

## Nationalism in the Writings of Tagore

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There is no end to Tagore! This sentence has two connotations: There is no end to the discoveries we can make reading Rabindranath's poems and prose. And there is no end to Tagore scholarship trying to unearth ever new shades of meaning and contemporary relevance. Since the three anniversaries surrounding the poet – his 150<sup>th</sup> birth-anniversary, the centenary of his award of the Nobel Prize, and the centenary of his award-winning book *Gitanjali* – there has been a stream of books on Tagore flowing not only from India, but from Europe, and North-America as well. Many of these volumes are originally the result of seminars held all over the world. It appears that every institution, government or non-government, with an interest in India, every University and Academy with a department related to India or Asia felt obliged to contribute to this glut of scholarship showered on this one person. I myself have been part of this. At least a dozen editors asked me to send a scholarly essay for their book or for the special Tagore number of their journal. How can an academician produce a dozen new essays within a span of three years? It is impossible. So whoever yielded to the pressure of expectant editors held recourse to repetition, to reworking older essays long published and often also to a journalistic approach to the subject. The anniversaries are over since three years, and the glut has reduced to a trickle, but we know that there are a few more books still in the pipeline.

Is there anything new we can project about Tagore? Or has Tagore scholarship become boringly repetitive, churning out the same ideas and cultural notions about Tagore that the Bengali middle-class has fondly grown up with and continues to live by? Homer, Shakespeare and Goethe have preoccupied scholars throughout the ages, who have been providing fresh insights into the work of these writers appropriate for every era. Is Tagore of such a caliber that his work would reach beyond his own time

and continue to supply fresh answers to changed cultural circumstances?

Looking at the variety of new volumes we can confirm one observation: Tagore scholarship has decidedly become more internationalized with fresh viewpoints, authors' personal experiences and new theories injected into a scholarship that has been 'traditional' for way too long. Not only have there been creditable contributions by non-Indian scholars about Tagore's influence outside India, Indian scholars have also increasingly related to Tagore in a more holistic way. One outcome is that it is no longer considered a scholarly prerequisite to be conversant with Tagore's work in Bengali to be credited with an informed assessment of the historical circumstances within which he wrote and influenced society in India as well as abroad.

One drawback of the volumes which have flooded the book-market is that their thematic focus is often very wide. Many are a result of seminars and conferences without a distinct frame. Books have been produced which collect papers on all and sundry topics struggling to delineate (and often not finding) a common thread running through them. The book under review is a notable exception.

'Tagore and Nationalism' has a sharp focus. Its contributions are grouped around Rabindranath Tagore's three lectures 'Nationalism in the West', 'Nationalism in Japan' and 'Nationalism in India', together first published as a book in 1917 from New York under the title 'Nationalism'. They were originally held as lectures in Japan and in the USA in 1916. Rabindranath's denunciation of nationalism provoked strong negative reactions in Japan and in the USA and not the least at home in India. Rabindranath's novel 'Ghare Baire' (Home and the World), discussing nationalism from various angles, was published around the same time.

As co-editor of 'Rabindranath Tagore: One Hundred Years of Global Reception' (2014), I am aware how significant 'Nationalism' has been for shaping Tagore's fame in many countries which, between the two World Wars, were struggling with resurgent nationalisms.

In several countries it was not 'Gitanjali', the book of prose poems that earned Tagore the Nobel Prize, which received the highest acclaim. Rather, it was 'Nationalism' which received both critique and praise. In the present Indian scenario, as the Preface points out, a debate on nationalism could not be more timely and urgent.

Our book does not so much look abroad to fathom the relevance of 'Nationalism', but it mainly looks inwards on the Indian situation. The reader is thankful for the introductory essay by Sabyasachi Bhattacharya who combines the skills of a historian and of a Tagore scholar to bring a strict historical perspective to this volume. His main contention is that Tagore's ideas on nationalism in India and elsewhere did not begin with his lectures in Japan and in the USA. Instead, they evolved in several stages and culminated during the First World War, but they by no means ended in 1916/1917. Apart from lectures, letters, essays, Rabindranath reflected on nationalism in, as mentioned, his novel 'Ghare Baire', in 'Chaturanga' and his satirical play 'Tasher Desh'.

Many authors have equated Tagore's rejection of nationalism with his promotion of internationalism. However, Sabyasachi Bhattacharya has rightly warned against a reductionist reading of Tagore's work with this juxtaposition in mind. Tagore was not against all forms of nationalism and certainly not in favour of all shades of internationalism. Although the focus of the book is intentionally narrow, the richness of material that is being discussed under the banner of Tagore's ideas of nationalism is stupendous. The twenty-four papers collected in this volume discuss the topic in Tagore's fiction, in his short stories, his travel writings, from the angle of colonial politics, from the binary of modernism

and Indian tradition, comparisons with Gandhi, Ambedkar and Premchand, and even with the Sikh Guru, Gobind Singh. All these perspectives may have been chosen by other authors before. But there are some truly astonishing new areas which the book opens to this discourse. A look at Ludwig Wittgenstein, the Austrian philosopher, contrasted with Tagore, is enlightening (although it is annoying that the author repeatedly calls him a 'German'). The comparison with the Spanish universalist writer Miguel de Unamuno is unusual as well. We must also be grateful for R. Siva Kumar's fresh insight into Tagore's attempt in Santiniketan to create a 'new community through artistic creativity'.

A final section of the 400-page-volume deals with the arts. It is less revealing that films on Tagore's themes, say, by Riwik Ghatak and Rituparna Ghosh, have a debate on nationalism. But to rope music and dance into this focus of nationalism is quite a feat and needs to be admired because Saurav Dasthakar and Aishika Chakraborty do it so imaginatively. Tagore's Rabindra Sangeet is here seen as a major resource to achieve 'leisure' in a modernity which first appears as alien and threatening. Aishika Chakraborty's essay has the title 'Dancing Against the Nation? Revisiting: Tagore's Politics of Performance' and opens a perspective on nationalism hitherto scarcely dealt with.

A certain overlap cannot be avoided when the focus of a book is narrow. Authors normally are quite irritated when editors tinker with their texts, trying to cut away repetitions. I do have less tolerance, however, for the many slips in spelling and the lack of uniformity. Has the book seen a copy editor? Anyway, these mistakes are more cosmetic and do not mar the content.