Misrepresentations of Rabindranath Tagore at 150

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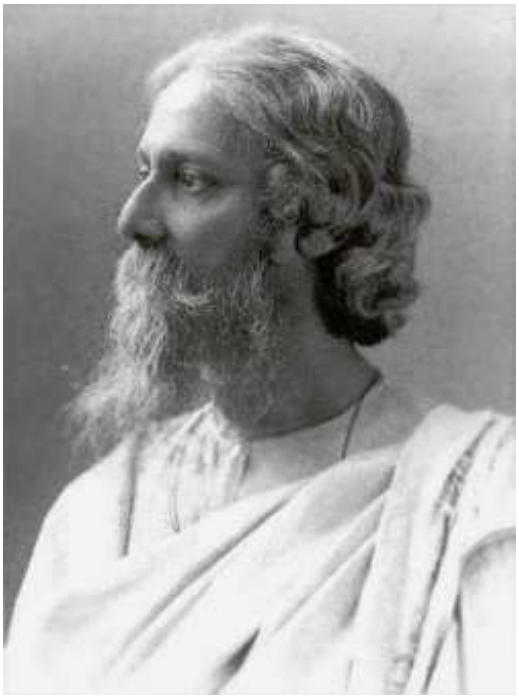
The first Asian genius to bring 'Eastern culture' to the west remains a cultural icon. But his undoubted global relevance has always been contested, and his alternative concept of modernity is so still.

The Bengali poet, writer and philosopher Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) remains a unique, though still under-recognised genius. Tagore's cultural production was vast, covering poetry, prose and plays; an astonishing volume of music which is played and sung throughout Bengal to this day (and includes the national anthems of two countries, India and Bangladesh); internationally acclaimed and exhibited paintings; social, political and philosophical essays; agrarian reform; pioneering environmentalism; the creation of a school and a university. His philosophy of education may yet come to be seen as one of his most significant contributions.



Rabindranath Tagore in a sage pose: Photograph probably taken in 1915, the year he was granted the Knighthood by George V: *Image: Wikimedia Commons*

Despite all this, and compared to his contemporaries Gandhi and Nehru, relatively few people have heard of Rabindranath Tagore. A Titan of the Bengal Renaissance, Tagore was cast in Romantic mould by a briefly admiring modernist intelligentsia in England. In India he was feted but also castigated for supposedly betraying the nationalist Left. Much maligned and often misunderstood, recovering Tagore's thought and life in all its complexity is important today – as the twenty-first century eclipse of the West by the East unfolds – for the fact that he tried to imagine and articulate an alternative modernity: not a Eurocentric one but a parallel Indian or 'Eastern' modernity that would necessarily involve inter-cultural dialogue and convergence. Tagore would have passionately opposed the post-9/11 'clash of civilisations' argument.

The global relevance of a cultural icon

The Tagore family had a profound influence on the cultural, religious and literary life of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Kolkata. Tagore's grandfather, 'Prince' Dwarkanath Tagore was a fabulously wealthy landowner, businessman and entrepreneur, who believed that race was not necessarily a barrier between himself and his British metropolitan peers. Dwarkanath travelled to London in 1842 and 1845 where his social connections enabled him to dine at Buckingham Palace with Queen Victoria. Rabindranath's father, Debendranath, was a different character: a scholar and founder of the Hindu reformist Brahmo Samaj, which occupied a highly influential position within the nineteenth century Kolkata intelligentsia. At the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century Kolkata was still the formal capital of British India and the pre-eminent political, cultural and economic city of empire, and in that city there was no aspect of cultural or intellectual life – from religious and social reform to music, art and theatre – in which one of the Tagores did not excel.

There were many Indian travellers to Britain in the nineteenth century. Later, Tagore's near contemporary Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was recognised, grudgingly in most British quarters, as

a political figure of substance and then, with wider adulation, as a social and political thinker. But no intellectual from a country colonised by one of the European imperial nations ever came close to achieving the fame that Tagore enjoyed after winning the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913. Tagore was the first Asian to bring what might loosely be referred to as 'Eastern culture' into the mainstream of intellectual life in the West, from Europe to America, north and south. For a man of his time he travelled astonishingly widely.[1] Tagore's writings have been translated into English, Spanish, French, German and a number of Asian languages. After 1912 Tagore also began to write directly in English and he became not just a Bengali writer but a globally recognised English language writer too. Tagore in English is out there in the world, and for many admirers and critics alike, Tagore in English is all that can be accessed. That includes non-Indians, but also many millions of Indians who do not know Bengali.

The issue of translation has always been a controversial one. Tagore's meteoric rise to fame in the West was almost matched by the suddenness in the decline in his reputation. That reputation is yet to recover, and many commentators have blamed poor translations of Tagore's work for this. There is no doubt that these had an impact, adding credence to a saccharine and ultimately unsatisfying image of Tagore as an Eastern 'poet-seer'. Yet many of Tagore's early interlocutors – notably W. B. Yeats – actively pushed this idea, only to chastise him for 'talking too much about God'.

Back in India Tagore argued vigorously with Gandhi about the freedom movement in the 1920s and 1930s. Tagore's alleged indifference to the plight of the masses became an object of criticism for Leftists of all varieties: statues of Tagore were smashed by members of the Marxist Naxalite movement in Bengal after independence. In response to Tagore's public disagreements with Gandhi an editorial in the pages of the Kolkata newspaper *Ananda Bazar Patrika* on 19 August 1925 bemoaned the 'ludicrous opinions of the Poet', which 'may appeal to those who live in a dream-world', whereas 'those who are grounded in the soil of this country and know of the realities … will no doubt feel that the Poet's useless labours are sad and pitiful'.[2] An article published in 1928 by a Bengali Gandhian went further still: 'it will not be unjust to say that he [Tagore] is unfit to be a priest at the sacred sacrificial rites for freedom'.[3] These discomforting judgements indicate why Tagore the anti-nationalist, anti-non-co-operator and critic (though also great admirer) of Gandhi has often been sidelined.

Perhaps by way of response to controversy, in Bengal Tagore's more interesting and provocative ideas about politics and society have sometimes been overlooked in favour of the patriotic poet of *Amar Shonar Bangla* ('My Beautiful Bengal') or the universally acclaimed *Gitanjali*, the 'Song Offerings'. As the historian and critic Ramachandra Guha has recently written: 'despite their love for and knowledge of Tagore, the intellectuals of Bengal have sold him short. They have provincialised and parochialised Tagore; as a result, this thinker whose ideas extended well beyond Bengal has been turned into a local hero'. In fact the very best work on Tagore is – unsurprisingly – done by Bengali scholars.[4] But at a wider level Guha may have a point, and perhaps a cultural figure such as Tagore (always a Bengali) is more prone to being treated in this way than a political actor such as Gandhi (usually an Indian first, rarely a Gujarati).

Historical memory in our post-colonial world is an enduringly political arena and with this in mind, other Bengalis – notably some of Kolkata's foremost intellectuals, either directly engaged with or indirectly influenced by the Subaltern Studies Collective – have taken a different view. Concerned as they have been to uncover ways in which the post-colonial Indian state has been marked by derivativeness, either through a coercive bourgeois nationalist project co-opting the political agency of the Indian peasantry, or through the extra-European dominance of Eurocentric discourses of Enlightenment rationality. In these analyses, Tagore has not fared especially well. No longer the patriot or nationalist *per se*, Tagore's supposed 'humanist' universalism is presented as tainted by its identification with Western sources [5]. The postcolonialist construction of a Tagore that had read Keats et. al. and thus somehow imbibed European romanticism is one that is vastly over-simplified and ironically mimics the earlier modernist language used to describe Tagore. [6]

Tagore has ever been a prisoner of those who claimed to represent him. In this sense he needs to be

understood historically, as a colonised intellectual who moved beyond the borders of 'self' and 'other' so carefully policed by colonial power which are all too often reinforced in a post-colonial world in which one is required to choose between good and evil. Like any great mind and great life, there were many Tagores, different stages of his thinking, expressions of ideas which sometimes overlapped and sometimes contradicted themselves, especially when his ideas were actualised in real social contexts. Despite his Nobel Prize, Tagore was not always 'at home in the world'. His experience of contact with Western intellectuals was often painful and conflictual. Moreover, although he explicitly rejected nationalism as a political ideology, his universalism was perhaps most effectively expressed at a metaphysical level. In practice, Tagore was profoundly shaped by Indian religious and social traditions, and his rendering of these traditions into a distinctly Tagorean philosophy exhibited a discernible sense of Indian civilisational superiority.

The condescension of proximity

As Emily Dickinson told us, fame is a fickle food upon a shifting plate. Tagore found early favour in London amongs t an *avant garde* intelligentsia looking beyond Europe for sources of creative stimulation. His work was read seriously for longer in Western Europe due to the prevalence of philosophical idealism. In England he was sometimes subjected to not only misunderstanding but also insult. George Bernard Shaw referred to him as Stupendranath Beghor, on account of Tagore's persistent fundraising for his university in Shantiniketan near Kolkata. Graham Greene felt that only 'pebbly eyed theosophists' could take Rabindranath seriously. Philip Larkin wrote to a friend that, having been asked by an Indian what he thought of Rabindrum [sic] Tagore, he felt inclined to send a telegram in reply: 'Fuck all. Larkin'.[7] By 1916 D. H. Lawrence had dismissed the 'wretched worship of Tagore' as 'sheer fraud'. 'The East', Lawrence claimed, 'is *marvellously* interesting, for tracing our steps *back*. But for going forward, it is nothing. All it can hope for is to be fertilised by Europe, so it can start on a new phase'.[8] All of this reminds us of the crassness of an imperial culture unaware of its paradoxical parochialism. The ignominy of Tagore being subjected to such judgements by men comparatively meagre in their achievements and relatively ignorant of the world still offends.

Even those who promoted Tagore – steeped as they were in a romantic fascination for the culture of the extra-European world, which had a late-Edwardian flowering – had an ambivalent attitude from the outset. At a certain distance, Tagore was a fine object of fantasy and desire. His reception and interpretation in London in 1912 and 1913 exemplified many of the commonplace tropes about the spiritually minded, 'other-worldly' Oriental. The Easterner in the metropole was lauded as a representative of a more 'harmonious' and 'unified' civilisation, one which had supposedly existed in Europe and which some Europeans still hoped to recover. W. B. Yeats had been deeply moved by Tagore's *Gitanjali* collection, and following meetings in London during the summer of 1912 Ezra Pound had written to a friend that in Tagore's company he felt like 'a painted Pict with a stone war-club'.[9] In March 1913, Pound published an adulatory essay in the *Fortnightly Review* in which he compared Tagore's work to 'the poetic piety of Dante'.[10]

As perhaps the most famous of Tagore's Western interlocutors, Yeats often features in commentaries on Tagore and the West, most specifically regarding Tagore's visit to Britain in 1912 and Yeats' role as midwife to Tagore's Western reputation. Yeats' role in securing the Nobel Prize for Rabindranath has been exaggerated: actually, a member of the Nobel Committee read Tagore in Bengali and they awarded the prize on the basis of many more texts than *Gitanjali* alone.[11] Even so, it is almost universally assumed that Tagore recognised in Yeats a common poetic genius, and that Yeats, in turn, recognised Tagore as a 'great poet'. But this is quite misleading. Tagore saw Yeats as a junior and less-accomplished man. Yeats' knowledge of Tagore was embarrassingly vague and he himself had suggested that honouring Tagore in those early years was a piece of 'wise imperialism'.[12]

Rather than genuine dialogue and mutual learning, Yeats was more interested in instrumentalising Tagore – and the East more generally – as part of a project of European cultural recovery. Tagore functioned not as an independent thinker or agent of historical change in his own right, but as

something of an aesthetic object. And when that object of fascination developed a voice beyond the pretty emotions of *Gitanjali*; when Tagore sought to lecture, educate and sometimes denounce the West in English, or to deepen the West's understanding of Indian philosophy, his audience of admirers soon changed their mind. 'Damn Tagore', Yeats wrote in 1935, 'he thought it more important to see and know English than to be a great poet, he brought out sentimental rubbish and wrecked his reputation. Tagore does not know English, no Indian knows English'.[13] The early green shoots of cross-cultural growth did not last even into the summer of 1913 when Pound decided that Tagore's philosophy had little to offer anyone who had 'felt the pangs' and been 'pestered with Western civilisation'.[14] Yeats soon distanced himself from Tagore, and whilst his encounters with Indian philosophy and religious thought outlasted the Tagore moment, he found it difficult to move beyond the gauche problematic posed by Pound: 'Why should India', Yeats asked in the 1930s, 'be always thinking of peace – *shanti*? Life is a conflict'.[15]

Tagore thus discovered early on some of the limits of his claim that the world was moving into a phase of cross-cultural communication. 'The world is waiting for its poets and prophets', Tagore said in a US lecture in 1913, 'and when the call of humanity is poignantly insistent then the higher nature of man cannot but respond'.[16] In reality, Tagore understood that much of what he wished to communicate to Western audiences, especially in poetic form, may be falling on deaf ears. By 1922 he had written to his biographer Edward Thompson (father of the more illustrious E. P. Thompson) to say that he now believed 'translating a poem was doing it wrong'. 'Can you ever imagine', he continued, 'the best passages of Keats, Shelley or Wordsworth in Bengali?'.[17] Despite his respect and admiration for certain aspects of Western culture, Tagore actually held a deeply felt sense of Bengali and Indian cultural superiority which is evident in private correspondence. He sought critical engagement from Western audiences but at times, when such criticism emerged, he took it badly. Writing to a friend in London about Edward Thompson's biography, he claimed that 'being a Christian Missionary, [Thompson's] training makes him incapable of understanding some of the ideas that run all through my writings'.[18] In a 1927 letter to an Indian confidant Tagore spoke of Thompson's 'insolent self-assurance' and of him being 'flippant' and 'dogmatic'. He added that:

> *where the Bengali language is concerned, if he [Thompson] forgets that this language is mine, that much of it I have shaped with my own hands, then the only reason for it I can think of is that he is an Englishman and I a Bengali … On the one hand there is his utterly shallow acquaintance with our language, and on the other his profound contempt for our country.[19]*

Tagore built a diverse range of friendships and contacts with Western intellectuals, some of them lasting and productive. But in many cases he was acutely aware of the difficulties of translating his ideas into Western languages and idioms, and even of divergent religious traditions that obstructed culture-contact. Literature, poetry, art were invitations to understanding, but in practice Tagore knew that language and culture set limits to his universalism. In later life he would remark that his paintings pleased him more than anything else, since it was through this art form that he felt cultural barriers could be most effectively crossed.

Freedom, nations and empires

If most of Tagore's modernist contemporaries were unwilling or unable to engage with his philosophical ideas, that only makes it all the more clear that these are central to a proper appreciation of his life and thought. One of the defining philosophical assumptions underlying much of Tagore's work is his ideal of Universal Man.[20] Often portrayed as a kind of humanism, it is perhaps better understood as a religiously-derived position owing much to the Hindu *Upanishadic* tradition that – in Tagore's interpretation – argued for the essential unity of God and the World: human reality is grounded in an organic whole constituted by Brahman, the Hindu Absolute. Tagore's philosophical starting point was

that the social world was determined by a harmonising, unifying force. Even if conflict appeared to govern social relations, this did not in fact represent Truth, and History would bring forth this Truth. For Rabindranath, reality was single; an ultimate whole comprehending the multiplicity of existence. But Tagore was no religious ascetic, and it was not only via spiritual texts but also his understanding of the phenomenal world that Tagore argued for the human as a fundamentally creative being, finding full expression and hence freedom within a social context. Moreover, Tagore's joy of creativity was certainly not confined to poets or artists. It was the essence of God in Man, an impulse to sociability, the observable and simple pleasure derived from contact with other human beings, of which art was merely a particularly refined expression.

The spiritual underpinnings of Tagore's thinking – unappealing as they may be to the modern secular, or post-modern deconstructionist mind – were complex and also remarkably coherent, reflected throughout his writing and active social work. His belief in a creative, expressive self also points us towards some appealing ideas and attitudes: openness towards the world beyond one's own culture, a willingness to learn from different traditions and a Universalist ideal that posits the good of all as higher than any parochial concerns for the good of particular groups. This is where Tagore's relationship with the West comes into relief for it was a very important part of his life's work that East and West (however reductive such terms may seem) not only enjoyed a degree of complementarity but comprised, at a fundamental level, a universal spirit coming to fruition. Unsurprisingly the problem of Tagore's Western leanings and his idea of a Universal Man proved highly controversial in an age of anti-colonial nationalism.

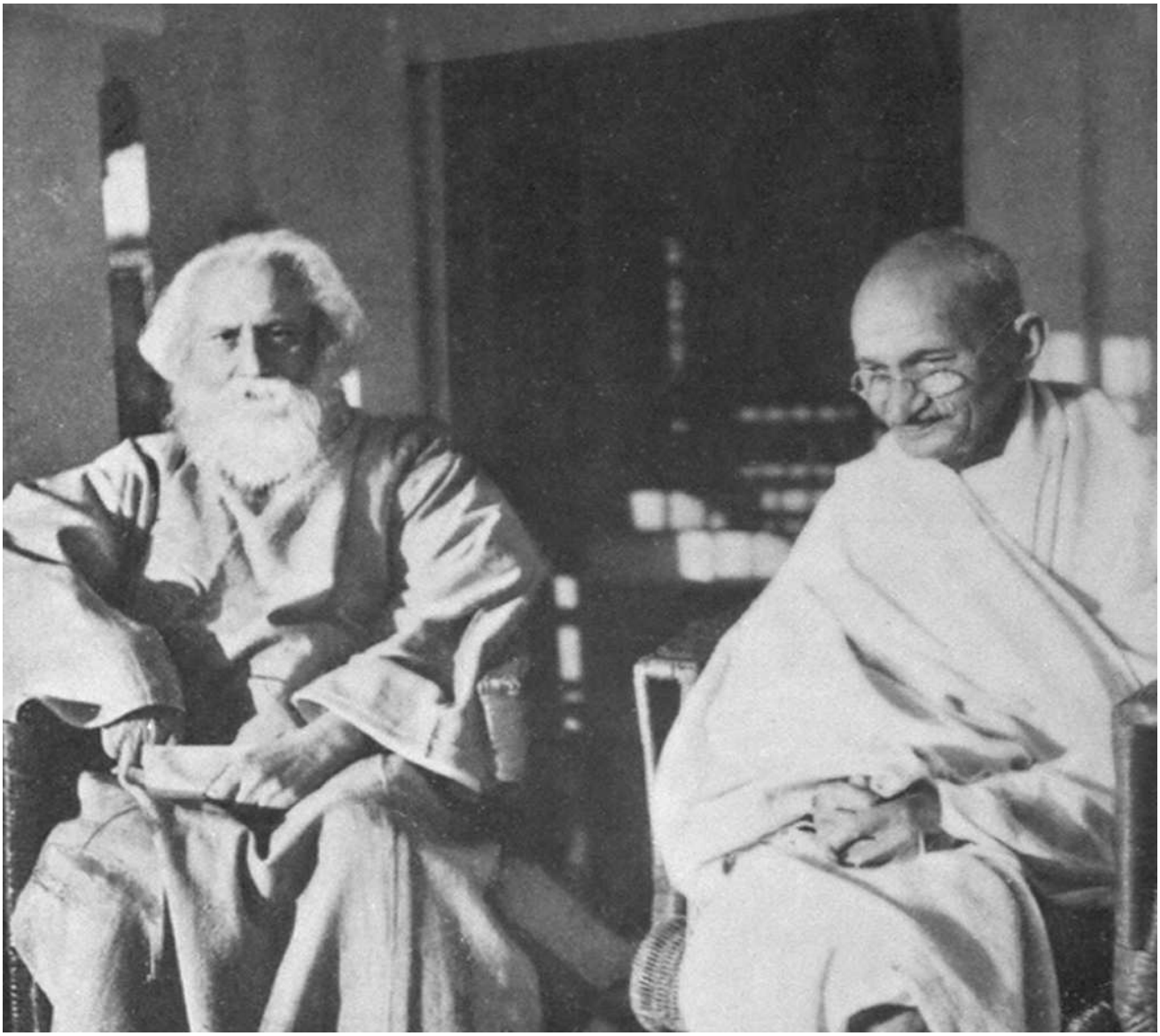
By 1912 Tagore had rejected nationalism and made his most explicit denunciation of it in his lectures in Japan and the United States during 1916, which were published as *Nationalism* by Macmillan in 1917. A nation, Tagore claimed, is understood 'in the sense of the political and economic union of a people' and is 'that aspect which a whole population assumes when organised for a mechanical purpose'.[21] A nation was not be equated with an *ethnie*, nor straightforwardly with a cultural or linguistic group. It may have comprised such phenomena, but for Tagore the nation was distinctively modern and exclusively Western. Its 'mechanical purpose' implicates an instrumental rationality in its political and organisational form and the purposeful element of the nation is reified in the form of the state. Therefore, in Tagore's critique, the nation is always the 'nation state'. The nation state can thus be seen as an organising system and a structure of power. This 'hardening method of national efficiency gains in strength, and at least for some limited period of time it proudly proves itself to be the fittest to survive … but it is the survival of that part of man which is the least living'.[22] It produces efficiency but also monotony and sameness, such that Western modernity – for example as manifested in modern towns, which present to us 'the physiognomy of this dominance of the nation' – are 'everywhere the same from San Francisco to London, [and now] from London to Tokyo'.[23] The nation is characterised by Tagore as externally aggressive and competitive, but is also equated with internal disciplinary and regulatory power and the erosion of difference.

Tagore's anti-nationalism was born out of the violence that engulfed the anti-partition movement in Bengal between 1905 and 1908. Lord Curzon sought to divide the Hindu and Muslim communities of the large and politically active Bengal Presidency, and in response the *swadeshi* (self-sufficiency) movement in Bengal anticipated Gandhi with its boycott of British goods. Tagore had initially supported the movement but soon turned away in disgust after it spiralled into violence. This was a seminal moment in Tagore's life. He was less interested in the conditions under which it becomes conceivable for people to act violently than any socialist might have been. Tagore's belief was rather that freedom cannot solely be attained through the instrumental rationality of politics, of which violence is a subset. The desire to shape or seize control of structures of power – state, army, police, even the economy – is insufficient unless we are willing to also look within at values, beliefs and culture. 'The way of bloody revolution', Tagore added, 'is not the true way': 'a political revolution is like taking a short cut to nothing'.[24] This could be seen as Tagore's answer to the 'two vital questions about the search for liberation in our times' that Ashis Nandy has pointed to: 'namely, why dictatorships of the proletariat never end and why revolutions always devour their children'.[25]

Underlying his critique of nationalism was Tagore's philosophical understanding of freedom and his analysis of whether or not nationalism offered a pathway to authentic post-colonial liberation. Tagore's fear was that, seduced by the nationalist aspiration to seize political power, India's political leaders simply aimed to construct a modern nation state on a Western model. In other word they simply aped the West and its political system, which had given rise to the imperial condition in the first place. Nationalism was a derivative discourse (Tagore had identified this problem some time before Partha Chatterjee) and political reform without social and cultural reform would ultimately be meaningless, merely replacing one set of rulers with others of a different colour. As Tagore put it, 'alien government in India is a veritable chameleon. Today it comes in the guise of the Englishman; tomorrow perhaps as some other foreigner; the next day it may take the shape of our own countrymen'.[26] The thing he was most convinced of was that the modern nation was anathema to Indian traditions:

> *we [Indians] are to emancipate Man from the meshes that he himself has woven round him, – these organisations of National Egoism … We, the famished, ragged ragamuffins of the East, are to win freedom for all Humanity. We have no word for Nation in our language'[27]*

In an essay entitled 'The Future of India' published in 1911 [28] Tagore asks a rhetorical question: 'how should we regard the hostility which has recently sprung up between the English and the educated (and even uneducated) public of India?'. Indians, Tagore claimed, 'could not see that true acquisition cannot come from *begging*, that knowledge and political power alike have to be *earned*, i.e., to be acquired by one's own power [*atmashakti*] … a manner of acquisition which is humiliating to us cannot be a source of gain'.[29] The transition from the *swadeshi* to post-*swadeshi* period in Tagore's life saw a desire to turn away from rejection towards engagement, a creative and constructive journey of self-discovery. The type of constructive activity to which Tagore felt he could contribute was initially in the field of education, and after 1902 it was to his school at Shantiniketan that he began to devote his energies. By 1921 Shantiniketan also saw the foundation of the *Visva-Bharati* University, a genuinely utopian educational experiment that involved an international and multi-faith professoriate. In 1916 Tagore recalled his thoughts about the link between his school, *swadeshi* and the idea that freedom was to be won by constructive effort: 'I said to myself that we must seek for our own inheritance, and with it buy a true place in the world'.[30] Tagore's turn from what he saw as a destructive anti-Britishness to the search for a constructive path towards freedom would constitute India's proper contribution to a universal civilisation. And with the fundamental importance of creative engagement as the basis of Indian self-expression in mind, Tagore was unforgiving when it came to the politics of the Indian National Congress as well as Gandhi's *satyagraha*, or non-violent resistance.



Tagore and Gandhi did not always see eye to eye, but their dialogue on Indian freedom deserves much more attention from scholars than it has so far received/ Image: Wikimedia Commons

Both Tagore and Gandhi agreed that there was to be nothing passive about resistance, but Tagore could not tolerate the negativity of book burning or education boycotts, which he saw as an offence against a higher ideal of cooperation. The differences between Tagore and Gandhi have been over-stated at times, but differences there were and their debates through the 1920s and 1930s about the nature of freedom deserve much more scholarly attention. Amartya Sen has written that Tagore 'never criticized Gandhi personally'. This isn't quite true. In a letter sent to his English missionary friend C. F. Andrews in July 1915, Tagore made the following and striking claim: 'only a moral tyrant like Gandhi can think that he has the dreadful power to make his ideas prevail through the means of slavery'.[31] When Andrews came to publish Tagore's letter in his 1928 book *Letters to a Friend* he deleted Gandhi's name and left only the generic 'tyrant'.[32] It suggests to us that in spite of Tagore's obvious admiration for Gandhi; in spite of the fact that it was Tagore himself who first gave Gandhi the name *mahatma* – the 'great soul' – he held deep reservations about Gandhi's methods. 'It is absurd', Tagore wrote 'to think that you must create slaves to make your ideas free'.[33] Tagore sometimes saw Gandhi's willingness to enforce his beliefs as a form of violence.[34] Tagore's advocacy of the 'worlding' or opening out of a creative, expressive Indian self often clashed with Gandhi's effort to negate external influence.

With regard to this external influence Gandhi and Tagore often clashed about Western science or technology, and the broader question of what might be deemed valuable about the British presence in India. Tagore was essentially more amenable to the positive dimensions of Science and Reason, but in

this respect an under-recognised side of Tagore is his teleological view of history.[35] Students of Hegel or Marx will be familiar with a worldview in which there was only a bit part for the East, with philosophical, social and economic developments in Europe providing the motor for historical development. At times Tagore appears to fall into the Orientalist trap of seeing India 'awakened' by the penetration of Western imperialism. But then, in a surprising twist, we do not find India awakened by England, but rather England, in a cosmic vision of humanity, absorbed by India:

> *India is the India of all humanity,– what right have we to exclude the English from that India before the time is ripe for it? … those who will one day be able to say with perfect truth "we are India, we are Indians," all (whether Hindus, Muslims, Englishmen or any other race) ... will join that undivided vast 'we' and be incorporated within it.[36]*

In this 'multicultural' reading of Indian history and empire, the determinism of Tagore's view is further elaborated. Contact with the English must 'bear its true fruit' and 'we must fulfil the purpose of our connection with the English'.[37] If we 'turn our face aside, if we isolate ourselves, if we refuse to accept any new element, we shall still fail to resist the march of Time, we shall fail to impoverish and defraud Indian history'.[38] In 1913 he reiterated the same point: Indian history 'has no less an object that this,– that *here* the history of man will attain to a special fulfilment and give an unprecedented form to its perfection, and make that perfection the property of all mankind'.[39] Tagore believed that India had a unique capacity to absorb people, ideas and innovations from 'outside' and domesticate them. This had to be kept in mind when resisting the effects of imperialism in the pre-independence period, but the problem of rejecting, adapting, absorbing or merely replicating external influences in the realms of politics, economy or culture remains central to the experience of post-coloniality.

For Tagore, then, the nationalist movement of the 1920s and 1930s placed India in a vertiginous position with much to gain, but equally much to lose, and in this respect Tagore was no moderate but an extremist. Soon after the Amritsar Massacre of 1919, which prompted Tagore's impassioned renunciation of his knighthood, he wrote to C. F. Andrews: '[l]et us forget the Punjab affairs, but never forget that we shall go on deserving such humiliation over and over again until we set our own house in order. Do not mind the waves of the sea, but mind the leaks in your own vessel'.[40] Gandhi's response was clear: 'non-cooperation with evil is as much a duty as co-operation with good'.[41] The fact that Gandhi may have been more politically astute than Tagore does not diminish in any way the radicalism of the latter's ideas. Nor should it hide from view the fact that much of what we recognise today as Gandhi's contribution to an intellectual history of anti-imperialism was forged in dialogue with Rabindranath. With time Tagore came to agree more with Gandhi and sharpen his critique of the British presence in India. But most importantly, the arguments between the two form a rich site of intellectual history, and indeed a source of celebration, remarkable as it is that India, in one generation, should have produced two of the greatest figures in twentieth century world history.

Tagore in the post-colonial world

In the passages quoted above Tagorean philosophy is grounded in the ideal of Universal Man, but *pace* Hegel and Marx, India itself, its civilisation and its history, lies at the centre of an unfolding historical ideal. From a post-colonial perspective Tagore's universalism – simultaneously multicultural but also situated, embedded – was contextualised by the fact he believed the 'universal ideal' of unity in diversity had been most successfully realised in India, above all other places. His anti-nationalism was so strident precisely because he believed that the fetishisation of sovereign borders would tarnish the gift that history had bequeathed to modern India, and which it in turn had a duty to communicate to the world. With this in mind it is worth remembering that *Visva-Bharati* – the name of Tagore's university – translates as where the world finds 'communion with India'. He may well have been deeply disturbed if he had ever come to know of India's current condition in which, far beyond the confines of Hindu chauvinist political parties an increasingly aggressive nationalism appears to be holding sway. Even so

Tagore remains a rich source for exploring – and perhaps moving beyond – the long-run debates about liberal universalism versus communitarianism which continue to resonate in world politics.

In thinking about the relevance of Tagore today we might also do well to acknowledge his shortcomings. Tagore's sense of how the individual comes into being was grounded in his belief in the inherent interconnectedness of the particular and the universal. For Tagore 'individuality is precious, because only through it can we realise the universal', and this intuition is given weight and meaning by Tagore's reading of history and identity.[42] But these ideas about the individual and the whole are not without their problems. Ultimately, the location of Tagore's personhood is outside the narrow confines of a self or ego. This movement beyond the self has both an aesthetic and a soteriological aspect. It is by stepping outside of ourselves that we can be 'saved' from ourselves. 'I strive', Tagore once explained, 'for a rare salvation', which is 'the salvation of oneself from one's own self'.[43] We might immediately, and rightly ask where Tagore's analysis of inequality and of global capitalism is to be found? Indeed, how does capitalism itself constitute culture and personhood? On these matters, in English at least, Tagore has relatively little to say. But his ideas should also prick the conscience of those on the Left who continue to believe that political or economic change is the only answer to the world's problems. Tagore reminds us that bureaucratic welfarism and a state-centred political rationality might serve to undermine what is most vital, alive and perhaps precious about the human.[44]

From the selection of evidence I have been able to assemble here, and despite all his talk of universalism, Tagore can also be seen as an Indo-centric thinker. It seems to me that a sure way to render Tagore uninteresting to the world is to present him as a platitudinous World Citizen, a cosmopolitan who 'loved his country and his people, but made no secret of the fact that he admired the British character more than the Indian ... [for which] history will honour him.[45] The (entirely false) image of Tagore as overly-enamoured with the West has done much damage over the years. As Tagore wrote in 1917, '*neither* the colourless vagueness of cosmopolitanism, nor the fierce self idolatry of nation-worship is the goal of human history'.[46] There may be 'cosmopolitan readings' of his life and ideas.[47] However, it seems more important to me to stress Tagore's embededness in Indian history and culture first, Asian intellectual, religious and social traditions second, and Western culture a distant third.

I do not see this as a weakness but rather a strength. Not, though, because India or 'the East' has (or ever had) ready-made answers for a waiting world. What is exciting is that Tagore viewed Indian experience not only as past, but as future. He developed an alternative conception of modernity which saw the ideas, politics and technology of the West as only one aspect of a developing historical process, rather than its core movement. Caught between an arrogant European modernist elite and a proprietorial Indian nationalism, Tagore challenged the spatial dimensions of modernity by critiquing both Eurocentrism and a simplistic anti-imperialism. Tagore did build meaningful bridges with some Western intellectuals and social activists – not least Leonard Elmhirst, who helped Tagore establish his project for rural reconstruction at Sriniketan – but much of his life illustrates the difficulties of meaningful cross-cultural relations. If this is in part due to the inadequacy of translation, then we need more and better translations. But Tagore's work also requires us to think more critically about parallel modernit*ies* and different ways of imagining our futures. As China and India, perhaps above all others, grow in economic, political and cultural strength these questions are likely to become more pressing. We should cherish past thought for its own sake. But we also need to face our present and future armed with the fullest possible range of ideas that history offers us. A thinker such as Tagore helps us to recognise, and thus seek to avoid, the failures of a European modernity that in many ways failed to historicise itself, and hence to understand that the rest of the world may not follow its path.

As we mark the 150th anniversary of Tagore's birth it may be that we have still barely begun to understand the depth and breadth of his thought and practice. Tagore should be far more prominent than he is in academic studies and university courses on World Literature and World History, as well as in discussions of the intellectual history of modernity. This should not come at the expense of an appreciation of the beauty of his artistic output: there are enough sides to Tagore for at least a

‘thousand bonds of delight’.[48] But the global relevance of this cultural icon will depend upon Tagore being understood in all his multiplicity and complexity.

1. England and America in 1912 and 1913; Japan and then America again in 1916; Western Europe in 1921; China and Japan in 1924; Latin America in 1924 and 1925. In 1927 he visited Singapore, Malaya, Java, Bali, Thailand and Burma. In 1930 he returned to America and Europe, again making an important visit to England, and in 1932 he made his final overseas tour, this time of Iran and Iraq.

2. Sabyasachi Bhattacharya (ed.), The Mahatma and the Poet: Letters and Debates Between Gandhi and Tagore, 1915-1941 (New Delhi: National Book Trust of India, 1997), p. 23.

3. Ibid., p. 22.

4. I am thinking in particular of the work of the late R. K. Dasgupta as well as more recent work by Tapan Raychaudhuri, Uma Das Gupta, Supriya Chaudhuri and Rosinka Chaudhuri.

5. This claim is expanded on in my book Empire, Nationalism and the Postcolonial World (London: Routledge, 2011).

6. See Dipesh Chakrabarty’s *Provincialising Europe* (Princeton, NJ: PUP), ch. 6.

7. Larkin used to exchange letters and telegrams with his friend Kingsley Amis in which sexual innuendo and crass, vulgar or sexist jokes seemed to frequently appeal to the two men, both apparently stuck in state of perpetual adolescence.

8. D. H. Lawrence to Lady Otteline Morrell, 24 May 1916: published in James T. Boulton & George J. Zytaruk, *The Letters of D. H. Lawrence: Volume II, 1913-1916* (Cambridge: CUP, 2002), p. 608, original emphasis.

9. Ezra Pound to Dorothy Shakespeare, 4 October 1912: published in A. Walton Litz & Omar S. Pound, *Ezra Pound and Dorothy Shakespear: Their Letters, 1910-1914* (London: Faber, 1985), p. 163: quoted in Dutta & Robinson, *Rabindranath Tagore: An Anthology* (London, Picador, 1997), p. 102.

10. Ezra Pound, ‘Rabindranath Tagore’, *Fortnightly Review*, 99, March (1913).

11. See Empire, Nationalism and the Postcolonial World, Chapter 2.

12. W. B. Yeats to Edmund Gosse, 25 November 1912: W. B. Yeats correspondence files, Tagore Papers, Rabindra Bhavana. Cf. Allan Wade (ed.) *The Letters of W. B. Yeats* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1954), pp. 572-573.

13. Allan Wade (ed.), *The Letters of W. B. Yeats* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1954), pp. 834-835.

14. Ezra Pound to Harriet Monroe, 22 April 1913: published in Paige, *The Selected Letters of Ezra Pound*, p. 19.

15. R. K. Dasgupta, *Rabindranath Tagore and William Butler Yeats* (Delhi: University of Delhi, 1965), p. 22.

16. Tagore, ‘Race Conflict’ (1913): published in Sisir Kumar Das (ed) The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore: Volume 3 (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1996), p. 363.

17. Tagore to Edward Thompson, 16 April 1922: quoted in E. P. Thompson, *Alien Homage: Edward Thompson and Rabindranath Tagore* (New Delhi: OUP, 1993), p. 48.

18. Tagore to William Rothenstein, 20 April, 1927: quoted in Thompson, *Alien Homage,* p. 40-41, emphasis original.

19. Rabindranath Tagore to Rani Mahalanobis, 8 April, 1927: quoted in Harish Trivedi's 'Introduction' to Edward J. Thompson, *Rabindranath Tagore: Poet and Dramatist* (Oxford: OUP, 1991), p. a19.

20. For an accessible overview see Tagore's essay entitled *Man*, originally delivered as a lecture in 1937, during which he elaborated on the theme of 'Universal Man' that features in many of his English essays and lectures. Tagore declared that Man 'must prove that in him dwells the Eternal Man, the Universal Man, the Man who is beyond the bounds of death'. Rabindranath Tagore, 'Man' (1937): published in Sisir Kumar Das (ed.), The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore: Volume 3 (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1996), p. 202.

21. Tagore, *Nationalism* (London: Papermac, 1991), p. 51.

22. Rabindranath Tagore, 'The Nation', *The Modern Review,* 22/1 (1917a), p. 1. Cf. Rabindranath Tagore, 'Creative Unity' (1922), in Sisir Kumar Das (ed.), *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore: Volume Two* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1999), p. 548.

23. Tagore, 'The Nation' (1917), p. 1.

24. Tagore, 'The Call of Truth' (1921): published in Sisir Kumar Das (ed.), The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore: Volume 3 (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1996), p. 418.

25. Ashis Nandy, 'The Illegitimacy of Nationalism: Rabindranath Tagore and the Politics of Self', *Bonfire of Creeds: The Essential Ashis Nandy* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 451-452.

26. Tagore, 'The Call of Truth' (1921), pp. 413-414.

27. Rabindranath Tagore to C. F. Andrews, 2 March, 1921: published in Bhattacharya (ed.), *The Mahatma and the Poet*, p. 55.

28. A number of essays published in the Kolkata journal *The Modern Review*, which develop some of Tagore's most controversial arguments about nationalism and imperialism, were not included in the first three volumes of Sisir Kumar Das' edited *English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*. One can only speculate about why this may have been, but they do seem to be surprising omissions. The essays left out include: 'The Future of India' (1911); 'My Interpretation of India's History' (1913); 'The Nation' (1917); 'The Small and the Great' (1917); 'Thou Shalt Obey' (1917).

29. Rabindranath Tagore, 'The Future of India', *The Modern Review,* 9/3 (1911), p. 242.

30. W. W. Pearson, *Shantiniketan: The Bolpur School of Rabindranath Tagore* (New York: Macmillan, 1916), pp. 18-19.

31. Tagore to C. F. Andrews, 7 July 1915: C. F. Andrews Correspondence Files, Tagore Papers, Rabindra Bhavana.

32. The original letter is preserved in the Shantiniketan archives, and it is to this letter I refer here. Interestingly, the letter is left out of Dutta and Robinson's *Selected Letters of Rabindranath Tagore*, possibly on the grounds that the editors did not want to replicate the material included in Andrews' *Letters to a Friend*. However, as I have already pointed out, Andrews is not a reliable historical source.

33. Tagore to C. F. Andrews, 7 July 1915: C. F. Andrews Correspondence Files, Tagore Papers, Rabindra Bhavana.

34. On one occasion Gandhi visited Tagore's Shantiniketan school and was asked by a young woman to sign her autograph book. Gandhi wrote: 'Never make a promise in haste. Having once made it fulfil it at the cost of your life'. Tagore wrote a short Bengali poem alongside: no one can be made 'a prisoner forever with a chain of clay', concluding in English, perhaps so that Gandhi could read it, 'fling away your promise if it is found to be wrong'. See Amartya Sen's article in the New York Review of Books.

35. See the essays referred to in note 27.

36. Tagore, ‘The Future of India’ (1911), p. 240.

37. Ibid.

38. Ibid., pp. 240-241.

39. Tagore, 'The Future of India' (1911), p. 239, my emphasis. This idea would recur again and again, e.g. in 1923, Tagore claimed that ‘it is the function of India owing to her experience of this racial problem within her own area, to begin this wider work of racial reconciliation throughout the world’. See Tagore, ‘The Race Problem and India’ (1923): from Nityapriya Ghosh (ed.) *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore: Volume 4* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2007), p. 289.

40. Tagore to C. F. Andrews, 7 September 1920: from Dutta and Robinson (eds.), *Selected Letters* of Rabindranath Tagore (Cambridge: CUP, 1997), p. 237.

41. Gandhi, 'The Poet's Anxiety' (1921), p. 67.

42. Tagore, ‘Individuality’ (1923): published in Nityapriya Ghosh (ed.) *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore, Volume 4* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2007), p. 277. This problem was, for example, the central issue explored in *Gora*, one of Tagore’s most powerful novels, in which the eponymous protagonist is forced to finally renounce his Hindu chauvinism having learned that he is no Hindu, but the child of Irish parents killed during the Rebellion of 1857: the ‘universal truth’ of Gora’s humanity – what we might call his ‘unconstituted self’ – is only revealed once the constructions of nation and religious affiliation are revealed as such.

43. Rabindranath Tagore in conversation with Maitreyi Devi: from Kalyan Sen Gupta, *The Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), p. 12.

44. His work is a counterpoint to the Marxian position that environment creates consciousness, and thus is relevant to debates taking place across Europe about the nature of democratic socialism.

45. The absurdity of this judgement, put into print by Krishna Kripalani – a former teacher at Tagore’s Shantiniketan School, his grand-son-in-law and one-time First Secretary to the Sahitya Akademi (the Indian National Council of Letters, equivalent say to the British Academy) – is made all the more galling by the fact that the author of these words (who also wrote a book entitled, instructively, *All Men Are Brothers*) wrote three biographies of Tagore, one published by Oxford University Press, which are still widely read today. See Krishna Kripalani, *Rabindranath Tagore: A Biography* (Kolkata: Visva Bharati, 1980), p. 260.

46. Tagore, *Nationalism*, p. 5, my emphasis.

47. For a brilliant discussion of Tagore and varieties of cosmopolitanism see Rahul Rao, Third World Protest: Between the Home and the World (Oxford: OUP, 2010).

48. ‘Deliverance is not for me in renunciation/I feel the embrace of freedom in a thousand bonds of delight’. *Gitanjali*, 73.