged study of the trend of Indian history titled "Bharatvarser tihaser Dhara" [The Trend of Indian History] was presented in a public meeting in Calcutta in 1912. It was translated into English by the noted historian Sir Jadunath Sarkar (1870-1958) and published in *Modern Review/Modern Review*, Calcutta in 1913.

<sup>5</sup> Cited in Jayant V. Narlikar, "Bijnan-prayuktir Yuge Rammohaner Prasangikata" [Rammohan's Relevance in the Age of Science and Technology] in Shibnarayan Ray, ed., *Banglar Renaissance* [The Renaissance of Bengal] (Calcutta: Renaissance Publications, 2002), 94. The Brahma Samaj movement, inaugurated by Raja Rammohan Roy, was a reformist, enlightened, and Unitarian vision of Hindu religion. The real organizer of the movement was Maharsi Debendranath Tagore (1817-1905), the scion of the house of Tagore of Jodasanko, Calcutta, and father of the poet Rabindranath. In 1868 Keshabchandra Sen (1838-84) separated from Tagore's *Adi* Brahma Samaj, and thereafter the Brahma movement was split into the *Adi* Brahma Samaj and the Brahma Samaj of India under Sen. A further schism took place in 1878 after Keshab, in violation of the Brahma canons, had married his underage daughter off to a wealthy aristocratic family of Cochbihar. Now the Brahma Samaj of India was split into Keshab's New Dispensation (*Nababidhan*) and a new splinter group called *Sadharan* Brahma Samaj. In spite of these internal dissensions, the Brahma movement did act as a dike against the rushin waves of Christian evangelism in India, especially Bengal. The best history of the Brahmos remain David Kopf, *The Brahma Samaj and the Shaping of Modern Indian Mind* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979); Kanailal Cattopadhyay, *Brahmo Reform Movement: Some Social and Economic Aspects* (Calcutta: Papyrus, (Calcutta: Papyrus, 1983).

<sup>6</sup> Bankey B. Misra, *The Indian Middle Classes: Their Growth in Modern Times* (London: Oxford university Press, 1961), 210.

<sup>7</sup> Dermot Killingley, "Vedanta and Modernity" in C.H. Phillips and Mary D. Wainwright, eds., *Indian Society and the Beginings of Modernism c 1830-1850* (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 1976), 135.

<sup>8</sup> Cited in Arun Kumar Mukhopadhyay, *Unabingsha Shatabdir BanglaGitikabya* [Bengali Lyric Poetry in the Nineteenth Century] (Calcutta: Dey's Publishing, 1403 BE), 34.

<sup>9</sup> Tagore's letter (dictated in Bengali) was translated into English by his close associate and biographer Krishna Kripalani (1907-92) and was published in the Calcutta daily, *The Hindusthan Standard*, on June 4 as a rejoinder to that of E. Rathbone, MP for the combined English universities, published in the same paper on May 30. Both letters are reprinted *in extenso* in Ray, *Bharatiya Aitihya*, 207.

<sup>10</sup> For nationalism see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Rev. ed. (London: Verso, 1991), 5-7.

<sup>11</sup> See Ray, *Bharatiya Aitihya*, ch. 2: "Rabindranath o Bishwajiban" [Rabindranath and World-Life]. See also the English translation of this chapter in Narasingha P. Sil, "Rabindranath and World-Life," *Parabaas*, Webzine for the Study of Cultural Heritage of Bengal, New Jersey (August 2007). See further, Mohammad Quayum, "Imagining 'One World': Rabindranath Tagore's Critique of Nationalism," *Literary Studies*, 8 (2) (2006): 20-40.

<sup>12</sup> See Ferdinand Tönnies, *Community and Civil Society*, ed., Jose Harris (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). Tönnies' *Gemeinschaft und Gessellschaft* was first published in 1887.

<sup>13</sup> For Rabindranath's ideas on nationalism see Quayum (n. 11 above); Kedar Nath Mukherjee, *Rabindranath Tagore's Concepts of State, Nation and Nationalism* (Calcutta: Punthi Pustak, 2003), especially ch. 4; Geeti Sen, ed. *India: A National Culture?* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2003, especially articles by Uma Dasgupta, Makarand Paranjape, and T.K. Ommen; Tapan Raychaudhuri, *Perceptions, Emotions, Sensibilities: Essays on India's Colonial and Post-colonial Experiences* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), chs. 2 & 9; Benoy Gopal Ray, *The Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore* (Calcutta: Progressive Publishers, 1970); Kalyan Sen Gupta, *The Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2005); Pabitrakumar Roy, *Rabindranath Tagore* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Private Limited, 2002); Ashis Nandy *The Illegitimacy of Nationalism: Rabindranath Tagore and the Politics of Self*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994); Ranajit Guha, *History at the Limit of World-History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002: ch. 5; and Isaiah Berlin, "Rabindranath Tagore and the Consciousness of Nationality" in idem, *The Sense of Reality: Studies in Ideas and their History* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1996), 249-66.

<sup>14</sup> R. Tagore, *Nationalism*, intr. Edward .P. Thompson (1917. Rpt. New Delhi: Rupa & Company, 1994), 56-57.

<sup>15</sup> A recent attempt to analyze Tagore's concept of nationalism by an enthusiastic scholar ends up rehashing the worn out *clichés* about Tagore's cosmopolitanism and cultural nationalism. See Srobana Bhattacharya, "Colonialism, Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism of Rabindranath Tagore." Paper presented to the annual meeting of the Southern Political Science Association (January 7, 2009).

<sup>16</sup> See Ujjvalkumar Majumdar, *Bangla Kabye Pashchatya Prabhab* [Western Influence on Bengali Poetry]. Rev. ed. (Kalikata: Abhi Prakashan, 1389 BE).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>18</sup> See N.P. Sil, *Kautilya's Arthashastra: A Comparative Study* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 1989), 19.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>20</sup> See Eugene O'Connor, *The Essential Epicurus* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1993).

<sup>21</sup> See P. Kropotkin, *Selected Writings on anarchism and Revolution*, ed., M.A. Miller (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1970).

<sup>22</sup> Cited in Sen Gupta, *Philosophy of Tagore*, 42.

<sup>23</sup> R. Tagore, *Sanchaita* [Collected Poems] (Kalikata: Tuli Kalam, 2002), 369-70.

<sup>24</sup> Tagore, *Nationalism*, 56.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 96-97.

<sup>26</sup> Berlin, "Rabindranath," 256.

<sup>27</sup> *A New History of India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1982), 250.

<sup>28</sup> *Nationalism*, 85.

<sup>29</sup> Cited in Sen Gupta, *Philosophy of Tagore*, 46 (emphasis in original).

<sup>30</sup> *Speeches* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1952), 7. Tagore, however, composed a near obsequious long poem titled "Namaskar" [Salutation] in honor of Ghose in 1907 when the latter was a prominent Extremist spokesman and leader at the Indian National Congress in Surat: "Arabinda, friend and voice of our land, please accept Rabindra's salutation" [*Arabinda, Rabindrer laha namaskar, he deshabandhu, swadeshatmar banimurti tumi*]. R. Tagore, "Namaskar," *Sanchaita*, 436-38.

<sup>31</sup> Gopalchandra Ray, *Sharatchandra* (Calcutta: Ananda Publishers, 2003), 133.

<sup>32</sup> Cited in Berlin, "Rabindranath," 262.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 264.

<sup>34</sup> Cited in Amiya Chakravarty, ed., *A Tagore Reader* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966), 204. This is Tagore's own translation of his lecture titled "Saphalatar Sadupay" [Right Means of Achieving Success] delivered at the Scottish

Church College, Calcutta on March 11, 1905 and subsequently published in *Bangadarshan* [View of Bengal] (April 1905).

<sup>35</sup> “Suprabhat” [Blissful Morn], *Sanchaita*, 434-35.

<sup>36</sup> “Mrityunjay” [Conqueror of Death], *ibid.*, 591.

<sup>37</sup> R. Tagore, *Four Chapters* [*Char Adhyay*], trans. Rimli Bhattacharya (New Delhi: Srishti Publishers & Distributors, 2002), 115: translator’s note “On Translating *Char Adhyay*.”

<sup>38</sup> Arabinda Poddar, *Rabindra Manas* [The Mind of Rabindranath] (Kalikata: Pratyay, Lekhak Samabay Samiti [Writers’ Cooperative Society] ed., 1376 BE), 35.

<sup>39</sup> *Sanchaita*, 418-20.

<sup>40</sup> R. Tagore, *Gitanjali* [Song Offerings] (1910. Kalikata: Vishwabharati, 1994), 17.

<sup>41</sup> Poddar, *Rabindra Manas*, 37, 77.

<sup>42</sup> Sibnarayan Ray, *Between Renaissance and Revolution: Selected Essays (Vol. I)* (Calcutta: Renaissance Publishers Private limited, 2006), 279-80.

<sup>43</sup> *Nationalism*, 99.

<sup>44</sup> *Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 230.

<sup>45</sup> See Gerard J.P. O’Daly, *Augustine’s City of God: A Reader* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999).

<sup>46</sup> Tagore, “Sathi,” *Sanchaita*, 477. English translation in Chakravarty, ed., *Tagore Reader*, 326.

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