



## Rabindranath Tagore on Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism: A Critical Exploration of His Global Vision and Contemporary Relevance

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### Abstract

Rabindranath Tagore, the Nobel laureate poet, philosopher, and humanist, occupies a singular position in the intellectual history of modern Asia. His engagement with the twin currents of nationalism and cosmopolitanism constitutes one of the most searching and morally urgent enquiries produced during the colonial era. This paper examines Tagore's global vision – a vision rooted in the ideal of universal human solidarity, the inviolability of individual conscience, and the transcendence of narrow political boundaries. Drawing primarily on his celebrated lecture series *Nationalism* (1917) and his broader philosophical writings, the paper undertakes a close reading of Tagore's perception of the nation-state as a mechanical and ultimately dehumanising apparatus that subordinates the spiritual and cultural richness of civilisation to the imperatives of power, competition, and exclusion. Discussion: The paper analyses how Tagore's critique of nationalism was not a negation of cultural identity but a passionate defence of a more expansive, relational selfhood grounded in cosmopolitanism – the belief that humanity constitutes a single moral community whose bonds of empathy and creativity transcend the accidents of geography and statehood. The discussion situates Tagore's thought within the political turbulences of his time, including colonialism, the First World War, and the rising tide of aggressive nationalisms across Europe and Asia, demonstrating how these contexts sharpened the urgency and radicalism of his ethical positions. The paper concludes by assessing the contemporary relevance of Tagore's cosmopolitan humanism in an era marked by resurgent ethno-nationalism, civilisational anxiety, and global interdependence, arguing that his thought offers indispensable moral and philosophical resources for rethinking the relationship between belonging, difference, and human solidarity.

**Keywords:** Tagore's Global Vision, Nationalism, Cosmopolitanism, Perception, Contemporary Relevance.

## 1. Introduction

Few thinkers of the modern era confronted the problem of nationalism with the philosophical depth, cultural breadth, and moral courage that Rabindranath Tagore brought to it. Born in 1861 in Bengal, and composing across poetry, fiction, drama, music, and philosophical prose, Tagore's intellectual formation was shaped by the great paradox of his age: the simultaneous awakening of colonised peoples to self-determination and the catastrophic violence that aggressive nationalism had unleashed upon the world. His Nobel Prize in Literature in 1913 confirmed his stature as a global voice, yet it was his sustained critique of the very concept of the modern nation-state that proved most prescient and most controversial.

This paper examines Tagore's perception of nationalism and cosmopolitanism as interlocking philosophical problems. It argues that Tagore's global vision was not the detached reverie of an idealist estranged from political realities, but a rigorous moral response to the dehumanising logic of the modern state. The paper is structured around three interrelated enquiries: first, an analysis of Tagore's critique of nationalism as it appears in his lectures and essays; second, an exploration of his positive cosmopolitan vision and its philosophical foundations; and third, an assessment of the contemporary relevance of his thought for a world grappling once again with the resurgence of ethnic nationalism and political exclusion.

## 2. Tagore's Global Vision: Foundations and Sources

Tagore's global vision drew upon a rich confluence of intellectual and spiritual sources. From the Upanishadic tradition, he inherited the concept of *atman* – the idea that the individual self is not sealed within its own boundaries but participates in a universal spiritual reality. From the Bengali Baul and bhakti traditions, he drew a devotional humanism that refused the separations enforced by caste, creed, and

nationality. From his engagement with Western Romanticism and Enlightenment universalism, he extracted the conviction that reason and aesthetic experience alike point toward a common human nature that precedes and exceeds any particular political community.

This vision was institutionally realized in Tagore's founding of Visva-Bharati at Santiniketan in 1921, a university whose very name—meaning “the world in one nest”—embodied his cosmopolitan aspiration. He envisioned the institution as a meeting point of Eastern and Western learning, a space in which knowledge would circulate freely across civilisational boundaries without being domesticated by the parochial demands of any single national tradition. Tagore's global vision was thus simultaneously educational, aesthetic, and political: it sought to cultivate the kind of citizen who could hold multiple affiliations simultaneously, whose loyalty to humanity would always qualify and temper loyalty to the state.

Tagore's global vision was not a "colourless" erasure of differences but a pursuit of "unity without destroying differences". He believed in the essential unification of the universe and human beings, acquired through the mind's relation to the outside world. This vision was physically manifested in Visva-Bharati (1921), established as a "link between India and the world" to study humanity across all races. His vision prioritized *Atmashakti* (inner strength) and social cooperation over statist political movements.

The paper analyses the unique philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore regarding nationalism, society, and humanism. Rather than supporting the aggressive, mechanical model of the Western nation-state, Tagore advocated for "Samaj," an organic social fabric built on moral cooperation and cultural diversity. His intellectual journey is frequently illustrated through his literary masterpieces, such as *Gora* and *The Home and the World*. The

paper examines how Tagore's rejection of narrow sectarianism and his pursuit of universal human values served as a critique of both colonial rule and militant anti-colonial movements. The study looks at Tagore's vision as a humanistic framework that prioritizes internal social reform and intellectual liberty over mere political independence. These perspectives remain relevant today as a potential remedy for modern religious intolerance and hyper-nationalist fervour.

### 3. Tagore's Critique of Nationalism

Tagore's most systematic engagement with nationalism is found in his 1916-1917 lecture tours of Japan and the United States, subsequently published as *Nationalism* (1917). These lectures were delivered at a moment of acute historical irony: Japan's rapid modernisation was being celebrated as an Asian triumph, even as it was already exhibiting the militaristic and expansionist tendencies that would culminate in catastrophe. Tagore's perception was devastatingly clear: Japan had absorbed not only the technological achievements of Western civilisation but also its most dangerous pathology – the organisation of human society as a nation-machine devoted to competitive power.

For Tagore, the nation is not a natural or organic community but a historical construction built upon the systematic subordination of human beings to administrative, economic, and military imperatives. He distinguished sharply between society – which he regarded as a living, creative, and spiritually rich form of human association – and the state, which he saw as an apparatus of organisation that progressively hollows out the moral and cultural substance of society in the service of collective power. In his view, nationalism demanded precisely the kind of moral abdication that civilisation ought to resist: the surrender of individual conscience to collective interest, the replacement of empathy with

rivalry, and the elevation of territorial sovereignty above universal humanity.

Tagore was equally critical of Indian nationalism, even as he sympathised with the aspirations for self-governance that animated the independence movement. He consistently warned against the danger of reproducing, in the name of national liberation, the very structures of domination that colonialism had imposed. His disagreements with Gandhi on this point are well documented: while Gandhi's programme of non-cooperation and swadeshi appealed to a revival of village-based tradition and self-sufficiency, Tagore feared that it risked narrowing the Indian mind and closing it to the universal currents of thought and creativity that he regarded as essential to genuine freedom. For Tagore, freedom that was merely political – freedom that replaced British rulers with Indian ones without transforming the underlying structures of social life – was a diminished and ultimately illusory achievement.

### 4. Cosmopolitanism: The Positive Vision

Tagore's cosmopolitanism was not the bloodless universalism of abstract principle but a deeply felt conviction that human beings achieve their fullest development only in genuine encounter with those who are different from themselves. His concept of *manush* – the ideal human being – was not defined by national, religious, or caste identity but by the capacity for love, creativity, and spiritual aspiration. This figure of the ideal human appears repeatedly in his *Gitanjali*, his songs, and his philosophical essays, always as a being whose ultimate horizon is not the nation but the universe.

Tagore's cosmopolitanism was also deeply attentive to the question of cultural particularity. Unlike some strands of Western liberal universalism, he did not assume that a cosmopolitan community required the dissolution of distinct cultural identities into a homogeneous global whole. On the contrary, he believed that the richness of human civilisation

lay precisely in the diversity of its cultural traditions, each of which had developed unique forms of knowledge, beauty, and spiritual insight. The task of cosmopolitanism was not to erase these differences but to create the conditions under which they could enter into genuine dialogue, mutually enriching one another without any single tradition asserting dominance over the rest. This vision is perhaps most clearly articulated in his essay *The Centre of Indian Culture* (1919), where he argued that India's historic genius had been precisely its capacity for creative synthesis – its ability to absorb and transform diverse cultural influences without losing its own spiritual depth.

### 5. Perception and Contemporary Relevance

In his time, Tagore was often iconized as a "mystic" or "Eastern Sage," a perception that frequently eclipsed his role as a knowledgeable intellectual and pragmatist. Today, his work has renewed significance as a critique of "democratic capitalism" and its ecological consequences. His "deep ecology" approach – viewing man, nature, and God as integrated – is increasingly relevant to movements like Permaculture and Transition, which focus on local resilience and sustainability.

### 6. Discussion: Tensions and Paradoxes

A sophisticated reading of Tagore must acknowledge the genuine tensions within his thought. His critique of nationalism left him politically isolated at several crucial moments: accused by some nationalists of obstructing the independence movement and misunderstood by Western admirers who sometimes reduced his cosmopolitanism to a kind of spiritual quietism. The perception of Tagore as an otherworldly poet indifferent to political struggle is, however, a serious distortion. His resignation of the knighthood in 1919, following the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, was an act of profound political courage; his travels across Asia, Europe, and the Americas were not the journeys of a cultural tourist but deliberate

engagements with the political and intellectual currents of his time.

There is also a productive tension in Tagore between his critique of tradition and his appeal to it. While he consistently challenged the caste-based, patriarchal, and doctrinaire aspects of Indian tradition, he simultaneously drew upon its deepest philosophical and aesthetic resources as the foundation for his cosmopolitan vision. This is not inconsistency but the mark of a genuinely dialectical thinker: one who recognised that the resources for resisting dehumanisation are often embedded in the very traditions that also contain the seeds of oppression, and that the task of the critic is not wholesale rejection but discriminating renewal.

Scholars such as Partha Chatterjee have questioned whether Tagore's cosmopolitanism was itself implicated in certain elitist assumptions – that his vision of cultural dialogue presupposed an educated, leisured subject capable of transcending the immediate pressures of economic and political survival. This is a serious challenge that Tagorean scholarship must continue to engage. Yet it is also worth noting that Tagore was acutely aware of the social dimensions of freedom: his novels, short stories, and educational experiments all reflect a sustained concern with the conditions under which ordinary men and women might access the forms of creative and intellectual life that he regarded as essential to human flourishing.

### 7. Contemporary Relevance

The contemporary relevance of Tagore's thought is difficult to overstate. The early twenty-first century has witnessed a global resurgence of ethno-nationalism, populist authoritarianism, and civilisational chauvinism that Tagore would have recognised with horrified familiarity. Across Europe, Asia, and the Americas, political movements have mobilised the language of national identity, cultural purity, and sovereign self-determination in ways that echo precisely the

dynamics that Tagore identified as most dangerous in the modern nation-state: the reduction of complex human beings to members of a single collective, the demonisation of the Other, and the subordination of ethical principle to political interest.

At the same time, the challenges of climate change, global pandemics, and transnational inequality have made the limitations of the nation-state framework increasingly apparent. Problems that exceed the capacity of any single state to solve require precisely the kinds of cosmopolitan solidarity and institutional imagination that Tagore advocated. His insistence that human civilisation constitutes a shared inheritance – that the gains of knowledge, art, and ethical reflection belong to humanity as a whole and cannot be monopolised by any single nation – speaks directly to the need for a politics of global responsibility adequate to the crises of the present.

Tagore's thought also offers resources for rethinking the relationship between cultural identity and political community in postcolonial contexts. His model of cosmopolitanism as creative synthesis rather than homogenising universalism provides an alternative to both the parochialism of ethnic nationalism and the cultural imperialism of certain forms of Western liberalism. For societies negotiating the complex inheritances of colonialism, tradition, and modernity, his example of a thinker who remained simultaneously rooted and open – deeply Bengali and genuinely universal – retains its exemplary power.

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Permaculture and Transition, which focus on local resilience and sustainability.

## 8. Conclusions and Suggestions

This paper has argued that Tagore's engagement with nationalism and cosmopolitanism constitutes one of the most searching and morally serious contributions to modern political philosophy. His perception of the nation-state as a machine that dehumanises those it claims to serve, his insistence on the spiritual and cultural dimensions of human freedom, and his vision of a cosmopolitan community founded on creative dialogue rather than competitive power – all of these elements form a coherent and compelling philosophical position whose importance has only grown with time.

Several suggestions emerge from this analysis. First, Tagore's work deserves fuller integration into the canon of modern political philosophy, alongside Arendt, Rawls, and Habermas, rather than being confined to the specialised literature on South Asian intellectual history. Second, the educational model he pioneered at Visva-Bharati – with its emphasis on intercultural encounter, creative learning, and the cultivation of universal sympathy – warrants serious reconsideration as a template for global citizenship education. Third, scholars working on the ethics of global justice and climate governance would benefit from closer engagement with Tagore's framework, which provides philosophical resources for grounding cosmopolitan obligation in a vision of shared human creativity rather than abstract rational principles alone.

Tagore wrote in 1917 that the world was being turned into a running track for nations to compete in. More than a century later, that image retains its disturbing precision. The task he set before his readers – to resist the dehumanising logic of competitive nationalism and to build instead the institutions and habits of mind adequate to a genuinely shared world – remains as urgent and as unfinished as ever.

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