

Crisis of Civilization to Crisis of Globalization? A Return to Rabindranath Tagore: On History, Humanity and Society

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Abstract. Rabindranath Tagore, (1861-1941) in 1917, at the height of the world war declared, “There is only one history—the history of man. All national histories are merely chapters in the larger one.” His goal was to establish the dignity of human relationships and he refused to believe that “human society has reached its limit of moral possibility”. This prompted him to search for fairness of justice in a strife-torn humanity. Noting the ruptures in the fabric of human civilisation, he maintained that the means to re-establish balance and harmony in this unequal world were to introduce social practices of justice and ideas conducive to freedom, and the remedy did not lie in enforcing power and coercive discipline. The lack of balance and harmony (*bhār sāmanjasyer abhāb*), which he saw as the crisis in negotiating through the highly fractured times in which he lived, is discussed in many of his travel lectures, essays and novels and of course his poems. Some of them are relatively unexplored till date. His uncompromising and non-dogmatic defence of harmony and unity by going beyond the realms of collapsing of cultural differences and without sacrificing local/individual ties and that admit to no artificial boundaries— political, ideological or geographic— need further exploration. They retain extreme relevance even today, in a world riven by aggressive identities, as a theoretical apparatus to define this situation. This paper, thus, aims to engage with Tagore’s distinct conceptualisation of ‘the-home-and-the-world’ as a global society by looking at both his intellectual and practical efforts to reposition India and Asia in a global framework.

Keywords: History, Common humanity, Society, Harmony, Justice, Rabindranath

1. Introduction

I have no intention of introducing Rabindranath Tagore. I think he has been over-introduced! In fact, I am not sure when the Bengalis will stop telling fellow Bengalis and the world that Rabindranath was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1913 and that he got the award for his own translation of his poems, published in a collection called the *Gitanjali*. Such ‘introduction’, now repeated for nearly 100 years, only reflects the stagnation and sterility of knowledge and scholarship in this part of the world. (Imtiaz Ahmed, 2011)

Indeed, in this increasingly globalising society when the uncertainties ruled by conflicts of race, class and gender continue, and especially because the security of basic human rights is still in jeopardy, it is important to engage our understanding with Tagore’s legacy into the global arena in the context of today’s world. Even if he is not considered as a social thinker, which he was, far ahead of his times, he is a social thinker relevant for all times. He is a thinker with a creative insight and to whom, as Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, an eminent Indian philosopher, puts it, “the future of the world belongs” (xvii). The oceanic depths of his mind saw the crisis of civilisation as a continuous process of rivalries between nation states. It is his thoughts and vision which is particularly prescient in the context of contemporary global geo-political crises: the nuclear armaments, the emergence of terrorism as a global phenomenon, escalating communal clashes, and other forms of disaster (even environmental). Today, when we are on the verge of crisis of globalisation, it is Tagore the thinker who is being evoked for the divergence of his thoughts, and the enigmatic quality of his creativity which comprise an enduring legacy that undoubtedly invites deeper engagement. We cannot forget that while the whole world was at war, Rabindranath raised the question of civility in war ethics. He denounced the “savage” “hunting” spree, with “one object to chase the game and kill it” (*Nationalism* 20). In a letter to Romain Rolland he critiqued Europe for asserting itself “in one of her choicest spirits through the ugly clamours of passionate politics”. Assessing critically the imperialist culture, he eloquently argued against political and commercial aggressiveness. Anticipating the crisis of human civilisation he insisted on maintaining “human” relationships across cultures and not submitting to the rule of the “machine” at the height of World War I. The correspondence between Rabindranath and Rolland (1919) reveals that the poet regarded with suspicion the uniform rule of the “the new machine”, which “will be of

little advantage if it be run by the old power for the old ends". In a letter to William Rhothenstein who obviously urged the poet to stay away from politics Tagore wrote on 6th Oct 1920:

I have nothing to do directly with politics; ... But politics is not a mere abstraction, it has its personality and it does intrude into my life where I am human. It kills and maims individuals, it tells lies, it uses its sacred sword of *justice* for the purpose of massacre, it spreads misery broadcast over centuries of exploitation and I cannot say to myself, 'Poet you have nothing to do with these facts, for they belong to politics'. This politics assumes its fullest diabolic aspect when I find all its hideous acts of injustice find moral support from a whole nation only because it wants to enjoy in comfort and safety the golden fruits reaped from abject degradation of human race. (in Lago 277-278)

Thus, we can say that Tagore's poetic endeavour, however personal, did not miss concerns for common humanity, the intricacies involving his uneven reputation notwithstanding. The diversity of human personality and history that were, in Rabindranath's time, contained in terms like East and West have now found expressions in the forms of First and Third Worlds, North and South. Having spoken briefly about the magnanimity of his thought and creativity, have we arrived at a point that we take refuge in Tagore's thinking for whom saving the grace of human race is so important?

As examples this paper will explore the relevant essays and very briefly the novel *The Home and the World* especially to analyse how far Tagore's insights and ideas, as depicted in the novel, can be read as prescient metaphors for the synthesis of the local and the global. The present attempt is thus to read Tagore's belief in peace not as its simple binary opposite war. The complexities involved with the holistic mode of understanding the civilian space that would be without violence and that would also relate to questions of identity, relationship and the possibilities of human survival itself was crucial for him. [T]o be able to penetrate all things with one soul to comprehend all things with sympathy and love" (from Nobel Prize acceptance speech in Das (a), 1996: 965) was his one point agenda although he is known to be a man of "myriad" thoughts. In the teeth of colonialism Rabindranath Tagore aspired to free the mind, culture and society from inhuman oppression and imperialism and its nationalist anti colonial derivatives. What follows is a humble attempt to examine the extent of influence of Tagore's idea of the fairness of justice can have on society and on fostering better ties among people in different parts of the world. In such a world, the 'human' would be above the 'person' defined by nation-states and other identities, and the home and the world would

Before proceeding, I would like to clarify that the term 'fairness' was used by Tagore to distinguish between the justice, which would be fair to certain life conditions in a society, and the justice which may not be as fair enough for established conditions in certain society, so as to build logical arguments pertaining to all life conditions. Nikhil's assertion, from the 1919 novel *The Home and The World*, can be marked as an example of the fairness of justice that Tagore was in search of in a "strife-torn humanity".

Only the weak dare not be *just*. They shirk their *responsibility of fairness* and try quickly to get at results through the short-cuts of *injustice*. But my determination was, never to do my duty with frantic impetuosity, helped on by the fiery liquor of excitement... For the matter of that, I have become unpopular with all my countrymen because I have not joined them in their carousals. They are certain that either I have a longing for some title, or else that I am afraid of the police. The police on their side, suspect me of harbouring some hidden design and protesting too much in my mildness. What I really feel is this, that those who cannot find food for their enthusiasm in a knowledge of their country as it actually is, or those who cannot love men just because they are men—who needs must shout and deify their country in order to keep up their excitement—they love excitement more than their country. (236)

Nikhil's endeavour "for the good", being misunderstood as "weakness", is a reflection of Tagore's experience, which he expressed as, "*Persons* who have no faith in *humanity* [can] contemptuously brand optimism as sentimental weakness" (Tagore 1929). The "sword of justice for the purpose of massacre" is the

weapon that all imperialisms resort to. Tagore explains the lack of balance and harmony – *bhār sāmānjasyer abhāb* (Tagore 1901) as a result of the political civilisation that was introduced by the colonial imperialism and which he saw as the ‘crisis’ in negotiating through the highly fractured times in which he lived. Keeping true to the above intension, that is, adhering to the values of human ties, this study interrogates Tagore’s comments and understanding about the dehumanising effects, in his own words, of “the soul-stifling discipline and the savage greed of the modern nation-state” on universal humanity, which he saw as the crisis of civilisation. The effects, according to him, are seen “not merely on the subject races”, but also on those “who live under the delusion that they are free [but] are every day sacrificing... freedom and humanity to the fetish of nationalism” (Tagore 1916). In India, the “uncharacteristic xenophobia” took the dehumanising form of violence affecting every layer of the society, as the novel *The Home and the World* indicates.

Today in the scenario of growing asymmetry between the declining economic power of the United States and Europe and the continued overwhelming military superiority of the US and NATO, it is particularly important to seek an alternative and instructive to remember Rabindranath and his vision of the danger of ‘armed conflicts’. In his infamous 1917 essay “Nationalism in Japan” he declared,

Eastern Asia has been pursuing its own path, evolving its own civilisation, which is not political but social and based upon all the varied and deeper relations of humanity. Now the time has come when we must make the world problem our own problem, we must bring the spirit of our civilisation into harmony with the history of all nations of the earth. (N 14)

Expressing his suspicion about “acquiring modern weapons of self-protection” and the pernicious effects of the greed for power that a nation “sedulously cultivate”, he declared that it was urgent to overcome the “foolish pride” and the “supercilious contempt and want of consideration which in the West is justified in the name of patriotism”.(N xlii) Convinced of the dangers of patriotic egoism and that there would be no sustained development if patriotism was not human-centred, he declared in a letter to Abala Bose (wife of the renowned scientist, Sir Jagodish Chandra Bose) in 1908:

Patriotism cannot be our final spiritual shelter; my refuge is *humanit*. I will never allow patriotism to triumph over humanity as long as I live (my emphasis). (in Sen 2005: 108).

The letter reveals that Rabindranath was certain that the pride associated with the very feeling of being patriotic, or loving one’s own country, separated the finer aspects of patriotism from the ideals of humanity and would only carve a path towards barbarity and endless complexities. Analysing the colonial situation and the plight of the people of Asia or ‘greater India’, in his essays, ‘East and West in Greater India’ he observed.

At every turn – in her religion, in her *samaj*, in her daily practice – does the India of to-day fail to do justice to herself. No cleverness or violence can deliver her from the sufferings or insults of which the Englishman is but the instrument. Only when she can meet him as his equal, will all reason for antagonism, with it all conflict disappear. Then will East and West unite in India, country with country, race with race, knowledge with knowledge, endeavour with endeavour.

He warned against the fortifying effects of being unmindful of acquiring modern weapons of self-protection,[for] real power is not in the weapons themselves, but in the man who wields those weapons; and when in his eagerness for power, [a nation] multiplies his weapons at the cost of his soul, then it is he who is in much greater danger than his enemies. (*Nationalism* 20)

This warning seems to be of particular importance today. Globalism after the days of “war on terror” and especially after the post 9/11 events, is facing an unrequited crisis. The pressing issues of national indebtedness leading to social and economic crisis that the 21st century Europe and the United States are currently confronting with are having wide scale implications for employment and unemployment culminating in several forms of violence including widespread student’s violence (which is profoundly disturbing as the dissatisfaction on the part of younger citizens is important considering the future stability in the society), and instability in the society. Further the gap between rich and poor are still widening. The family as a social institution is under greater pressure. Overall, the growths of nationalisms at regional, national and international level are offering challenges to the global unity affecting human civilisation at several social levels. Although diverse sets of global connections and global dependencies cannot be ignored with the advancement of technological revolution, welfare of society is at stake. The result of the demonic

and destructive power associated with terrorism has definitely lead the global economy in crisis, and the United States remains deeply troubled. If dynamics operating in the society is guided by or rests with the demonic power of global terrorism, it is not hard to imagine the chain of complexities globalisation for social and economic justice in a global world society would mean; or as John R Saul observes “Only societies in disorder will be unable to do this” (208).

2. Conclusion

Given the part history of today’s globalisation, certainly, Tagore’s precocious renderings of the “crisis of civilisation” need a careful delineation. History is not only about the past, it tells us about the present and that would attribute towards the future society. If we are to go by the poet’s words, “All national histories are merely chapters in the larger one” (Tagore 1917:65), what could be the alternative? Can we have a peaceful globalisation by returning to what he envisioned almost hundred years ago? Should we return to Tagore’s journey towards reviving a modern consciousness collective of India, his thought for Asia and its rich cultural civilisation and his love for Europe without sacrificing his intellectual position? Should we not learn a lesson from his uncompromising and non-dogmatic, non-parochial defence of harmony and global unity by going beyond the realms of collapsing of cultural differences and without sacrificing local/individual ties and that admit to no artificial boundaries— political, ideological or geographic?

Tagore’s concern for common humanity is manifested in every form of his creativity – ranging from literature (which includes poetry) to inventive art to composition of music. His anxiety finds a profound expression in his last lecture/essay “Crisis of Civilisation”; his restlessness was no less intense in his early writings as he was constantly experiencing the impossibility of reconciling action with thought. It is possible to trace contemporary concerns with globalism, and the connections between colonialism and globalism in at least two of his early writings in 1881 “Juta Vyavastha” (Ruled by the Boot) and “Chine Maraner Byabsa” (Death Traffic in China). The poet-thinker with a deep unease not only condemned the dehumanising effects of modernity on universal humanity, instead “he homed in on the war then raging in Europe, the cult of nationalism and its partner, industrialisation”. The ugliness of the colonial ports shocked his aesthetic sensibility and roused his dormant dislike of “Trade” (Dutta and Robinson 201); the opium trade and the commerce of killing Chinese people by “feeding them with cannons in their mouth” (Tagore 1881:127). The indignation with which Tagore had vehemently condemned these pernicious tendencies of colonial imperialism way back in 1881 is evident in these essays written almost back to back (“Juta Vyavastha” and “Chine Maraner Byabsa”) and in his last essay “Crisis of Civilisation”, prominently, but not exclusively. They do not necessarily indicate a shift in his thought for common humanity, although he was always motivated “to create change” (2012:156). Rather, it is the anticipation of the crisis due to the lack of sustainable innovations which would be fair for all, for common good, for which we still criticise and appreciate Rabindranath Tagore. It must be noted in this context that during the discussions on maintaining “human” relationships and not submitting to the rule of the “machine” at the height of World War I, Rabindranath warned of selfishness and narrow nationalism, assessing critically the imperialist global world culture and its anti-colonial nationalist derivative. When one reads and analyses the above essays along with his other essays, in *Kalantor* and *Creative Unity*, one realises that Tagore is definitely relevant today and the degree of reproof is increasing considerably. One question would perhaps conclude what Tagore had to say in these essays - will India and China build a common ground on which humanity will meet as one, or, will they become super-powers and turn the wheel of global world change?

In this context, we need to pay renewed attention to Tagore’s claim that the *deference* for unity in common humanity can be simultaneously nurtured by acknowledging the *differences* in cultural diversity. He was cognisant of the injustices proliferating from European colonisation, but preserving rights for a greater unity cannot be impeded by coercive means in a civil society. He, thus, persistently rejected the exclusionary framework and in spite of the ‘complex interactions’ showed that it was possible to maintain human ties in society through “a harmony of adjustments”, but as he said, “unity is not in uniformity, but in harmony” (Tagore 1922:74). Cultivating relationships across cultures can come in respecting differences in cultures and in maintaining individual ties at the same time. Cabrera’s and Unruh’s observation on building “global mindset” exemplifies the same and it is particularly useful here. He writes,

Acquiring relationships outside the confines of your home environment requires that you find some ways to reach beyond it. Cultivating relationships across cultural lines likewise requires that you develop shared meanings (2012:70)

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