



## Rabindranath Tagore's *The Home and the World* in the Context of Contemporary India

Nilofar Yasmin

Assistant Professor, Sripat Singh College

Email: [nrtamann7@gmail.com](mailto:nrtamann7@gmail.com)

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.13.3.491](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.13.3.491)



### Article info

Article Received:15/08/2025  
Article Accepted: 19/09/2025  
Published online:22/09/2025

### Abstract

The feeling of nationalism was augmented with the rise of the anti-colonial movement during the freedom struggle in India. The regional, religious, and communal differences took a back seat for a greater cause of national integrity. Amidst the varying experiences of colonial atrocities, people chose to unite over a common national interest that would pave the way for the country's freedom. People from different regions of the country had varying colonial experiences based on their cultural identities or geographical locations, resulting in various expressions of nationalist feeling; some adhered to a radical approach that placed the nation above everything and justified anything in the name of the country. This paved the way for many other injustices and helped raise divided, radical, and sometimes communal approaches. There was a rise of another group of people who adhered to a more balanced and logical approach towards national issues. Tagore successfully portrays two contrary notions of nationalism through the characters of Sandip and Nikhil in his novel *The Home and the World*. My paper will try to analyze how Tagore's *The Home and the World* stood against time and happened to become an eye-opener even in present-day India. The growing menace of nationalistic issues has become dreadful and threatening in India nowadays. People are forced to showcase their love for the country on many occasions and, if they fail to do so, are beleaguered and tagged as anti-nationals. Love, when blinded by illusionary passion, may yield dreadful results, and this Tagore had beautifully illustrated in his book.

**Keywords:** Nationalism, Illusionary Passion, Home and the World, Contemporary India.

Nationalism in India and many other countries/colonies had an upsurge in close connection with the anti-colonial movement. It

paved the way for the people for a narrative of their understanding of who they are and defined their identity and sense of

belongingness with the land they identify as their motherland. During the growth of modern nationalism in the late nineteenth century, people from different cultures, races, and ethnicities began to unite for the greater cause of freedom. The sole purpose of freeing the nation was to help people look over other differences as trivial. The shared (common) interest of people from across the country made their bond over a supreme national interest; the impeccable bond gave birth to national unity amongst Indians from different regions, cultures, and religions. The varying experiences of colonialism across different provinces and geographical areas and varying levels of struggles for freedom led to obvious differences, resulting in conflicting notions of nationalism. On one side, some radical nationalists would justify anything in the name of national interest; the nation will be worshipped, and everything will be secondary to that. Contrary to that, there was a balanced, more rational, and logical approach to a nation wherein truth was valued over everything and criticism was welcomed for the betterment of the nation.

This paper will focus on this issue of conflicting nationalistic approaches through the perspective of Rabindranath Tagore in the light of his novel *The Home and the Word*. The Swadeshi movement in India plays the backdrop of the book. Tagore, through his three protagonists, Nikhil, Bimala, and Sandip, presents a global view of the conflicting notions of patriotism versus nationalism. The turmoil on the home front parallels the ongoing political upheaval in the outside world. During the Swadeshi movement, the production and use of domestic goods were promoted alongside the boycott of British commodities. This was a resultant effect of the non-cooperation movement carried forward by Gandhiji in the form of passive resistance and non-violence.

The novel *The Home and the World* is written against these socio-political movements. Through the narratives of three different characters, Tagore not only brings his personal

views on nationalism but also condemns extremist nationalism, which is destructive and harmful at various levels in the lives of common people. Nationalism has been a recurrent theme in many of Tagore's works, from prose to fiction, like another novel of his, *Gora*, and essays like *Nationalism in India*. In *The Home and the World*, Nikhilesh is a character who, on multiple occasions, becomes Tagore's mouthpiece. Nikhil represents a more inclusive and humane form of nationalism, advocating for mutual understanding and respect among people of different backgrounds. He reiterates Tagore's beliefs about women, society, politics, and freedom. By freedom, Tagore mainly emphasises the freedom of the self rather than mere political freedom. Sandip, on the other hand, embodies a more militant and exclusive form of nationalism, advocating for violent resistance against colonial rule. This dichotomy reflects contemporary debates on nationalism in India, where tensions between inclusive and exclusive notions of national identity are rising everywhere.

Tagore's perception of nationalism has mainly relied on ancient Indian philosophy, where the world was accepted as a single nest. In this way, Tagore was striving to dissociate himself from the general belief of nationalism and trying to associate it with ideas such as peace, harmony, and welfare. He argues further that if India decides to contribute to the world, it should be only in the form of humanity. Humanity, the world over, does not require a narrow but a broad sense of nationalism. Therefore, it should be formulated through various means of life. Tagore's idea of humanism goes beyond any boundaries or barriers and seeks at large a common place where humanity comes before any other kind of identity. He adds further that Saints such as Nanak, Kabir, and Chaitanya ignited the flame of humanism in Indian minds. But unfortunately, it faded over time with an aggressive rise of racism and the caste-based disintegration of our society. Nationalism is

being replaced by religious majoritarianism, and the freedom of expression is increasingly disallowed. The aspirations of the national movement for Independence are somewhat dwindling amidst the chaos of communal bigotry. Tagore, in his essay *Nationalism in India* writes-

“During the evolution of the Nation, the moral culture of brotherhood was limited by geographical boundaries because those boundaries were true at that time. Now, they have become imaginary lines of tradition divested of the qualities of real obstacles. So the time has come when man’s moral nature must deal with this great fact with all seriousness or perish.”-----  
Nationalism in India P-25

Time and again, Tagore reiterates that the love for one’s country can never be greater than the ideals of humanity. He dismisses the idolatry of a Nation that is placed before God or humanity. In *The Home and the World*, a similar idea reverberates when Sandip tells Nikhil about how his adoration is exclusive to his land and it also excludes veneration for any other country or man. He even justifies hatred as an aspect of prayer. Nikhil, on the other hand, echoes Tagore’s views when he says that if we worship God through man, then how can we deny the existence of the whole of humanity and other lands? He further argues-

“Sandip, I’ll be honest with you: when you try to pass off misdeeds as duty and irreverence as piety in the name of the nation-god, it pains my heart, and I can’t keep still. If I steal to satisfy my own needs, isn’t it a blow to the true love that I bear for myself? That’s why I can’t steal.”

The text clearly shows Nikhil’s love and admiration for his country but not at the cost of

truth and humanity. The novel grapples with questions of identity, particularly in the context of colonialism and patriarchy. Bimala, the protagonist, undergoes a journey of self-discovery as she navigates between her roles as a wife, a woman, and a Bengali in a changing society. Her interactions with Nikhil and Sandip force her to confront the complexities of her own identity and allegiances, reflecting the struggles of individuals in contemporary India to reconcile multiple facets of their identity in a rapidly changing world

Tagore explores the tension between tradition and modernity in “The Home and the World.” Nikhil represents the voice of reason and moderation, advocating for a synthesis of traditional values with progressive ideas. Sandip, on the other hand, represents radicalism and a rejection of traditional norms in favour of revolutionary fervour. The novel portrays a struggle between two visions of India: the nationalist ideal, represented by Sandip, and the more universal, humanist perspective, represented by Nikhil.

The protagonist, Bimala is torn between her loyalty to her husband and her attraction towards Sandip's passionate nationalism, which is more of a belligerent, militant form as compared to Nikhil's adoration for gradual reform through ethical principles over blind patriotism. This conflict intricately illustrates how the personal turmoil at the home front could not escape from political ideologies of the outside world; rather stirred for the worse. Tagore has critiqued through Bimala's internal struggle the way varying ideologies of nationalism can creep in personal spaces and individual moral judgement. This debate of tradition vs modernity is still relevant in contemporary India, where discussions persist about the role of tradition in shaping national identity and social norms in the face of globalisation.

The gender dynamics that persist in traditional Indian society are beautifully

illustrated in the course of the novel. Bimala's character embodies the role of women in adjusting to the complexities of experiences in a patriarchal society, where they are often confined to traditional roles but seek agency and autonomy. Through the portrayal of Bimala's journey, the challenges faced by women in navigating societal expectations and asserting their own identities are aptly highlighted, echoing contemporary discussions on gender equality and women's empowerment in India.

The problem of race is not limited to India and its people only, but the world powers like Europe and America too have indulged in violent methods to keep aloof from other races like Red Indians or negro, with a sense of superior air. Despite great difficulties, India has tried and is still trying to acknowledge the real differences among races by seeking some basic unity. Each strife towards the attainment of his brute instinct is solely driven by self-love/interest, but higher instincts like sympathy and mutual help restrain him from perishing or living in a state of degradation. A balance between self-interest and common interest is a must for the smooth functioning of a nation. At present, all the different races have come together, and again, we are confronted with varying ideologies and alternatives. Now, the question is whether all the different ideologies go on fighting one another or reconciling for a common good.

Nationalism in contemporary India is a multifaceted and deeply influential phenomenon that intersects with politics, society, and culture. Understanding its current manifestations requires exploring its historical roots, ideological variations, and impacts on various aspects of Indian life.

The narrative of nationalism has evolved significantly over the years from its origins during the struggles against British colonial rule in India. The vision of a unified, secular, and democratic nation-state propagated during the independence movement was

enshrined in the constitution. It was laid on the foundation of pluralism, secularism and social justice. These democratic principles promote inclusive citizenship that celebrates Indian identity through shared values and commitment to the constitution. These zeal for nationalism align with the vision of leaders like Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru who advocated for unity in diversity.

Organizations like the Bharatiya Janata Party and Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh are prominent components that promote ethnic and cultural nationalism, aiming at redefining Indian identity in terms of Hindu cultural heritage which critics say curtails the rights of ethnic or religious minorities. A significant transformation in narratives of nationalism has gained momentum with the ascendance of BJP, which is reshaping the chronicles of national identity. An emphasis on Hindu cultural values is central to this vision that has sparked widespread debate concerning the secular nature and minority rights. This articulation is not restricted to government rhetoric but also in public discourse and social movements. Citizenship Amendment Act and National Register of Citizens have acted as flashpoints in national debates. The growing fear of institutionalised discrimination through such measures will render certain communities vulnerable to statelessness, challenging the ethos of the constitution. Thereby, the nation-wise protests reflect deep anxiety about citizenship, identity and republican values.

Cultural narratives through popular modes like media, cinema and literature valorise military heroism, national achievement and patriotic fervour, thereby contributing to a collective sense of pride and unity, reinforcing the image of India as a strong, cohesive nation. Media representation often echoes governmental narratives, creating a symbiotic relationship between state ideology and popular culture. This blending of entertainment and political messaging can sometimes lead to the

marginalisation of dissenting ideologies and critical voices.

Putting one religious or cultural identity above others can make divisions in the community worse, which could lead to social unrest, violence, and the exclusion of minorities. These changes have real effects on the lives of India's religious and ethnic minorities, many of whom feel more and more alone in the current political and social climate.

The shrinking space for democratic dissent is also a very important issue. In some cases, the rise of nationalism has made it harder for people to speak out against things. Journalists, professors, student leaders, and activists who speak out against official stories or support groups that are not well-known often face censorship, harassment, or legal action. This trend is a big threat to free speech and democratic accountability, which are two of the most important parts of any working democracy. When nationalism is used to silence criticism and alternate points of view, it can easily turn into authoritarianism under the guise of patriotism.

Ultimately, nationalism in contemporary India represents a multifaceted and often contradictory terrain. On one end of the spectrum lies civic nationalism – an inclusive form based on shared democratic values, constitutional rights, and equality before the law. On the other end is cultural nationalism – exclusionary in nature, rooted in a singular historical and religious identity. The tension between these two forms is not merely academic; it manifests in policy decisions, public behavior, and the socio-political climate of the nation.

As India continues to evolve as a global power, how it balances these competing visions of nationalism will critically determine the strength of its democratic institutions, the cohesion of its social fabric, and its standing in the international community. The challenge lies in cultivating a form of nationalism that is

inclusive, pluralistic, and respectful of India's rich diversity – a nationalism that does not merely tolerate differences, but celebrates them as integral to the Indian identity.

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