Tagore and Nationalism
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What did Tagore think of nationalism: a concept so intimately associated with modernity and frequently seen as one of its important political by-products? There are no straight answers. But apparent elements of ambivalence, even contradiction, can certainly be found in his views on the subject scattered across his numerous writings. This is not surprising. Even as nationalism evolved in diverse ways as an overwhelming historical force, Tagore’s own perception of it changed. It was only natural that a thinking and reflective person would arrive at an assessment that had been filtered through introspective personal experience and intellectual inquiry.

As a poet, creative writer and social thinker, Tagore was acutely sensitive to the events of his times. He witnessed, with rising unease, the ominous direction that the concept and practice of nationalism had taken over the long term. It had changed relationships between states. More importantly, it had altered how their peoples perceived and identified each other. In the ascendancy and control of hardened nationalist ideologies over political dispensations in Europe, Tagore saw a future imperilled by confrontation. He understood, in no uncertain terms, that nationalism in the West had restructured the nature of international affairs in a manner that he found difficult to reconcile with. Further, it had fundamentally transformed the relationship between the State and its citizens. The argument that the nation was in some manner greater than the people who constituted it had begun to find increasing acceptability. Yet this raised crucial moral and ethical questions for those who were more sceptical. Was there a limit to the cost that individuals might be expected to pay to demonstrate their loyalty to the State? Do nations have a moral measure to balance the call for sacrifice with their obligation to value and honour the inherent worth of each human being?

Events of the past century have proved that Tagore’s apprehensions were not unwarranted. He foresaw the necessity of exploring more inclusive civilizational and humanistic ideas as an alternative to the strident ethnic nationalism that had become the defining ideology of his time. In this, Tagore seemed to strike a discordant note. It placed him in opposition to many of his friends and contemporaries. Despite this marginalization, Tagore was probably right. Many nations have always
been ethnically diverse, while a large number are today becoming home to increasingly mixed populations. Some recent ideas that seek to respond to the ethnic discord within nations—which has now spilled onto the global stage—seem surprisingly close to the thoughts that Tagore had broadly expressed. The dehumanizing brutality of these conflicts has obliged statesmen to bring to centre-stage compelling issues of the human condition.

If the nation is, in a significant way, an ‘imagined’ or ‘constructed’ entity, as has been argued by some scholars, then the context in which it is imagined becomes integral to its existence. Along with the nation, therefore, nationalism itself needs to be seen as an idea that exists, not on its own, but contextually. Changed circumstances require a correspondingly altered inspiration: a re-imagination, as it were, of both nation and nationalism. The possibility of a ‘civic nationality’ it has been suggested is more likely to succeed in socially diverse nations. It might as a result also make relations between nations radically different from what they are at present in most parts of the world.

The thoughts and ideas of Tagore on nationalism are found not merely in works where he attempted to systematically address the problem. They find expression in the aspirations, anxieties and concerns of people he portrays in so many of his creative writings. The essays in this volume, Tagore and Nationalism—written from an impressive range of perspectives—bring out the complexity with which Tagore interrogated the idea, and the manner in which his own thinking gradually evolved.

I am grateful to Prof. K.L. Tuteja and Dr. Kaustav Chakraborty for the support they unstintingly provided to the institute and the enormous effort they put in to bring out this collection of essays. They undertook to convene the seminar on which this volume is based and subsequently agreed to edit its proceedings. I am certain it is going to be well received by readers and emerge as an important contribution to the field.

Prof. Chetan Singh
Director, Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla, India
Looking at the enormous volume of the literature produced in both print and the Web space, one can definitely say that early 2016 has been one of Tagore and Ambedkar in the domain of Indian socio-political discourse. It is no wonder that the visionaries are occasionally summoned as per the order of the day. What makes one worried is, rather the context, which compels us to recall Tagore. Like the utterances made by the hero at the very initial phase of Tasher Desh, right at the beginning of the year, we have found ourselves grounded on a ‘land of cards’, where ‘we are fenced in with falsehoods. Languishing in the cage of safety, our wings have grown stiff’. The ‘king’ of the ‘yaksha town’ sitting inside the ‘dark chamber’ keeps on weaving glossy dreams of glimmer, but in the darkness, below the misleading lamplight, the ‘khyapa’ can only tune his mad songs into the concert pitch of savagery, confinement and death. In such a setting, it is quite predictable that ‘the harp of India’ echoes Tagore for remonstrance and sustenance. However, it is indeed strange to think that we, who are neither seers nor magicians, foresaw the importance of evoking Tagore’s critique of nationalism, back in 2015. Retrospectively, it seems that the global scenario had already been upsetting enough to force the sensible souls to contemplate on ‘why is the clay vessel of this body flooded by the tears of blood-red delirium?’ (No. 5, Rog Shjay).

Why is it that under the plea of victimhood, suspicion, sectarianism and chauvinism, the world seems to be getting fragmented by the fundamentalist designer of the narrow walls?

This pursuit led us to organize a three-day international conference on Tagore and Nationalism, paving the way for debate on the possibilities of renouncing fundamentalism and otherization, at the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla. Moreover, we badly needed to be inspired by Tagore’s unshaken faith on the essential goodness of humankind that would restore the ‘human’ to this desolated world of antagonists and combatants. Tagore’s essential humanism as an everyday humanitarianism has motivated us to move forward in search of an illuminated positivity despite the looming darkness of majoritarianism in almost every parts of the world. W.B. Yeats, in his introduction to Gitanjali, had envisaged that the fellow lovers, while waiting for one another, would wash away all the
bitterness and renew the youthful vigour by immersing into the magic of love embedded in Tagorean notes. We too hope that a passage to this polyphonic response to Rabindranath’s reflections on nationalism, by its unprofane flaring touchstone, would buoy up justice and rationality.

We thank Prof. Chetan Singh, Director, Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla, for his encouragement and active engagement. We express our gratitude to all the contributors for their profound interest and involvement in reading Tagore and nationalism through the lens of contemporaneity. We are also indebted to our collaborative publisher for the required assistance.

Shimla, India
K.L. Tuteja
Darjeeling, India Kaustav Chakraborty
## Contents

1 Introduction: Rabindranath Tagore and an ‘Ambivalent’ Nationalism ............................................. 1  
K.L. Tuteja and Kaustav Chakraborty

Part I Nationalism, Ambivalence and Tagore

2 Rethinking Tagore on the Antinomies of Nationalism .......... 17  
Sabyasachi Bhattacharya

3 1910 and the Evolution of Rabindranath Tagore’s Vernacular Nationalism ........................................ 31  
Krishna Sen

4 Language, Nationalism and Tagore ........................... 53  
Tilottoma Misra

5 Tagore, Nationalism and Imperialism ............................ 67  
Sukanta Chaudhuri

6 Tagore’s Nation: Swadeshi Samaj and the Political Novel .... 77  
Makarand R. Paranjape

7 Santiniketan, the Making of a Community ........................ 95  
R. Siva Kumar

8 The Pathography of Nationalism: Tagore’s Critique of the Idea of the Nation ................................. 111  
K. Satchidanandan

9 Rabindranath Tagore at the Intersection of Nationalism and Modernity ......................................... 125  
Fakrul Alam
# Contents

## Part II  Nation and Textual Representations

10  History, Identity and Nation in Tagore’s Fiction  
    Supriya Chaudhuri  
    143

11  The Self, the Nation and the World Beyond It: Reading Tagore’s Travel Writings  
    Bhaskar Chakrabarty  
    159

12  ‘Pollution Complex’, Tagore and the Tabooed Nation: Revisiting the Select Short Stories  
    Kaustav Chakraborty  
    171

13  Tagore’s *Ghare Baire* (Home and the World) and *Char Adhyaaya* (Four Chapters): Rethinking Nationalism, Cosmopolitanism and Gender  
    Biraj Mehta Rathi  
    185

## Part III  National Discourse Under the Comparative Lens

14  Tagore’s Nationalism—And Premchand’s: A Complementary Comparison  
    Harish Trivedi  
    201

15  Language, Nation, Freedom: Rabindranath Tagore and Ludwig Wittgenstein on the Epistemology of Education  
    Rukmini Bhaya Nair  
    219

16  The Spirit of India: An Exploration of Rabindranath Tagore’s and Mahatma Gandhi’s Ideas on Nationalism  
    Bashabi Fraser  
    245

17  Rabindranath Tagore’s Use of Guru Gobind Singh as a Nationalist Icon  
    Chhanda Chatterjee  
    257

18  Nation and Civil Society as Spheres of ‘Enlightenment’: The Dialogue of Gandhi and Tagore, and an Ambedkarite Inflection  
    Sukumar Muralidharan  
    267

19  Ideas on Nationalism in Tagore and Unamuno: A Comparative Study  
    Swagata Kumar Basu  
    285

20  Tagore and Nationalism: A Perspective on Italy Imagining the Indian Unity  
    Stefano Beggiora  
    299
### Part IV Interrogating Nationalism in Art and Culture

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Pages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>From Rabindranath Tagore to Rituparno Ghosh: Domestic Space, Gender and the Nation in <em>Chokher Bali</em></td>
<td>313</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pathik Roy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Nation and Partition: Tagore Reinvented by Ritwik Ghatak</td>
<td>325</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Manas Ghosh</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>The Useless and the ‘Wonderful’: Work, Leisure and Being ‘at Home in Modernity’ in the Music of Rabindranath Tagore</td>
<td>337</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Saurav Dasthakur</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Dancing Against the Nation? Revisiting Tagore’s Politics of Performance</td>
<td>359</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Aishika Chakraborty</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Erratum to: Introduction: Rabindranath Tagore and an ‘Ambivalent’ Nationalism**

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K.L. Tuteja and Kaustav Chakraborty
Editors and Contributors

About the Editors

K.L. Tuteja, Ph.D., is former Professor of Modern Indian History at Kurukshetra University, Kurukshetra and was Tagore Fellow at the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla (2014–2016). He was Visiting Professor at the University of West Indies, St Augustine (2002–2004), El Colegio de Mexico (2012) and University of Hyderabad (2013).

Kaustav Chakraborty, Ph.D., is Assistant Professor and Head, Department of English, Southfield (Loreto) College, Darjeeling, West Bengal. He has completed a major research project on tribal folklore sponsored by the University Grants Commission. He is the editor of the Prentice Hall, India edition of Indian Drama in English. Presently, he is a fellow at IIAS, Shimla.

Contributors

Fakrul Alam  Department of English, University of Dhaka, Dhaka, Bangladesh
Swagata Kumar Basu  School of Languages, Doon University, Dehradun, India
Stefano Beggiora  Department of Asian and North African Studies, Ca’ Foscari University of Venice, Venice, Italy
Sabyasachi Bhattacharya  Department of History, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India; Ministry of Culture, Government of India, New Delhi, India
Bhaskar Chakrabarty  Department of History, University of Calcutta, Kolkata, India
Aishika Chakraborty  School of Women’s Studies, Jadavpur University, Kolkata, India
Chhanda Chatterjee  Centre for Guru Nanak Dev Studies, Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan, India
Sukanta Chaudhuri  Department of English, Jadavpur University, Kolkata, India
Supriya Chaudhuri  Department of English, Jadavpur University, Kolkata, India
Saurav Dasthakur  Department of English & Other Modern European Languages, Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan, India

Bashabi Fraser  Scottish Centre of Tagore Studies (ScoTs), Edinburgh Napier University, Edinburgh, Scotland

Manas Ghosh  Department of Film Studies, Jadavpur University, Kolkata, India

Tilottoma Misra  Department of English, Dibrugarh University, Assam, India

Sukumar Muralidharan  Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla, Himachal Pradesh, India

Rukmini Bhaya Nair  Indian Institute of Technology Delhi, New Delhi, India

Makarand R. Paranjape  Centre for English Studies, School of Language, Literature, and Culture Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi, India

Biraj Mehta Rathi  Department of Philosophy, Wilson College, Mumbai, India

Pathik Roy  Department of English, St. Joseph’s College, Darjeeling, India

K. Satchidanandan  Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla, India

Krishna Sen  Department of English and Women’s Studies Research Centre, University of Calcutta, Kolkata, India

R. Siva Kumar  Kala Bhavana, Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan, India

Harish Trivedi  Department of English, University of Delhi, Delhi, India