



Rabindranath Tagore and His Ideas of Nationalism

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ARTICLE DETAILS

Research Paper

Keywords:

*Philosopher, Humanity,
Indian society, Struggle,
Swadeshi, Nationalism*

DOI:

10.5281/zenodo.14105314

ABSTRACT

Rabindranath Tagore, a cosmopolitan philosopher, had a unique perspective on nationalism that was not limited to India but had worldwide appeal. He opposed the exclusionary features and self-aggrandizing character found in contemporary discourses on nationalism, such as chauvinism, aggression, and false pride. Tagore believed that these features were not in the interest of humanity at large. Despite his criticisms, Tagore considered nationalism beneficial as long as it served the interests of the poor and deprived people. He opposed the British authority for causing inhuman exploitation and impoverishment and opposed any racial or undemocratic behaviours of Englishmen towards Indians. He believed that the schema of nationalism should not be merely self-determination from British authorities just because they are not Indian. Tagore argued that nationalism was a manifestation of Western capitalism and mechanization, contradicting Indian spiritual ideals and contrasting with India's goals. He emphasized the importance of Indian society as a natural regulation of human relationships, fostering cooperation and ideals of life. Tagore aimed to convey the humanist conception of nationalism away from mechanistic and commercial purposes. Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore, two key figures in the Indian Independence Struggle, held differing views on nationalism. Gandhi believed imperialism was an external manifestation of

nationalism, while Tagore viewed internationalism as a more inclusive concept. Tagore and Gandhi had a notable dialogue on various themes, disagreeing with Mahatma on numerous counts. Tagore found Gandhi's use of 'Swadeshi' irrational and argued that the concept of nationalism should not be based on self-determination. This paper will underline Tagore's ideas on nationalism and critically analyse the debate between Gandhi and Tagore.

Introduction: -

Rabindranath Tagore, a prominent Indian poet, philosopher, and Nobel laureate, had a unique and critical view of nationalism, especially as it emerged during his lifetime. Although Tagore supported Indian independence, he was wary of nationalism, seeing it as a force that could limit human potential, foster division, and promote violence. Rabindranath Tagore's philosophy of nationalism is a product of modern science and technological advancements, contextualizing it in the context of the rise of nationalistic aspirations in India and Europe in the twentieth century. His ideas are unconventional, focusing on broad humanistic concerns rather than constrained political strategies. This article highlights Tagore's viewpoints and the symbolic significance of his perception of nationalism. Rabindranath Tagore's concept of nationalism involves the separation of a nation and society, highlighting the transition from a political organization to a political union. He argued that a nation is a political and economic union of people, unlike a society with no ulterior motive. Tagore believed that Indian civilization has been a continuous social adjustment, avoiding political supremacy and organized power for defence and aggression. The civilization aimed to live peacefully, without politics and divisions, with the world as a single soul, with people living in eternal and personal relationships with it, a goal that the West has recently embraced.

Discussion: -

Tagore argued that nationalism was a manifestation of Western capitalism and mechanization, contradicting Indian spiritual ideals and contrasting with India's goals. He emphasized the importance of Indian society as a natural regulation of human relationships, fostering cooperation and ideals of life. Tagore aimed to convey the humanist conception of nationalism away from mechanistic and commercial purposes.

The West's commerce and politics have transformed humans into mechanistic tools, bound in iron hoops and labelled towards compressed bales. Indians have witnessed the true value nations hold for humanity, as foreign invaders were treated as human races with their own religion and customs. In the West, Indians had to deal with a nation in the situation of not being a nation themselves.

Tagore's concept of power is defined as a scientific product that dissolving personal humanity in the laboratory of a nation can led to the dissolution of higher social life and harm humanity. He emphasizes that the nation has more to do with the history of man than with India's, and that the transition from a moral man to a political man can upset moral balance and obscure the human side under the shadow of soulless organization.

Tagore argued that India's real problem is not political but social, a condition prevalent among all nations. He criticized the West's dominant political arena, arguing that India has been trying to imitate it to adopt a materialist approach, leading to a civilization that has become "political and commercial aggressive."

In ancient times, geographical boundaries allowed people to maintain unity within their areas of segregation, based on moral cooperation and fostering art, science, and religion. He opposed the education system that taught nationalism and nation over humanity, arguing that moral cooperation was the true basis for greatness.

The author criticizes India's submissive role in education compared to Western countries, stating that they are encouraged and trained to fit themselves for global commerce and industry movements, while India receives only minimal assistance. He also criticizes Western civilization as the civilization of power, as it is exclusive and unwilling to open its sources of power to those it has selected for exploitation. The author highlights the nation's jeering at India for lagging behind in education.

The narrowness of moral freedom is a radical issue, not due to its quantity but its nature. The West's spirit of freedom is paradoxical, as the Nation of the West forms relentless and unbreakable chains of organization. Man is not powerful but perfect, and to gain power, he must curtail his soul to avoid harming others. His instincts and humanistic ideals hinder his ability to harm others, making moral freedom a more radical issue.

Japan, a nation based on higher human ideals, remained independent from the West and its neighbours, focusing on its own humanitarian ideals as its religion. He emphasized the importance of

developing from within, as Western civilization's weapons will only be available when the inheritance is exhausted. He compared India to European nations, arguing that India could not borrow from other people's history, as it had its own civilization to follow.

Tagore's writings on nationalism emphasized world unity and cooperation, transcending political boundaries and material pursuits. Drawing on the Indian philosophy of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*, his ideas offer a framework for rethinking nationalism in a world facing globalization and cultural conflicts, aligning with universal human values.

Tagore was influenced by the cultural and intellectual revival in Bengal during the 19th and 20th centuries. His thoughts were shaped by Indian philosophical traditions, such as Vedanta and Upanishads. He engaged with Western ideas, including nationalism, humanism, and liberalism.

Main Perspective of Tagore's Concept of Nationalism: -

- 1. Critique of Western Nationalism:** Tagore's experience with the Western model of nationalism—particularly in Britain and Japan—led him to view it as a restrictive and aggressive ideology. He argued that Western nationalism encouraged militarism, economic exploitation, and colonial domination, which went against the universal human values he cherished.
- 2. Spiritual Humanism Over National Identity:** Tagore advocated for *spiritual humanism*, where people see themselves as part of a larger, interconnected world rather than limiting their identities to nations. He believed that humanity's focus should be on the universal rather than confined to national boundaries, which he saw as arbitrary and divisive.
- 3. Nationalism as a Threat to Individual Freedom:** Tagore feared that nationalism could suppress individual freedom and create a blind allegiance to the state. He saw it as a force that could encourage uniformity, reduce the importance of cultural and intellectual diversity, and impose narrow loyalties.
- 4. Criticism of Indian Nationalism:** While Tagore supported India's struggle for independence, he was critical of the nationalist movement's inclination toward violence and exclusion. He felt that Indian nationalism should be based on self-reliance, cultural unity, and respect for all communities rather than merely opposing colonial powers.
- 5. Globalism and Universal Brotherhood:** Tagore's vision was for a world united by a shared respect for all human beings. He argued that love and mutual respect between people should



transcend borders and political divisions. Tagore believed in a world where the unity of mankind was more important than narrow national interests.

- 6. Works on Nationalism:** Tagore's essays, especially in his book *Nationalism* (1917), present his thoughts on how nationalism, particularly Western-style nationalism, could be dangerous. In it, he criticizes the way nationalism was practiced and argues for a society built on cooperation and universal values rather than competition and aggression.

Different Types of Nationalism: -

Rabindranath Tagore's nationalism was complex and multifaceted, reflecting his commitment to Indian culture, humanity, and universal values.

1. Cultural Nationalism: Tagore emphasized the importance of preserving Indian culture, traditions, and heritage.
2. Spiritual Nationalism: He believed in the spiritual unity of India, transcending religious and regional divisions.
3. Humanistic Nationalism: Tagore prioritized human values, such as love, compassion, and equality, over narrow nationalistic interests.
4. Anti-Colonial Nationalism: He opposed British colonial rule, advocating for Indian independence and self-rule.
5. Internationalism: Tagore envisioned a global community, where nations coexisted in harmony, sharing knowledge and culture.

Difference Between Gandhi and Tagore on Nationalism –

Rabindranath Tagore and Mahatma Gandhi, two of India's most revered figures, had differing views on nationalism. Tagore believed in a more inclusive and spiritual nationalism, emphasizing the importance of Indian culture and traditions ¹. In contrast, Gandhi's nationalism was rooted in politics and the struggle for Indian independence.

Mahatma Gandhi's Concept of Nationalism: -

Gandhi's nationalism seems simple and straightforward: he wanted an independent Indian nation state and freedom from British colonial rule. But in reality, his nationalism rested on complex and sophisticated moral philosophy. He sought a tolerant and unified state that included all communities within a 'Mother India'. Gandhi saw nationalism as a means to achieve Indian independence and self-

rule. He believed in the power of non-violent resistance and civil disobedience to challenge British colonial rule.

Rabindranath Tagore's Views on Nationalism: -

For Rabindranath Tagore, the view of nationalism and patriotism that the movement was taking on was too narrow. He disengaged with the movement but remained expressive on the issue of independence through his art and writings. Tagore, on the other hand, was critical of narrow nationalism, fearing it could lead to exclusion and division. He advocated for a more inclusive and spiritual nationalism, emphasizing India's rich cultural heritage.

Differences Between the Concept of Nationalism: -

1. Cultural vs. Political Nationalism: Tagore focused on preserving Indian culture and heritage, while Gandhi prioritised political freedom and self-rule.
2. Spiritual vs. Materialistic Nationalism: Tagore's nationalism was spiritual, emphasizing the unity of all people, whereas Gandhi's was more materialistic, focusing on economic and social empowerment.
3. Internationalism vs. Isolationism: Tagore envisioned a global community, while Gandhi advocated for Indian self-sufficiency and isolation from Western influences.

Common Ground: -

Despite their differences, both Tagore and Gandhi shared a deep love for India and its people. They both recognized the importance of Indian culture and traditions in shaping the nation's identity. But their debate on nationalism continues to inspire and inform discussions on Indian identity, culture, and politics. The common ground between Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore on nationalism lies in their shared vision for an inclusive, ethical, and humane approach to national identity and independence. Although they differed in certain areas—Tagore was often more sceptical of nationalism, while Gandhi saw it as a path to India's self-realization—their philosophies converged in several key ways.

1. **Humanistic Nationalism:** Both Gandhi and Tagore believed in a form of nationalism rooted in respect for all humanity. They argued that love for one's country should not breed hatred or contempt for others. Gandhi's idea of *Sarvodaya* (welfare of all) and Tagore's advocacy for universal brotherhood reflected their shared view that nations should uplift humanity, not divide it.



2. **Cultural and Spiritual Identity Over Political Identity:** For both thinkers, the soul of a nation was not its political or military power but its cultural and spiritual values. Gandhi's emphasis on *Swaraj* (self-rule) was not just political independence but also moral and cultural self-reliance. Similarly, Tagore valued India's cultural heritage and believed it could enrich the world, emphasizing that true freedom comes from within.
3. **Non-violence and Ethical Means of Resistance:** Gandhi and Tagore both rejected aggressive or violent forms of nationalism. Gandhi's philosophy of *Ahimsa* (non-violence) was integral to his vision for a free India, while Tagore argued that nationalism rooted in aggression and hatred was harmful. Both believed that a just and lasting independence must come through ethical means and mutual respect.
4. **Nationalism Beyond Materialism:** Gandhi and Tagore were both wary of a nationalism driven by materialism or economic exploitation. They advocated for a sustainable, self-sufficient society where people's needs were met without excessive consumption. Gandhi's *Swadeshi* movement encouraged local production and self-sufficiency, while Tagore promoted a simple, sustainable life that respected natural resources.
5. **Education as a Path to True Nationalism:** Both saw education as crucial in cultivating a sense of national pride that was ethical and informed. Gandhi promoted *Nai Talim* (basic education) that combined learning with practical work, fostering a grounded nationalism. Tagore, too, founded Visva-Bharati University to blend Indian and global cultures, nurturing individuals who respected all cultures and sought truth.

In essence, Gandhi and Tagore envisioned a form of nationalism that was inclusive, ethical, and rooted in humanity's shared values. Their ideas remain relevant today, offering a blueprint for a national identity that respects cultural diversity, promotes ethical self-reliance, and upholds global solidarity.

Application of Rabindranath Tagore's ideas on Nationalism in today's world: -

Applying Rabindranath Tagore's ideas on nationalism in today's world offers valuable perspectives on promoting harmony, inclusivity, and ethical governance. His critique of nationalism focused on moving away from divisive, aggressive nationalism towards a globalism rooted in humanity, culture, and ethics. Here's how his ideas could apply in the present scenario:

1. Promoting Inclusive National Identity: Tagore advocated for a form of national identity that celebrated diversity and inclusivity rather than exclusion or ethnic homogeneity. In multicultural societies, this approach encourages viewing diversity as a strength, fostering unity within a shared national identity without suppressing cultural differences.

2. Encouraging Global Citizenship and Ethical Patriotism: In a world interconnected by technology, climate change, and global economies, Tagore’s concept of a “spiritual humanism” that transcends borders is particularly relevant. Global citizenship encourages people to take responsibility for worldwide issues, such as environmental protection, human rights, and poverty, while practicing an ethical patriotism that respects humanity’s shared challenges and values.

3. Avoiding Jingoism and Ethnocentrism in Politics: Tagore’s critique of nationalism warned against jingoism, where excessive patriotism can become aggressive and divisive. In today’s political climate, avoiding ethnocentrism means rejecting narrow or exclusionary political narratives and fostering policies that promote peace, cooperation, and dialogue between countries. This approach can reduce conflicts and create platforms for constructive international relations.

4. Education for Global Understanding and Cultural Appreciation: Tagore emphasized education as a means to cultivate empathy, cultural understanding, and a sense of interconnectedness. Modern education systems could integrate global studies, ethical citizenship, and cultural appreciation to foster a sense of belonging that is both national and global. This approach could nurture a new generation that respects both its own and others' cultural values.

5. Support for Humanitarian Efforts Across Borders: With Tagore’s vision, nationalism should inspire efforts to address global crises—like pandemics, natural disasters, or human rights violations—collectively. Cooperation between nations to tackle such issues aligns with his ideals, emphasizing collective responsibility over competitive nationalism.

6. Encouraging International Peace and Cooperation: Tagore’s ideas advocate for a global peace that transcends narrow national interests. This has relevance in international diplomacy, where countries can adopt policies that prioritize peacebuilding, cultural exchange, and shared global challenges, like climate change, over military or economic rivalry.

7. Promoting Sustainable National Development Goals: Tagore encouraged self-reliance and resilience without being exploitative. This idea can be applied today by encouraging national

development that emphasizes sustainable practices and ethical business standards, which can promote prosperity without exploiting people or natural resources.

Conclusion: -

Rabindranath Tagore's concept of nationalism had a profoundly positive impact on Indian thought and culture. His ideas emphasized the importance of Indian culture, traditions, and humanity, promoting a more inclusive and spiritual nationalism. Tagore's ideas on nationalism also emphasize that while love for one's culture and community is natural, an aggressive nationalism focused on self-interest is harmful to global harmony. His critique advocates for a balance between cultural pride and a commitment to universal humanity. Tagore's ideas influenced notable Indian leaders, including Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru. Gandhi's concept of Swadeshi and non-violent resistance was shaped by Tagore's ideas, while Nehru's vision for modern India was influenced by Tagore's emphasis on cultural nationalism. Tagore's concept of nationalism continues to inspire contemporary debates on nationalism and identity. His emphasis on human values and inclusivity inspires social movements worldwide, making him a cultural icon symbolizing India's rich heritage and intellectual traditions. Tagore's nationalism remains relevant today, offering a nuanced and inclusive vision for India and the world.

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