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Why Does Tagore Oppose Western Model of Political Nationalism?

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Abstract

In his seminal essays *Nationalism* (1917) Rabindranath Tagore opposed western aggressive model of political nationalism because for it placed the nation above humanity, morality, and spiritual values. He argues that the Western model of nationalism emerged from imperialism, materialism, and the desire for political and economic domination. Tagore believed that India should not imitate the western model because India's civilization is founded on cultural diversity, spiritual unity, and human values. He maintains that political freedom without spiritual freedom is incomplete and that true civilization is measured by the development of humanity rather than the strength of the state. This paper critically examines Tagore's rejection of Western political nationalism and highlights his vision of a humanistic, ethical, and inclusive society. It also demonstrates the continuing relevance of Tagore's ideas in today's world, where aggressive nationalism, intolerance, and global conflicts threaten peace and human coexistence.

Keywords: Nationalism Humanity, diversity, freedom, Universalism, inclusive, conflicts, coexistence.

INTRODUCTION

Why does Tagore Oppose Political Nationalism? A Justification

Rabindranath Tagore's opposition to political nationalism is not a rejection of love for one's country but a rejection of an aggressive political ideology that places the nation above humanity. He distinguishes between patriotism, which is rooted in affection for one's land and people, and political nationalism, which is driven by power, competition, and domination.

Tagore's criticism is justified because he believed that nationalism, as it developed in Europe, encouraged imperialism, militarism, economic exploitation, and moral decline. Rather than promoting peace, it transformed nations into mechanical organizations devoted to political and commercial interests. Rabindranath Tagore's opposition to political nationalism is not a rejection of love for one's country but a "rejection of an aggressive political ideology that places the nation above

humanity" (Tagore 5). Tagore argues that human communities have existed since ancient times. Early societies united for hunting, agriculture, protection, and social cooperation. Although these communities possessed a collective identity, they were never organized according to the modern concept of the nation-state. Political nationalism emerged much later in Europe as a product of industrialization, capitalism, and imperial expansion. Since this model evolved under specific European historical conditions, it could not be universally applied to civilizations such as India, because its social and cultural foundations were entirely different. Critique of Nationalism According to Rabindranath Tagore Rabindranath Tagore was a not only a great poet but also an original thinker through his writing, express his views on various social cultural and political aspects. As a philosopher he was contributed to the existing discourse on Nationalism of his time. Although a political nature he came close to nationalist movement and wrote various patriotic songs and poems. However gradually he became disillusion by nationalism due to various factors like use of violence by nationalist and freedom fighters and self-certainness, hunger for material wealth and political power and ignorance of humanism and spiritualism. He also criticized Western nation of nationalism for its chauvinism greed for political and economic power. Tagore's thought in nationalism are shattered in his literature. Tagore's critique of narrow and aggressive nationalism brought him close to the idea of such cosmopolitanism which believes in universal humanism, spiritual universalism, cooperation and coexistence. Main perspectives of Tagore's concepts of Nationalism - 1. Critic of Western nationalism- Tagore's experience within the Western model of nationalism -- particularly in Britain and Japan let his to view it as a restrictive and aggressive Ideology. He argued that Western nationalism encouraged nationalism, economic exploitation, and colonial domination which went against universal human values he criticized. 2.

Spiritual humanism over national identity - Tagore advocated for a spiritual humanism where people see themselves as a part of interconnected world rather than limiting their identities to nation. He believed that humanities focus should be on the universal rather than confined national boundaries which he saw as arbitrary and division. 3. Nationalism as a Trade to Individual Freedom - Tagore feared that nationalism would suppressed individual freedom and create a blind alliance to the state. He saw it as a force that could create division, reduce the importance of cultural and intellectual diversity and impose narrow. 4. Criticism of Indian nationalism - While Tagore support India's freedom struggle he was critical of the nationalist movement integration towards violation. He felt that Indian nationalism should be based on self-reliance, cultural identity, and respect for all communities rather than merely opposing colonial powers. 5. Globalization and universal brotherhood - Tagore's vision was for world united by a shared respect for all human beings. He argued that love and mutual respect which means people should transcend border and political division. Tagore believed in a world where unity of mankind was more important than narrow national interest. 6. Works of nationalism - Tagore's essay especially in his book "Nationalism" 1971 present his thought on nationalism particularly Western style of nationalism, would be dangerous. In it he emphasized the nationalism was practiced and argued for social build on cooperation and universal values rather than competition and aggression. Different types of Nationalism- 1. Cultural Nationalism- According to Rabindranath Tagore, cultural nationalism emphasizes preserving India's rich cultural heritage, diversity, and spiritual unity over a narrow, political form of nationalism. He believed that a strong national identity should be rooted in cultural and moral self-reliance, fostered through art, literature, and education, and should complement universal human values rather than being replaced by them. Tagore saw Indian culture as an internal,

spiritual force that was distinct from and superior to the political, often destructive, nationalism of the West. . Cultural preservation: Tagore championed the preservation of Indian traditions, culture, and heritage as the foundation of national identity. . Spiritual and humanistic values: He promoted a nationalism based on universal human values like love, compassion, and equality, believing that these should guide national development and be more important than political power. . Promoting internal strength: He advocated for a society that was self-reliant and developed from within, urging Indians to build their strength on their own cultural inheritance rather than simply imitating the West.

His criticism gains further strength from the history of European colonialism. European powers justified imperial conquest in the name of national glory and economic prosperity. Millions of people in Asia and Africa suffered political subjugation, economic exploitation, and cultural humiliation because of nationalist ambitions. For Tagore, political nationalism therefore represented not liberation but organized domination. It glorified power while neglecting justice and compassion. Consequently, he urged humanity to replace narrow national interests with universal moral responsibility. Scholars have observed that Tagore regarded nationalism as a dangerous political force because it encouraged domination instead of ethical cooperation (Nandy 61).

Tagore's opposition is particularly relevant to India. Unlike Europe, India developed as a civilization rather than merely as a political state. Its unity was based on shared spiritual traditions, cultural diversity, and centuries of coexistence among different communities. Political nationalism, however, reduces this rich diversity to a single political identity. Tagore therefore argues that India's strength lies not in copying European nationalism but in preserving its civilizational values of tolerance, harmony, and spiritual

unity. As Bhikhu Parekh argues, Tagore imagined India as a civilization of plural cultures rather than a centralized nation-state (Parekh 119). His criticism also extends to modern education. Tagore believes that schools encourage students to neglecting humanity. Such education creates loyal citizens but not morally responsible human beings. A nation cannot become truly great unless it recognizes that human dignity is superior to political power. In this sense, Tagore's opposition to nationalism is an affirmation of universal humanism.

Review of Literature

Nationalism has been an important issue in political, philosophical and literary discourses. Many political thinkers discussed the issue with different angles. There have been many scholars who have dealt the issue of nationalism in relation to Rabindranath Tagore. Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson, in *Rabindranath Tagore: The Myriad-Minded Man*, examine Tagore's intellectual development and demonstrate that his political thought was deeply influenced by his commitment to human dignity, moral freedom, and cultural harmony. They argue that Tagore consistently preferred spiritual civilization to political domination and regarded ethical development as the true foundation of national progress. Tagore isn't against nationalism. He is a cosmic scholar. He respects unity in diversity. He celebrates heterogeneous, an amalgamation of cultures and their peaceful coexistence. This is the basic difference between Indian and European point of view in relation with nationalism. Scholars like Dutta Krishna, Andrew Robinson, Ashis Nandy, Bhikhu Parekh and Amartya Sen have thrown light upon multiple aspects of nationalism. As Ashis Nandy, in his *The Illegitimacy of Nationalism*, ponders over the concept of nationalism. According to him Tagore was fundamentally a humanistic person. He believed in oneness of all cultural and political ideology. He wanted to establish a society which is spiritually advanced one. He

desired a society based upon human values. He rejected materialistic and mechanical society. According to him in such society people crushed down humanity. Human relations are doomed. Tagore was a visionary. He advocated freedom and moral values. Tagore was a multiculturalist. Tagore's views are very relevant today. Today political nationalism has an edge over humanism. This is dangerous for humanity. Bhikhu Parekh touches upon the most significant dimension of Tagore's concept of nationalism. According to him Tagore promotes universality of cultures. All cultures in the world are connected. He talks of the world citizenship. An individual belongs to the world. Although people live in particular geographic areas yet they share cultural unity. Hence, Tagore concept of nationalism is universal. It is all inclusive. The western concept of political nationalism excludes the weak. It divides the world. Hence, it gives birth to wars in the world. While Amartya Sen in his *The Argumentative Indian* points out some relevant aspects of Tagore's nationalism. According to him Tagore respects intellectual freedom, rational enquiry and cultural openness. Tagore's nationalism open ended. It welcomes everyone. It does not divide people in the name of religion, caste, color, culture and gender. On the other hand, political nationalism compels people to fight with one another in the name of caste, religion, color, and gender. Hence, political nationalism hampers coexistence of human beings. Very few scholars have paid attention to the cause of rejection of Tagore to political nationalism. This research article fills the gap in earlier researches on Tagore's nationalism. Scholars in the most recent years seem to have done researches on Rabindranath Tagore's Nationalism. Rinku Lamba in her study observes Tagore's concept of universal society. She points out that Tagore emphasizes harmonious social relationship following moral values. Anupam Kumar in his research discusses as how Tagore rejects rootless cosmopolitanism and favors synthesis of cultural identity and universal humanism. He highlights the importance of Tagore's

philosophy at current times. A Japanese scholar Zeljko Cipris highlights Tagore's opposition to militaristic nationalism in Asia through his correspondence with Yone Noguchi, a Japanese poet. Recent research confirms the fact that relevance of Tagore's humanistic critique of nationalism while also revealing the need for a focused examination of why he regarded the Western model of political nationalism as incompatible with India's civilizational ethos.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research article is a textual analysis. Hence it adopts analytical and interpretative research methodology. The primary source of this research article is Rabindranath Tagore's *Nationalism*. The lectures show the intellectual, cultural, philosophical, social and political depth of the writer. The article adopts an interpretative method to analyze the text.

The Danger of Imitating the West

Another reason why Tagore rejects political nationalism is that it encourages blind imitation of Western political history. Every civilization develops according to its own historical experiences, cultural values, and social needs. When one nation borrows another's political institutions without understanding its own traditions, it weakens its cultural identity.

Tagore illustrates this danger through the example of Japan. Rapid modernization enabled Japan to become militarily powerful, yet it also encouraged imperial ambitions that eventually led to destruction. The pursuit of borrowed political strength failed to produce genuine moral or spiritual development. India, therefore, should avoid repeating the same mistake.

Tagore clearly states: "We in India must make up our minds that we cannot borrow other people's history, and that if we stifle our own we are committing suicide. When you borrow things that do not belong to your life, they only serve to crush your life" (103). This argument

justifies his opposition because borrowed nationalism produces imitation rather than authentic national development.

Spiritual Civilization versus Political Power

Tagore distinguishes between material progress and spiritual civilization. Western nationalism measures success through military strength, industrial expansion, and political influence. He considers these achievements incomplete because they ignore the moral development of individuals.

He argues that intellectual education alone cannot create a civilized society. True civilization requires compassion, self-restraint, justice, and spiritual freedom. Material prosperity without moral responsibility ultimately leads to violence and exploitation. The catastrophic wars of the twentieth century later proved the accuracy of Tagore's warning. National pride, when combined with military ambition, resulted in unprecedented destruction. Krishna Dutta similarly notes that Tagore consistently placed moral and spiritual freedom above political success (Dutta and Robinson 214).

Nationalism as a Mechanical Organization

Perhaps Tagore's strongest criticism is directed against the mechanical nature of political nationalism. He defines the nation as "the aspect of the whole people as an organized power" (106). Organization is necessary for administration, but when it becomes the supreme ideal, individuals lose their creativity, freedom, and moral independence.

The western model political nationalism demands continuous sacrifice from ordinary citizens while serving the interests of political elites. Instead of promoting human welfare, it often pursues wealth, military power, and economic domination. Tagore therefore compares nationalism to a machine that functions efficiently but lacks moral personality. History repeatedly confirms this point of view. Fascism in Italy, Nazism in Germany, Japanese

militarism, and various forms of colonial imperialism all demonstrate how nationalism can become an instrument of oppression when divorced from ethical values. Therefore, Tagore adds: "For thereby man's power of sacrifice is diverted from his ultimate object, which is moral, to the maintenance of this organization which is mechanical" (107).

India's Real Challenge

According to Tagore the greatest problems are social rather than political. Colonial rule certainly oppressed humanity but social inequalities, caste discrimination, communal divisions, and blind adherence to outdated customs had already weakened the nation internally.

Political independence alone could not eliminate these problems. Even after the end of colonial rule, social injustice would continue unless Indians transformed their moral and social institutions. Therefore, political nationalism, by focusing exclusively on reforms and political representation, ignored the deeper causes.

Concept of Real Freedom

One of Tagore's most profound insights is his distinction between political freedom and spiritual freedom. A country may become politically independent while its people remain psychologically, morally, and economically enslaved. Freedom without ethical responsibility merely changes the identity of the rulers. Tagore writes: "In the so-called free countries the majority of the people are not free; they are driven by the minority to a goal which is not even known to them" (118). This insight remains remarkably relevant today, when many democratic societies continue to struggle with inequality, consumerism, and political manipulation.

The Relevance of Tagore's Critique

Events after Tagore's lifetime strongly validate his opposition to political nationalism. The First and Second World Wars, the

Holocaust, colonial violence, ethnic conflicts, and contemporary religious extremism all reveal the destructive consequences of aggressive nationalism. Nations that place political interests above human values often generate hatred, intolerance, and violence.

At the same time, institutions such as the United Nations, international human rights movements, and global peace initiatives reflect the universal humanism that Tagore envisioned. His philosophy anticipates the need for international cooperation based on justice, compassion, and mutual respect rather than political domination.

Thus, Tagore's opposition to political nationalism should not be interpreted as opposition to patriotism. Rather, it is a moral critique of any political ideology that sacrifices humanity for power. His vision of a civilization founded upon spiritual freedom, ethical responsibility, and universal brotherhood continues to provide a compelling alternative to aggressive nationalism. More than a century later, his warning remains both intellectually persuasive and morally indispensable.

CONCLUSION

Rabindranath Tagore's viewed Western nationalism as a mechanical and materialistic system that encourages domination, conflict, and the neglect of human values. Unlike political thinkers who regarded the nation-state as the highest ideal, Tagore placed humanity above the nation. He believed that the strength lies not in military or political power but in its spiritual heritage, cultural diversity, and moral traditions.

Tagore also warned against blindly imitating Western political models. He argued that every nation must develop according to its own historical and cultural experience. The real challenge was not merely political independence but the removal of social evils such as caste discrimination, inequality, and superstition. Without moral and social reform,

political freedom alone would remain incomplete. Contemporary scholars continue to regard Tagore's critique as one of the most significant alternatives to aggressive nationalism in modern political thought (Sen 95).

Ultimately, Tagore envisioned a world where nations cooperate rather than compete and where human dignity transcends political boundaries. His philosophy of universal humanism, ethical responsibility, and spiritual freedom continues to offer valuable guidance in an age marked by aggressive nationalism, intolerance, and global conflicts. His message reminds us that the true greatness of a nation lies in its humanity rather than its political power.

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