Chapter 5

A. Partition of Bengal: Tagore’s Contribution to National Awakening

The partition of Bengal by Government order took effect on October 16, 1905. It had a prehistory. Sumit Sarkar in his *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal: 1903-1908* makes an elaborate discussion on this (pp.1-30). In a brief summary, it runs like this: Long before in 1866, after the Orissa famine, Sir Stafford Northcote, proposed a reduction in the area of Bengal Presidency purely from better administrative perspectives. Accordingly, in 1874 Assam was separated to form a chief Commissioner’s province. But the problem was not solved, for Bengal Presidency with Bengal proper, Bihar and Orissa, still was too vast to rule from one place, Calcutta. In 1892 a suggestion came from the foreign department that along with South Lushai Hills, the whole of Chittagong division should be transferred to Assam. During 1896-97, William Ward, the Chief Commissioner of Assam, himself expressed desire to incorporate Dacca and Mymensingh too, under his governance. Sir Henry Cotton, who succeeded Ward in Assam, however “opposed the whole plan” and “with Mackenzie, the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, also rather lukewarm, the India government decided on 29 April, 1897, to transfer South Lushai Hills only for the time being”. In 1901, the issue got revived when Sir Andrew Fraser, the Chief Commissioner of Central Provinces, suggested a readjustment in the line of Bengal CP boarder, particularly regarding Sambalpur, “an Oriya enclave in a Hindi-speaking province” (ibid., 10). Though irritated with departmental delay,¹ Lord Curzon, the then Viceroy, still greedily captured the opportunity and “suggested in
council that we should take up the question of readjustment of boundaries all around” (ibid., 10). Fraser worked on the suggestion and in his note of March 28, 1903, “strongly urged” on the transfer of Chittagong division, Dacca and Mymensingh to Assam, as desired by Ward earlier and “for the first time highlighted the political benefits of the scheme” (ibid, 11). This was accepted by Curzon and placed in his Minute on Territorial Redistribution in India, suitably edited by Risely, as Sumit Sarkar notes, for “public consumption” (ibid., 12).

Eventually this attracted fresh and more proposals for inclusion. Bakargunj and Faridpur were annexed to the list, prior to Curzon’s East Bengal tour (Feb, 1904). On April 06, 1904, Government of Bengal wrote to Government of India to add Rangpur, Bogura and Pabna also. Shimla took only five months to send its approval and along with these, Rajshahi, Dinajpur, Malda and Jalpaiguri were proposed to be annexed to Assam. Curzon dispatched this final proposal to the Secretary of State on February 02, 1905. His consent came on 9th June. On 19th July, 1905 the Government of India announced its decision to set up a new province of Eastern Bengal and Assam comprising of Chittagong, Dacca and Rajshahi divisions, Hill Tipper, Malda and Assam. The formal proclamation came on 1st September and on 16 October, 1905 Bengal was partitioned.

Searching for causes behind Bengal partition, one is more or less convinced like Sumit Sarkar, that except a few vague references, till Fraser’s note of March 28, 1903, the administrative reasons had been predominant in the issue. Bengal Presidency had an area of 1,89,000 square miles and in 1901, a population of 78.5 million which was rapidly expanding (ibid, 23). Curzon did not like the Governor – in - Council system of Bombay and Madras Presidency model. Thus reduction in size was a necessity.

Additional to this was the administration problem of Assam. Too small as it had been, its Chief Commissioner had to depend entirely on officers lent by Calcutta, and upon which he, therefore, had no immediate administrative authority. Then Risely drew attention
to the commercial benefits of the scheme as Assam Bengal Railway would directly carry tea, wood, oil and other export materials to Chittagong port, a rising rival to Calcutta. Even in his letter to Fraser on April 08, 1904, Curzon justified the progressive expansion of the partition scheme mainly on administrative grounds (ibid., 14).

But it is also noteworthy that even in 1896, at least one officer, W.B. Oldham, realized the political benefit of uniting “the most important part of the Mohammedan Population of Eastern India”, thereby reducing the “politically threatening” position of “Hindu minority” in undivided Bengal. Eight years later, in 1904, Risely appreciated this view as “very instructive”. Alternative proposals of separating Bihar and Orissa in order to offer relief to Bengal administration, made repeatedly by nationalists and also by ex-officials like Henry Cotton, C.S. Stevens and C.F. Buckland – were not accepted, without sufficient logic. The political warning however, came from Risely: “…the Bengalis with their genius for intrigue would…find their own advantage and indulge their ruling instinct in stirring up strife and paralysing the executive”. But Lord Curzon, determined to brush aside all alternative plans, clung to his theory that any thing short of a Partition, would not only “seriously weaken” the prestige of the Government of India, but

would tend to consolidate the Bengali element by detaching it from outside factors, and would produce the very effect that we desire to avoid. The best guarantee of the political advantage of our proposal is its dislike by the Congress Party.

Curzon, who was keen enough to cash on the divide and rule policy, declared in a well calculated way in his speech at Dacca that the scheme “would invest the Mohammedans in Eastern Bengal with a unity which they have not enjoyed since the days of the old Mussulman Viceroy and Kings” (Mukherji 39). Fraser’s note assured him that “the advantage of severing these eastern districts of Bengal, which are a hot bed of the purely
Bengali movement, unfriendly, if not seditious in character, and dominating the whole tone of Bengal administration, will immesurably outweigh any possible drawbacks” (Sarkar, The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal, 21). And he agreed with Risely that, “Bengal united is a power, Bengal divided will pull in several different ways”. Considering everything Curzon arrived at the conclusion that

The Bengalis, who like to think themselves a nation and who dream of a future when the English will have been turned outy, and a Bengali Babu will be installed in the Government House, Calcutta, of course bitterly resent any disruption that will be likely to interfere with the realisation of this dream. If we are weak enough to yield to their clamour now, we shall not be able to dismember or reduce Bengal again, and you will be cementing and solidifying on the eastern flank of India, a force already formidable, and certain to be a source of increasing trouble in future. (Mukherjee. P 39)

This can be considered as the official standpoint of the Government of India itself, and not of Curzon’s own imperialist design alone, for when on another less significant issue Curzon resigned and Lord Minto became the Viceroy, the stand point did not altar. Minto accepted that the whole thing had been “carried through with an unfortunate disregard for local sentiment and public opinion”, but still partition had to be maintained, for, in his words the diminution of the power of Bengali political agitation will assist to remove a serious cause for anxiety….It is the growing power of a population with great intellectual gifts and a talent for making itself heard, a population which, though it is very far from representing the more manly characteristics of many races of India, is not unlikely to influence public opinion at home most mischievously. Therefore from a political point of view alone, putting aside the administrative difficulties of the old province, I believe partition to have been necessary.

(Sarkar Sumit  20)
England apprehended the power of Bengal almost prophetically. Though never publicly acknowledged, the words and phrases, made bold in the lines of the extracts of confidential notes, quoted above, themselves witness the real causes behind that apprehension. But in time of action, led by habitual arrogance and blind self confidence, England committed that very blunder which she was in greatest need to avoid, and which unavoids, ultimately claimed from her the dearest cost of India. For, England thought that Bengal would weep and beg like Congress (Sarkar Sumit 23). It was beyond her imagination that Bengal alone could divide Congress and former mendicancy could be replaced altogether by the double edged policy of violence and non-violence which it would be impossible for England to resolve properly.

Rabindranath Tagore came to construct on this emotional upheaval and rebellion of Bengal. He reached the heart of the people where the nation was about to be born and found the glimmers of a new awakening. In its most vital phase he offered leadership and along with others, quickly turned it into a Swadeshi movement. The word ‘Swadeshi’ originally means something related to one’s own land or motherland. As a movement it intends the emergence of one’s love, pride and spontaneous preference for everything produced in the native land and glorifying the native spirit. It aims to avail an intrinsic unity among native people against all threats of separation and contradiction. And it is particularly this message that Tagore, in his impassioned article “Bangabibhag” (Partition of Bengal), delivers to Bengal, bleeding and boiling and bursting in anger to protest:

The moment artificial separation will stand in-between, the intrinsic unity will swell up within us; then only we feel that the same Ganges holds the East and West Bengal in her eternal embrace, the same Brahmaputra fondles them on the extensive lap; the east and west, like the right and left heart, are steadily sustaining the flow of the same vital sap through the veins and arteries of Bengal.

(Qtd. in Poddar 92)
From the very beginning, Tagore was careful about one thing. He saw that the educated class and its representative political leaders demanded the support of the common multitude, but were not ready to come down to them, to educate them or to think from their point of view, as if it was the moral responsibility and holy duty of the mass to be directed and led by the leaders at moments of crisis and, it being over, to be cast aside in neglect, hatred and schemes of exploitation. His intention was to unite this class difference, if not in the external material field at this moment – he had already attempted that task in the article “Swadeshi Samaj” and in numerous social and rural reconstruction works in Shilaidaha, Patisar and will lead it further, later, especially in his Sriniketan projects –, at least in the spiritual domain of the nation. Like the French philosopher Renan, he also believed that nationalism is born in the spirit and common desire of the people, in their collective consent and agreement to live together and think alike. He strove to remove the differences that blocked that path. He took Partition of Bengal (1905) as an opportunity to consolidate and reunify Bengal, and in a larger perspective, India as well.

Three years later, in 1908, he will be writing:

Many of us have the illusion that our subjection is not like a headache, an ailment pestered so from within, but like a load on the head, pressing down on us from without in the shape of British Government; and that relief will be ours as soon as we can shake off that load by some means or other. Well the matter is not so simple as all that. The British Government is not the cause of our subjection; it is merely a symptom of a deeper subjection on our part.

[“Path O Patheya” (The Ends and Means), translated and cited in Dutta, Krishna and Robinson Andrew 152]
Still later his pen will oppose the basic negative principles of Gandhi and his non-cooperation much in the same way as it opposed ‘Boycott’ and ‘Passive Resistance’:

Some of us are reported to be of the opinion that it is mass animosity against the British that will unify India . . . . So this anti-British animus, they say, must be our chief weapon . . . . If that is true, then once the cause of the animosity is gone, in other words, when the British leave this country, that artificial bond of unity will snap in a minute. Where then shall we find a second target for animosity? Then we shall mangle each other in mutual antagonism, athirst for each other’s blood. (Ibid., 152)

But now for the present, he easily recognized the real canker, the conflict and duality in the political mission and exposed it in the essay “Banga Bibhag” (Partition of Bengal):

. . . the most surprising element is this that we have expressed our distrust in English administration, but could not sever the bond of trust from it. This is Orientalism. Here we differ from the West. Europe knows how to doubt and hate from the heart. Wrath captures us for a moment. Whatever we do, we cannot distrust whole heartedly. We lack in that strength. We prefer to be deluded and get desperate for a chance to believe in . . . . The stiff cruelty of complete distrust is unknown and alien to our unitary civilization. We have been taught for generations how to develop relations, not to dismiss it. What is unessential, what is contradictory, we have tried to adopt even that. We have not learnt to uproot and spoil anything completely. This cannot be called lessons for self defense . . .

(“Swadesh”, Rachanaboli, 6: 118)

Tagore warned his countrymen to shake off this feminine liquidity, this petition and protest. He strove to arouse them to reason and confidence:
If you do think that Partition of Bengal intends to weaken the Bengali people as a race, if you do contend that University Bill infact bows the death arrow to University, then whom do you want to soften by pleading against that? If a tree were to plead with the insolent axe coming down to fell it, “Your blows will kill me” – will not that be hopelessly silly? Is it inherent in the marrow of the tree that the axe has come to embrace it, not to cut it down? On the contrary if there is no such suspicion in your mind, why are you shouting – “your plan is clear to us. You want to destroy us”. And the next moment you are pleading with tears “What you have planned will ruin us. So please stop”. Shame for this “so please” . . .

(Ibid., 152)

One now easily understands the origin of songs like “If no body comes responding your call” or “ If you are afraid of what will happen, turn around and retire” etc. Tagore’s stand is clear. He knows well that nothing can be gained from appeals to bolted door except self insult and injury. Therefore he appealed to his fellow beings to unite, to stand by each other and oppose the foul separatist strategy of the rulers, with whatever strength and determination they have. The honest love of their heart and common truthful desire of united living were enough to reclaim their land back from the grip of dirty colonialist politics.

All these ideas came from his pen in numerous speeches, articles, letters, novels, poems and songs, written/composed at that moment of upheaval and later also, and offered leadership in mass arousal, which the snobbery of higher class political leaders did not care to think about. In “Swadeshi Samaj” he had already said:

The foreigner will be giving us water and food and light of education for ages and our only duty is this that if the quantity of alms fails to satisfy our need, we shall start shouting! Never, never! We, each of us, shall take the responsibility and
weight of our motherland upon our shoulders, everyday – that is our religion, there lies our emancipation.

[Atma Shakti (Self Power), Rachanabali, vol. 13, 44-5.]

He truly believed that nobody can snatch away our land completely from us and no one has that power to restore it back to our hand from outside:

The greatest danger lies in this that, if the country asks for anything from the countrymen, she gets no response. Water, food and education, for everything we wait upon the Government. This is where the country has lost herself. She should be intrinsically related to her people through the tie of service. The greatest separation has occurred there. Therefore I said in “Swadeshi Samaj” that, do not spoil time to decide who is our ruler, the English or any native king. We have to reclaim our land upon truth and love through self less service and profound sacrifice.

(Qtd. in Rabindranath, Swadeshi Andolon and the Monthly Magazine The Bhandar, in Bengali, Pustak Bipani, Kolkata: 2002, 303-4.)

Now on the moment of general upheaval, in the essay “Byadhi O Pratikar” (Disease and Treatment) he advised his countrymen to control the excitement:

Armed or non-violent, in both types of war, one should make a pre-calculation of self power and potency. Mere bragging is not war. One, who jumps to the battlefield and demands war, has to make another jump next moment to escape from the battlefield. When in the assembly of political speech we clapped and declared our war of boycott against the English, we forgot to make an account of our own strength. Whatever claim did we make of our love of the mother land, the fact remained that we had not known our country adequately...
‘The enemy will not touch weapon’ – if this is your only capital before getting involved in war, then it is a comedy that should end in tears. It seemed we retained the same hope in our heart. We had profound expectation and confidence on the patience and conscience of the English, not half so, on ourselves. If this is not so – why do we jump in hue and cry at a little displacement of the king’s scepter and a few wounds in our head! Think a little! What amount of respect do we gather for the English that we hoped, we would shout Bande Ma taram, we would bite his right hand off and still his scepter will not mind our pranks!

(Chowdhry Kamal 159-60)

The logic is self evident. Arrogance may be a quality for the powerful, for the limpid that is suicidal. The boat which can only bear the weight of itself, can never be the right place for imparting the lessons of dancing:

If dancing is your final mission, well I will not object, but take your time, at least repair the cracks before the show. Forget other things. The responsibilities one should acknowledge about one’s motherland, shold be clearly mentioned and pointed out before everybody. The old or the new, whoever has the ability, must perform the task soon. What they think on the matters we have heard for long, what they can do, we are yet to witness.       (ibid., 163)

If Tagore here alerts his age for what it should not do, and depicts clearly the danger traps, he also shows the positive field of work. He invites his countrymen to the real work, that is, the unification of hearts, – as Yeats did in Ireland, – which alone can cure all other errors and reclaim the life back to the dead body of the dead land. He makes this call a number of times, but most profoundly in the Vijaya Sammilani Address, delivered just a
week before the implementation of the Partition Scheme, on October 09, 1905, at the residence of Pasupati Bose, at Bagbazar:

We have to keep in mind that the swadeshism which stands revealed to us today does not depend on the grace or ill-grace of any king; it matters little if any regulation is enacted or not enacted, if the people of England heed our supplication or not, my native land is forever my native land, the land of my ancestors, the land of our children’s’ children, the giver of my life, my strength, my prosperity. No false assurance will delude us, nor will we betray it for anybody’s interest. (Poddar 96)

This is in fact, the true Magna Carta of nationalism, in every country, in every age. Rabindranath presents it here, not as a social thinker or critic, but as a natural leader of the people, their friend, their guide who is careful to preserve the autonomy of the mind, to strengthen the unity of the spirit. Like a true boatman, he timely alerts his passengers how to fight the wild waves. Courage is of course the first requirement. But along with it one should also extend one’s love for the motherland, for the poor country and countrymen. He carries on:

Friends on this occasion of Vijaya-gathering, extend your heart to every nook and corner of our dear Bengal. . . . Greet the peasant who has just returned after ploughing his field, the shepherd who has tended his flock back home, the devotee who has stepped into the cheering temple of worship, the Muslim brother offering his prayers with his face turned towards the setting sun, greet them all . . . and let the sweet music of Bandemataram, sung in a thousand voices, reverberate through out the length and breadth of the land – and let this ardent prayer move hevenyard:
Let the earth and water, the air and the fruits of Bengal be holy, my Lord!

Let the home and the marts, the forests and fields of Bengal be full, my Lord!

Let the promises and hopes, the deed and words of my people be true, my Lord!

Let the lives and the hearts of all the brothers and sisters of Bengal be one, my Lord! (ibid, 96-7)

Yeats and many other poets of various other countries also have played vital roles in the nationalist movements of their homelands. But what makes Tagore different from others and especially from Yeats, is his supreme concern for downtrodden humanity. Yeats also loved his country and wanted Ireland to achieve freedom at the earliest, but while he was more concerned with the world of mysteries and fairies and folk tales of an ancient Ireland and its Celtic culture, preserved and maintained by an aristocracy, Tagore’s first love is the common people. He is willing to reach the Hindu peasant and shepherd and devotee as much as the Muslim brother, and he hopes that “the deed and words of my people be true”. He also, as Yeats did, calls for unity of culture and wants to unify the lives and hearts of all the brothers and sisters of his country, but in his lips, these words do not sound merely poetic and hollow, he comes down to them whom he wants to have as friends in the rise of the nation.

The date of the execution of partition was fixed on October 16, 1905. Rabindranath proposed to observe the day through rakhibandhan (binding of sacred thread in everybody’s hand as a token of love) ceremony:

On the thirtieth of Aswin, Bengal will be partitioned by legislation. To prove, however, that God did not ordain the severance of the race, it is proposed that the day should be commemorated by the observance of rakhibandhan, to indicate the indelible unity of the Bengali race. The rakhi would be of yellow colour and the
mantra, to be uttered at the time of tying the sacred rakhī to one another’s arm, would be, brothers live united... The rakhībandhan ceremony will indicate that no monarch’s sword, however powerful, can cut asunder the bond of union implanted by providence amongst people forming one and the same race.

(Majumder, N. 21-22)

No other poet has ever thought of unifying the hearts of the land with more powerful and effective a totem/symbol than this. Tagore had an instinctive capacity to read the mind of his people; he knew that in a country like India, what political programmes could not avail, a religious ritual could easily achieve. His devoted acceptance of the dictates of Providence, also allowed him to come down and caress the blisters and wounds of the common people. Yet, in his leadership, he was never half hearted, never a man of retreat. Poddar records his tight schedule on the rakhībandhan day:

On the appointed day he participated in the ceremony proposed by himself, joined the early morning procession organized by the Bandemataram society which marched to the bank of the Ganga for a dip in its holy waters, and there in the company of distinguished public men he prayed for the well being of Bengal. He also participated in the Federation Hall function, of which the foundation stone was laid by the veteran and ailing Anada Mohan Basu, brought to the meeting place in an invalid chair. Basu’s presidential speech in English was read out to an estimated audience of fifty thousand people by Ashutosh Choudhury; Rabindranath translated it into Bengali and read the same out. At the end of the meeting the following proclamation was made:

Whereas the Government has thought fit to effectuate the partition of Bengal in spite of the universal protest of the Bengali nation, we hereby pledge and proclaim that we, as a people, shall do everything in our power to counteract the
evil effects of the dismemberment of our province and to maintain the integrity of our race.

Rabindranath read out the proclamation in Bengali. (97-8)

The meeting over, a huge crowd came to the road, Tagore’s song on their lips: ‘Oder bandhan jatai sakta habe’ (As strongly they will bind us, so will our fetters snap/ As redder grow their eyes, so clearer shall we see/ The more they will strike, the waves will higher rise.) and many similar ones that defied the deceitful enemy and its ugly conceit. Indeed, these patriotic songs have been unanimously acknowledged to be Tagore’s greatest contribution to nationalist movements in Bengal and her spiritual rebirth during the Swadeshi movement.

“These songs are”, as Poddar rightly comments in his analysis,

wonderfully free of any trace of parochialism or jingoism; nor do they incite crude passions or hatred or violence. A serenity adorns them; and their haunting melody inspires one to dedicate life and soul for the motherland. The first lines of the most popular of them may here be noted. ‘Amar sonar Bangla, ami tomay bhalobasi (My golden Bengal, I love you.), is now the national anthem of Bangladesh. ‘Sarthak janam amar janmechi ei deshe (Blessed is my birth in this land ); ‘O amar desher mati, tomar pare thekai matha’ (O my country’s dust, on you I rest my head); ‘Aji Bangladeshsher Hriday hote kakhon apani, tumi ei aparup rupe bahir hole Janani” (When, O Mother, did you appear out of Bengal’s heart in this peerless beauty of yours!). (99)

Some others of the group may also be noted:

Nai nai bhay hobe hobe joy (Don’t fear we shall win)

Jadi tor bhabna thake fire ja na (Should misgivings trouble you, go back)
Ore nutan juger bhore dish ne samay Katie britha (Don’t waste time at the dawn of this new age)

Ekhan ar deri nay (no, no delay any more, now)

Sankochero bhavalata nijeri apaman (To fear and imagine trouble, is to insult oneself)

And of course the most vital one:

Jadi tor dak sune keu na ashe (if nobody responds to your call, then go yourself)

Some of these songs might have cast an animating spell for secret, violent, revolutionary organizations and many martyrs readily caught them as stirring call to action. But even though Tagore always had a deep respect and love for these dedicated sons of mother Bengal, who never thought twice to sacrifice their lives for the country, he never could approve their violence and way of blood-shed. To him, this was a heroic but futile exercise, a noble waste of resource, that burnt itself in the fire of excitement and he was agonized to witness the fall and loss of lives.

One notable characteristic of these songs had been that nearly all of them were set to the folk tunes of boul, vatiyali, kirtan, sari, ramprasadi etc. These tunes originated in the very soil of Bengal and thus could penetrate the heart of all listeners. The robe of the zaminder was left behind, Tagore, through these songs once again met and merged with the common people who accepted him joyfully as the natural leader of the movement. He wrote many inspiring poems also during this period, the most remarkable of these being ‘Suprabhat’ (The Auspicious Morning!) which concludes with the oft quoted lines:

At this hour of sunrise, who sends out the call, ‘Fear not, ardent one, fear not; he who offers his life unasked, will never be forgotten!’

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Still, the songs had their unique effect and enthralled all. Through their soft colours and deep motivating words, Tagore painted the figure of mother Bengal who in due course of time ascended the throne of Bharat Mata. No model from the West was required, nothing was supplied by anybody. The spiritual domain claimed back its life blood and finally got successful to have an aroused people, unified and dedicated to uplift the nation.

The real contribution of Rabindranath Tagore then, may also be located here, in preparing the way for mass participation in politics. It is here that he paved way for the arrival of Mahatma Gandhi.
B. Tagore Resigns from Swadeshi and Boycott Movement

Tagore resigned from the Swadeshi and Boycott Movement only after three months of glorious, vibrant leadership. The contemporary historical documents provide some specific reasons:

a) Pressure was rising from all corners to make him a political leader who will speak beautiful words to the satisfaction of everybody save himself and no one will pay any attention to follow his advice into action, because after all he is a poet and dreamer and as Plato confirmed years ago, his plans also must be miles away from truth and reality, they must be unreal and utopian.

b) Rabindranath lost hope in the present scenario of Hindu-Muslim relationship and required undisturbed concentration to look into the problem in his own way and to find out a solution. The novel *Gora* and to some extent *Home and the World* too, was the result of this meditative pursuit.

c) The transfer of the point of gravity from a positive Swadeshism to a negative one of forceful boycott, he could not approve. He detested hollow shouts and baseless excitement that always negate constructive enterprise.

When the spiritual recovery of the soul of the nation was sacrificed at the altar of mere political and material gains, he detached himself from the movement. Poddar makes excellent translation of the words quoted by Prabhat Kumar Mukhopadhyay in the second volume of *Rabi Jibani* (125):

If the number and influence of such people has increased vastly in the country today, then the duty of people like us is to concentrate attention in our private works in a silent corner. Patriotism in excitement leads to loss of direction, however negligibly,
and ultimately to dissipation of energies. So I have decided instead of adding fuel to
fire, I shall wait by the road-side and keep my lamp burning. (108)

The glorious harvest of that self-withdrawal and re-orientation found expression in
three representative works of the period: *Gora* (1908), *Prayaschitya* (Expiation, 1908) and
*Ghare Baire* (*The Home and the World*, 1913). All these three works marked Tagore’s own
growth and increasing maturity to the basic question of spiritual revival and regeneration of
his country and countrymen in the context of nation formation.

Of the three *Gora* was first to come out. But it did not want to project the
contemporary turmoil only. After partition and a significant silence of nearly one year (from
the middle of 1906 to the middle of 1907) Tagore started anew just where he had left, that is,
Hindu revivalism. He makes it sure that his protagonist is born during the stormy days after
mutiny (1857), a time not far from his own birth (1861).

Gora, in the final judgment definitely stands apart from Sandip but in the initial
stage of the novel his character also is imagined in the context of the advent of extremism. It
was a philosophy, so Tagore opined in the essay “Shouting” (*Chenchiye Bala*), imitated and
borrowed from the foreigners’ politics. The Bengali word ‘gora’ refers to an uncommonly
fair or white complexion, commonly shared by the Europeans. Although the true identity of
his origin is skillfully kept hidden from the hero (not from the readers, however) till the fag
end of the story, Tagore by the very name of Gora, seems to suggest a European connection.
Accordingly Gourmohan, whom his friends and relatives called Gora, is physically different
too:

He seemed to have utterly outgrown all around him. One of his college Professors
used to call him the Snow Mountain, for he was outrageously white, his
complexion unmellowed by even the slightest tinge of pigment. He was nearly six
feet tall, with big bones, and fists like the paws of a tiger. The sound of his voice was so deep and rough that you would be startled if you suddenly heard him call out, “Who is there?” His face seemed needlessly large and excessively strong, the bones of his jaws and chin being like the massive bolts of a fortress…. Gourmohan was not exactly good-looking, but it was impossible to overlook him, for he would have been conspicuous in any company. (Gora, 17-18).

In deed, it is through these sharp, robust features and uncommonly white complexion of Gora that, as Jahar Sen Majumdar suggests (108), the issue of colonial domination and extremism silently intrudes the under surface of the narrative. Similarly the author draws special attention to his voice. Gora never says anything but declares. His words bear such strong accent and weight of personality that they easily earn an authoritarian control over the listeners and almost like a spell, convince them. But more than anything else, he has a ready conviction in everything he says and does. With strong perseverance and an unshaken belief in his ideology that sometimes amounts to obstinacy, he follows his thoughts. When the novel begins he is seen just in this role, holding the post of the Chairman of Hindu Patriots’ Society, set to work on a book in English on ‘Hinduism’, defending as well as glorifying Hindu orthodoxy with all his power and youthful energy:

... Gora began religiously to bathe in the Ganges, regularly to perform ceremonial worship morning and evening, to take particular care of what he touched and what he ate, and even to grow a tiki. Every morning he went to take the dust of his parent’s feet, and as for Mohim, whom he had no compunction in calling ‘cad’ and ‘snob’ – now, whenever he came into the room, Gora stood up and made to him obeisance due to an elder. …

By his preaching and example Gora created a regular party of young enthusiasts round himself. They seemed to have gained from his teaching freedom from the
strain of opposing pulls of their conscience. “We need no longer offer
explanations”, they seemed to say to themselves with a sigh of relief. “It matters
not whether we are good or bad, civilized or barbarian, so long as we are but
ourselves.” (53-55)

This also was a kind of extremism that under the cover of intoxicating rhetoric
lacked the sober touch of truth. Tagore recognized its illusive but hollow spell well in the first
hand experience of Boycott movement in the post-partitioned Bengal. Gora seemed to have
drunk the same wine that leading him blindly to the powerful advocacy of Hinduism, made
him forgetful of the narrow orthodoxy he had been inviting for his country. Led by his
colonial instinct of domination and control, he not only tried to stop Binoy from his visits to
the house of Pareshbabu, a follower of Brahmism, but he, in fact objected that Binoy should
not have food in the household of his mother Anandamoyi:

Gora shook his head vehemently as he said: “No, no, mother, none of that please!
I cannot allow Binoy to eat in your room.”

“Don’t be absurd, Gora,” said Anandamoyi. “I never ask you to do so. And as for
your father, he has become so orthodox that he will eat nothing not cooked by his
own hands. But Binu is my good boy; he’s not a bigot like you, and you surely do
not want to prevent him by force from doing what he thinks right?”

“Yes, I do!” answered Gora. “I must insist on it. It is impossible to take food
in your room as long as you keep on that Christian maidservant Lachmi.” (29)

When Tagore had been writing these lines, he must have remembered what he
himself once heard during the Swadeshi Movement in Bengal. A Hindu politician forced one
of his fellow comrades from the Veranda of the house where they had been preaching, simply
because the other man happened to be a Muslim and the Hindu leader feared of losing his
caste if he was to drink water in his presence in the same veranda. Tagore, annoyed with the efforts of marginalization within native hierarchy, knew this to be another version of colonialism, the internal one, which was more dangerous since members of the same society had been involved in it. The privileged top-order of native society intends to keep itself safe and pure, beyond the reach of the lower strata, which is insulted and marginalized within the ‘home’. The irony is keener, since it is this lower order that served and saved the higher culture for ages. Even when reminded by Anandamoyi, Gora, proud of his higher caste and culture, is unwilling to recon to the fact that he had been fed, nursed and brought up by that maidservant Lachmi, who along with thousand other Lachmis, make the body politic of mother India. The instinctive arrogance keeps Gora away from realizing that his struggle to lift India up with a pure Hinduism, in a supreme irony, in fact lowers her down to a greater misery and ignominy.

Just here Tagore seems to interfere, in his effort to Indianize Gora by making him darker, inch-by-inch, by drawing him out of home into the vast, open, unknown territory of the country.

First he presents Gora in between two sets of opposite characters, one rigid and dominant, the other liberal and progressive. Krishnadayal, Harimohini, Barodasundari and Haran or Panu Babu belong to the former category. They are all orthodox in their own ways and strive to dominate over others through their stiff ideology, blind rituals, narrow interests, ridiculous pride and prejudice. Hence in chapter 3 Anandamoyi’s words reveal to Gora the rough impatience and temper of Krishnadayal in his early years:

“Oh, Gora, you silly boy!” smiled Anandamoyi. “There was a time when this mother of yours was very careful about observing all these customs; and at the cost of many a tear too! –Where were you then? Daily I used to worship the emblem of Shiva, made by my own hands, and your father used to come and
throw it away in a fury…. But do you know that it was when I first took you in my arms that I said goodbye to convention? …. From That very day the understanding came to me that if I looked down upon any one for being of low caste, or a Christian, then God would snatch you away from me (30-32).

Barodasundari, in her turn, cannot tolerate the independent ideas and manners of Sucharita. Then there is Harimohini, who, angry that she fails to Keep Sucharita booked for her dear Kailash, exposes her old orthodoxy and rebukes Gora. And finally Haran or Panu Babu with his jealous rage and dogma tops the group:

One day Haran said to Sucharita in the presence of Paresh Babu: “I have heard that nowadays you take only sanctified food offered to idols. Is that true?”

Sucharita’s face flushed…. Paresh Babu, with a sympathetic glance towards her, said to Haran: “Panu Babu, whatever we eat is food sanctified by God’s grace.”

“But Sucharita is ready to give up our god, it seems”, said Haran.

“Even if that were possible, is it any remedy to worry her about it?” asked Paresh Babu.

“When we see a person being carried off by the current, are we not to try and draw him back to the bank?” replied Haran.

“Pelting him with clods is not the same as drawing him to the bank”, said Paresh Babu. “But Panu Babu, you need not be alarmed. I have known Sucharita ever since she was a tiny little thing, and if she had fallen into the water I should have known it before any of you, and would not have remained indifferent about it either.” (419)

Tagore calmly realizes that under the organized exploitation of the foreign rulers, India has been more oppressed and demeaned by one section of her own people who, blind,
aloof and remote as they stand from the people, try to suppress and dominate over any counter voice, unwilling to subdue under their self claimed authority. Gradually he makes Gora get aware of this burning shame of mother India, of the story of her daily disgrace and suffering, flowing underneath the surface as internal colonization.

Tagore proceeds to reconstruct Gora in two specific ways. First he weaves a positive circle of unprejudiced, modest and liberal characters like Anandamoyi, Binoy, Sucharita and Paresh Babu around Gora. Gora’s defying and extremist propaganda of ‘excellent India’ gradually loses its sneering sharpness, mellows down and maturates through constant interaction with four influencing concepts, - Anandamoyi’s casteless Indianness, and Paresh Babu’s Classless Indianness on one hand, and on the other with Sucharita’s ideas of a limitless India, unbounded in territory and Binoy’s concept of a noble and grand India, ever generous to include and accept all creeds and religious difference.

And along with this, Rabindranath takes Gora out of his home, out of Calcutta itself to the vast, unknown, unseen world where through diverse first hand experiences, all sour and bitter, he comes to know the true identity of oppressed India and her subdued people. The novel has many significant turns and bends to lead him to his final destination, but three incidents can be picked up separately, which specially contribute to his grand illumination about India. The first one occurs in Chapter 10, where Gora undertakes a river journey on a steamer for the bathing festival at Tribeni. Pilgrims from way-side stations boarded the vessel in profuse numbers. Most of them had been women. Despite sufficient elbowing and jostling they failed to secure a position and with mud on their feet and a single slippery plank that served as gangway, some lost balance and fell into water. On top of all, there was a rain, occasional showers kept on drenching them. “Their faces”, the novelist hastens to inform us, “betokened hopeless harassment, their eyes a pitiful anxiety. Only too well did they know that such weak and insignificant creatures could expect no help from captain or crew, so that
every moment of theirs was full of a timid apprehension.” (86). Gora was the only one who was doing his best to help these pilgrims in their distressful plight.

Leaning over the railings of the upper first class deck, an Englishman and a Bengali babu were smoking cigars and enjoying the fun. As the unfortunate pilgrims were getting into some awkward predicament their laughter and hilarity increased and crossed all limits of endurance for Gora. He came up and in a thundering voice protested the inhumanity:

“Enough of this! Aren’t you ashamed of yourselves?”

The Englishman merely stared fiercely at Gora from head to foot, but the Bengali vouchsafed a reply: “Ashamed?” he sneered. Of course I am, to see the utter stupidity of these animals!”

“There are worse beasts than ignorant people”, flung out Gora with a flaming face,- “men without hearts”.

“Get out of here!” retorted the Bengali, getting excited. “You have no business to come up to the First Class.”

“No indeed”, replied Gora, “my place is not with such as you; it is with those poor pilgrims there. But I warn you not to compel me to come again to this class of yours!” With which he rushed back to the lower deck. (87)

The spiritual domain of the country’s nationalism indeed, was not in the first class, Gora rightly recognized it to be populated by “those poor pilgrims”. But the important thing was that in spite of becoming an intellectual, he identified himself, among these helpless creatures who irrespective of any support from upper deck, themselves make the nation, everywhere and in every age. The protest and agony of Gora ignited that lamp which was to lend fire to a thousand other candles, waiting expectant for the final illumination to lit up the
spiritual domain and end the reign of age-old darkness. Throughout the novel, Gora, and throughout his life Tagore, had non-stop journey towards that goal.

But the goal now required a reorientation of objectives and a refinement of the sentiments at work. The British, dividing Bengal on the issue of communalism, exposed the rotten wound polluting all efforts of reconciliation in the Hindu-Muslim relationship. It was very much clear that without overcoming this canker first, the petals of Indian nationalism could never fully flourish. Accordingly, Tagore wanted his countrymen to look inward, to confront the flaw there, in the very heart. Poddar translates from the essay, “Badhi O Pratikar” (Disease and its Remedy, Rachanabali, XII, 905-914):

The fact that Muslims could be mobilized against Hindus is the really disconcerting problem, who mobilized them is not as important. Satan cannot work unless he finds a flaw. So one has to be cautious more about the flaw than about Satan. . . . The fact remains that we live in the same land, sharing common joys and sorrows. We are human beings; our failure to unite is a shame, a sin. . . .

Our sin is England’s main strength. (110)

Following the same tune Gora, in the novel, comes up to support the deaf, old, Mohammedan cook, who had been nearly ran over by the tum-tum of a Bangali Babu:

He managed to save himself, but tripped, and the contents of the basket – fruits, vegetables, butter and eggs – were scattered all over the road. The angry driver turning on his seat had shouted, “You damned pig”! and given the old man such a stinging stroke with his whip that he drew blood.

“Allah! Allah!” sighed the old man as he meekly proceeded to gather up what things were not spoilt into his basket, while Gora, returning to the spot, began to help him at his task. The poor cook was greatly distressed at seeing this well
dressed gentleman taking so much trouble, and said: “Why are you troubling yourself, Babu? These things are no longer any good”.

Gora knew quite well that what he was doing was really no help at all, and that it would only embarrass the man he was seeming to help – but he felt that it was impossible not to do something to show passers-by that one gentleman at least was anxious to atone for the brutality of another by taking the insult upon himself, . . .

When the basket was refilled Gora said: “This loss will be too heavy for you to bear. Come along to our house and I will make it up to you. But let me tell you one thing, Allah will not forgive you for submitting to such insult without a word of protest.” (Gora, 173-74)

It is also the same idealism that makes him deny hospitality at the house of Hindu Madhav Chatterjee who had been torturing the poor common villagers at Char Ghosh para, and he accepts food from the barber in that Mohammedan village, who gives shelter to Tamiz, the unfortunate Muslim boy of Faru Sardar:

Gora was almost overcome with hunger and thirst, but the very idea of having to preserve his caste by eating in the house of that unscrupulous scoundrel, Madhav Chatterjee, became more and more unbearable the longer he thought of it. His face was flushed, his eyes bloodshot, his brain on fire with the revolt in his mind. “What terrible wrong have we been doing”, he said to himself, “by making purity an external thing! Shall my caste remain pure by eating from the hands of this oppressor of the poor Mahomedans, and be lost in the home of the man who has not only shared their miseries but given shelter to one of them at the risk of being outcast himself?” (291-92)
What Gora tries to refashion here is the spiritual domain of Indian nationalism, and in the process he refashions himself, by going deeper into the problem, where his steadfastness gradually subdues to welcome a multiplicity of perspectives, controlled and consolidated by a supreme belief in liberal humanism and common traits of a shared culture. He steps into and tastes the sweet air of this spiritual domain when he is able to say:

My mind is in an ecstasy with the deep and grand unity which I have discovered running through all of India’s various manifestations and her manifold strivings, and this prevents me from shrinking to stand in the dust with the poorest and most ignorant of my countrymen. This message of India some may understand, some may not, – that makes no difference in my feeling that I am one with all India, that all her people are mine: and I have no doubt that through all of them the spirit of India is secretly but constantly working. (224-25)

Here Gora’s Indianization gets complete, and accordingly, he emerges with a new vision:

“No, I am not a Hindu”, continued Gora. “Today I have been told that I was a foundling at the time of Mutiny – my father was an Irishman! Today I am free Paresh Babu! …. I need no longer fear being contaminated or becoming an outcaste – I shall not now have to look on the ground at – every step to preserve my purity. …. Today give me the mantram of that Deity who belongs to all, Hindu, Mussulman, Christian and Brahmo alike – the doors to whose temple are never closed to any person of any caste whatever – He who is not merely the God of the Hindus, but who is the god of India herself. (861, 865).

Thus, through the construction and reconstruction of the protagonist, through negation of all sorts of domination and promotion of religious tolerance, which together, lead
to an over all cultural reorientation, Tagore in *Gora* refers to that ever flowing, inclusive and assimilative spirit of mother India, which he posits as the alternative and real base for further developments of Indian Nationalism.

But even though, through *Gora*, Tagore was successful to locate the final destination of a unique notional and national integrity that sought to accommodate all resources of a grand human culture, it was necessary then, to carry forward Gora’s individual struggle to a wider platform, that could drive home the unique message to every corner of the land and could ensure a spontaneous, vibrant, mass-participation in the nationalist cause. That made the way for the play ‘*Prayaschitto*’ (Expiation, 1908). In fact this came out earlier than Gora in its final form, but Tagore started to work on *Gora* earlier. Temperamentally also *Gora* precedes the play and its natural mass-leader Dhananjoy. Dhananjoy is not the hero, but a common man, a *boul* / *bairagi* or ascetic. He lacks the stout determinism and vehemence of Gora, but he possesses one special trait, Gora did not have. He has an innate capacity to attract and assemble others by his divine, down to earth simplicity. He never challenges, nor gets involved in heated arguments over religion and society. He worships a truth, which does not blaze like the sun but smiles and greets like the moon and includes everybody, draws universal love and support.

This was indeed an important point of departure for Tagore from the popular convention of contemporary days. The extremist politics had been already emitting smoke for last few years. After the partition of Bengal (1905) smoke turned into sparks and fire. The country began to feel the lack of an active, confident leadership that could unify and awaken its countrymen to the real work of building the nation. Up to this Tagore supported the sentiment and offered an example through the character of Gora. But to awaken the people is only half of the task. One needs to control this newly awakening force. One must subdue and consolidate its contradictory pulls with well calculated socio-economic programme, political
foresight, proper guidance and direction. Gora could not do that. The time, itself tumultuous and out of joint, could not conceive such a character even in the spiritual domain. That was the age of anxiety, excitement, enraged protest and anarchy. Boycott was its beginning and it led to bloodshed and terrorism at the end, that claimed back the heavy toll of martyrdom. Starting from Skhudiram up to Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, innumerable noble sacrifice ignited the lamp that strove for freedom and final deliverance as well. The spiritual domain indeed caught the fire and Kazi Nazrul, Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay, Girish Ghose, D.L.Roy and many others did not miss to stir the countrymen with timely dose of rebellion and patriotism.

Tagore’s position in this respect, has appeared to many as to some extent, ambivalent. From the beginning of his life he never liked the moderate mendicancy. The supreme sacrifice of the young heroes of Bengal moved him deeply and he greeted them with blooming petals of immortality: “Whose voice do we hear coming from the sunrise saying to us, ‘Fear not! Fear not! There is no death for him who will lay down his life’ ” (‘Suprabhat’, Sanchayita, 256).

In his Presidential speech in Pabna Provincial Congress in 1908 (12th February), he identified the British Government itself as the source of extremism and its resulting troubles:

. . . such is the nature of extremism that if one side rises to the top, the other by the same pull, rises too. When the misrule of punitive police, suppression, whipping and imprisonment along with one eyed law strive to gag every voice of protest, the warmth of excitement spreads everywhere like forest fire and makes people wild and outrageous. The situation indeed, is not conducive to our mission and interest. But all the same, it has to be acknowledged that despite the reign of age old oppression and immobility, instinct and nature have not died altogether among us. (Sehanbishi 20)
After the bomb blast in Mazaffarpur (30th April, 1908) and discovery of bombshell factory at Muraripukur, Rabindranath criticized the path of terrorism but his softness to the revolutionaries could not be missed also, for instance in the essay “Path O Patheya” (Ways and Means):

Such is the time now that it has become useless to rebuke or offer religious instruction to them who have accepted assassination to be the only way of rendering service to the country. If we need to convince the excited countrymen of anything we must speak it from the points of necessity. We must make it clear that even if the need is urgent, we must go for it through the broad, main road. The short-cut ultimately leads to a blind alley and misses both the way and the work.

When wounded and insulted human soul, in order to recover its lost dignity and manliness, moves towards the ultimate sacrifice – what can be more pathetic than that? Such desperation always leads to inevitable failure; but we cannot laugh at it. Its intensity to endure the full course of suffering has ennobled itself many times, many where in the history of the world. The vain expectation of attaining the unattainable, forces it to jump to the fire, as does the insect. True human welfare is achieved in a different way, through calm determination and perseverance.  

(Rachanabali 1941, vol. X, 447-8)

Comparison can be made here with Yeats. Though his context was different, Yeats too never supported violence and bloodshed. Yeats detested and protested the English misrule over Ireland, but Protestant as he had been and as he could not master Gaelic and wrote in English, he also had often been charged of his ambivalent attitude to England. What saved him was his love for the occult mystery of ancient Ireland and his love of Irish culture. In the case of Tagore, culture and heritage of India, the lessons of religious tolerance and unity in
diversity no doubt played a significant role. But ultimately what shaped his course was his concern for humanity. Repeatedly he voiced his protest and criticized British Government that it was beyond its power to subdue the fire which it itself had enkindled in the country by its policy of oppression and exploitation. But it does not mean that he blindly accepted and supported the policy of the revolutionaries and their blood stained path. He was proud of their courage of self-sacrifice, not of their cowardice of killing and murdering in search of freedom and truth. He searched for the golden lines of native culture, but more than that he searched for truth:

It is believed by many that our general antipathy to the British will give us a harmony. . . . But if this is true, there is one danger. When the British will leave India, that artificial lace of harmony also will be torn at once. Where shall we then find out a second element of hatred? Then we shall not have to search afar, our blood thirsty cynicism will make us wound and tear each other. (Ibid., 464)

Keeping humanism, peaceful, self-reliant resistance to oppression and a hope of a pan-world fraternity at the centre of his belief and creative energy, Tagore from this time onward had undergone a change, a change towards the realization of a different call of the universe and the self that remake each other and transcend to a greater liberation. In poetry it is the beginning of the Gitanjali phase. In Politics and Philosophy, it is a journey from nationalism to internationalism. In drama and prose fiction, it is a shift of focus from Gora to Nikhilesh (Home and the World) via Dhanajay (Prayaschitya/ Expiation).

Dhananjay does not believe in terrorism. He is not a revolutionary in the ordinary sense. King Pratapaditya is tyrannous. His misrule and torture make an atmosphere of suffocation for the people. Dhananjay uplifts them to a moral cohesion, empowered by good and truth alike. A minstrel on the village path, he becomes their guide and defies the irresponsible king his claim of tax. With the strength of the people at his back, he retorts with
all the force of peaceful, truthful, non-violent resistance: “No my Lord, you cannot claim what is not yours . . . your kingship cannot have any right over the rice grains that meet our hunger” (Rachanabali, 1939, vol. 8, 256).

He is fearless, he never compromises with pretence and never deviates from the path of love and truth. He has overcome the instincts and learnt to win through a calm, silent resignation of the self. His character becomes a forecast of what Indian politics will have ten years after in Mahatma Gandhi.

Poddar, representing a group of modern scholars, has seen in this shift of attitude in Tagore a strong note of ‘self-delusion’, especially in relation to ‘what Rabindranath previously wrote’. He brings the charge of Anglophilism on Tagore of this period:

Indeed, it was a withdrawal from Swadeshism with a vengeance, since he withdrew to the lap of Anglophilism he used to condemn a few years back in the severest terms. The fact is that dejection, frustration and gradual emasculation of a movement caused many of its pioneers to find out a way of escape. Aurobindo, after his release from prison in 1909, found that a hush had fallen on the country and the people hopelessly bewildered. This change of atmosphere was a prelude for him to bid farewell to politics and his ultimate retirement in Pondicherry. Bipinchandra Pal secured a passport to England to declare there in 1911 that the right of self-determination with equality in status within the British empire was the best solution of India’s political aspirations. Rabindranath, likewise, prescribed unity and cooperation with the colonial-imperialist forces in India with a view to making the gospel of oneness of world humanity a reality. Indeed, to Rabindranath of the current phase, ideas of world nationalism or spiritual unity of mankind and cosmopolitanism, ideas which at one time were ridiculed by
Aurobindo as ‘copy-book maxims’, wore themselves into a kind of obsession which shaped all his thinking and gave it the needed particularity of direction.

(118)

The objection is double edged. First, Rabindranath did not openly support and gladly accepted, but in fact condemned, the terrorist activities and bloodshed programme of the heroic revolutionaries who sacrificed their lives to free India from British rule. Second, and this is the main, in doing this, Tagore’s primal interest was to soften the British and regain their confidence in order to satisfy his personal (both literary and material) ambitions. Thus, in Poddar’s opinion, Tagore becomes one of the greatest friends of the British, still aspiring to carry on its colonialist, imperialist exploitation in India, a position he (Poddar) must sternly condemn:

... but truth also has to be stated. There should not exist any shade of doubt, however, that he succeeded in endearing himself to the English rulers. Of this he himself has supplied evidence in his letter to Lord Chelmsford of May 30, 1919, in which he requested to be relieved of the title of knighthood. In the last sentence of the said letter he paid tribute to Lord Hardinge ... in these words, “for whose nobleness of heart I still entertain great admiration”. (120)

Many lines can be written in defense of Tagore, sufficient to make a separate thesis and research work. But a few points may prove the logic behind Tagore’s choice of path:

a) In his biography of Tagore, Krishna Kripalani at one place writes:

He [Tagore] has himself related how once when a family acquaintance had gone to the Jorasanko police station in Calcutta to report a theft, an intelligence agent came in and reported to the chief on duty, ‘Rabindranath Tagore, class B, Number 12, has arrived in Calcutta from Bolpur’. Tagore must have told this story to Ezra Pound
whom he came to know in London some years later for, when the present writer [Kripalani] met the distinguished American poet in Rapallo, Italy, in 1959, the latter, who was in a reminiscient mood, said “Rabindranath whose words on numerous occasions are worthy of record, once told me ‘In my country I am suspect Number 12, Class B!’ ” (Kripalani, 219).

b) In 1917, when the Madras Government interned Anni Besant and her two assistants, Tagore in consequence, sent a letter to the paper *The Bengalle* (September 07, 1917) where he wrote:

. . . . In Bengal itself hundreds of men are interned without trial, a great number of them in unhealthy surroundings in jails and in solitary cells, in a few cases driving them to insanity or suicide. The misery that is carried into numerous households, is deep and widespread, the greatest sufferers being women with their children who are stricken at heart and rendered helpless.

I do not wish to go into details but as a general proposition I can safely say that as the whole evidence against them is not published sifted by a proper tribunal giving them the opportunity to defend themselves, we are justified in thinking that a large number of those punished are innocent. . .

c) After the barbaric Jalianwalabag public slaughter (1919) Tagore at least left his knighthood. Nobody else, nor even Gandhiji, has been reported to leave anything.

d) When the proposed new Constitution was published, asked by the editor of the English Paper, *The Manchester Guardian* (March 10, 1938) Tagore wrote to him:

. . . As regards the new Constitution, it is really not worth troubling about as it stands. It was made by politicians and bureaucrats, who even as they were framing it, were
sending some of our best men and women to prison, mainly without trial. It therefore, embodies all their narrow caution and miserly mistrust.

e) In 1917, in the essay “Chhoto O Bado” (The Small and the Great) Rabindranath clearly said:

. . . from the days of Swadeshi movement and its excitement I am writing against the extremist path. I hold that the result derived from unlawful and untruthful activities, is transitory and cheap. That does not pay the wage of the action, rather the burden of sin gets heavy. From the beginning I have requested all to leave this blind, dark alley, and I have criticized together the extremism of the Government. The West considers that there is no fault in blending political cunning with political piracy. Accordingly we too have learnt that to place deliverance of men above the material interests of the country is foolish weakness, mere sentimentalism.

Alas! What has happened to us! Thousands candles of patriotism have been enkindled. But what strange things do they reveal! theft, burglary, assassination? The internal poverty of mind had kept us as political beggars for the previous years. We excelled in nothing else but in writing applications to Government. Now when the new light of patriotism comes through the window how could we misuse it? How could we think that political murder and violence is the only way to overcome poverty? The path of the thieves never can meet that of the heroes.

(Rachanabali, vol. XXIV, 284-86)

Tagore’s stand is clear. Of course he is ready to salute the hero and his great sacrifice. But he could never like the path of the thieves, which leads to theft, burglary and assassination. There is no ambiguity, no duality in this.
f) Tagore was only a poet and writer. He never claimed himself to be a politician. But such criticism does not agree to make any difference of nature between the internal spiritual domain where the nation is thought into being and theoritized, and its external, political domain of diplomacy, struggle and active confrontation where a nation comes into actual existence. What is more, such criticism wants to monopolize and set a singular pattern as the unique and authentic method of nation formation, it derides and disqualifies any point of departure or deviation from that set design.

g) Only a recognition of the spiritual change in him, during this period can explain the true significance of why Tagore wrote such lines as:

The English have been sent out to work for new India, the India that has had her beginning in the past and is now gradually blossoming towards the future. That India is the India of all mankind. What right do we have to expel the English from that India before the time is ripe! Who are we of that greater India?

(“Purba O Paschim” / The East and the West, Rachanabali, Vol.13, 53-4.)

‘What ability do we have to expel the English from India, before the time is ripe’! – that is in fact the central question raised by Nikhilesh against Sandip in The Home and the World. Sandip says, the time is ripe right now, and if it is not, he cares little for that, he and his colleagues with patriotic fire and fervor will at once dismiss the British rule and usher in freedom for motherland, for the mother herself.

Bimala responded to Sandip’s call. It is not that she acted under blind passion beyond her control. The initiative was taken first by Nikhilesh, her husband himself. Having constantly before his eyes the image of the sister-in-laws, rotting as Hindu widows, imprisoned behind the bars of a confined culture, Nikhilesh deliberately wanted Bimala to come out of the image of the conventional Hindu wife. He expected her to love him at equal
terms, not as a subordinate. But this created a vacuum in Bimala. Responding to her husband’s call she came out, but could not avail independence:

My husband used to say that man and wife are equal in love because of their equal claim on each other . . . but my heart said that devotion never stands in the way of equality . . . My beloved, it was worthy of you that you never expected worship from me. But if you had accepted it, you would have done me a real service . . . . \textit{(The Home and the World, 20)}

Sandip offered her the support of an equal temperament. She found one who had not been cold like her husband, who could make extremist call for the destruction of foreign cloth, who had been equally impatient with the “fine-tuned arguments about justice and virtue” of her husband and preferred alike the politics of “exclusion, agitation, demonstrative violence, symbolic action and great rhetorical aggrandizement” (ibid., 38). She clung to him. Nikhilesh later sadly acknowledges the fact that “her values had been attuned to Sandip’s. They were not made by Sandip” (Tanika Sarkar 38).

Whatever other significances it may have had, Bimala’s story is intrinsically related to Sandip’s story in \textit{The Home and the World} in one major way, that it helps to expose the hollow rhetoric and shattered values of Sandip. “The representation of extremism would have seemed unfair”, Tanika Sarkar reassures in her analysis:

had Rabindranath not fleshed out its attractions through Bimala’s words. It is significant that this should be so, because the country did occupy a female space in its nationalist as well as imperialist envisioning – as the glorious Mother or as the land of effeminate Indians. Its state of bondage, its imposed burden of silence and endurance in the face of exploitation, seemed to confirm its feminine personality. Its arousal therefore, could be most accurately echoed through the awakening of
possibilities in the modern Indian woman. The politics of national self determination and anti-colonialism and the politics of the woman’s self-determination are simultaneous. (34)

But Sandip or Hindu nationalist extremism, in reality never intended to allow woman go for self determination. The inherent hypocrisy is all the more exposed by the exceptional character of Amulya whose crude, immature idealism “nonetheless reserves a surplus of genuine patriotism” (ibid, 34). Once Sandip is confirmed about Bimala’s irrevocable departure from Nikhilesh, his tone changes. He sets new trap that ultimately ends in entrapping himself in gross fleshly appetite, a degradation he could never repair or recover from:

My watch word has changed since you have come across my vision . . . . It is no longer ‘hail Mother!’ but ‘hail beloved!’ . . . . The mother protects, the mistress leads to destruction. (The Home and the World, 177)

Accordingly Bimala also constructs her vision of emancipation:

One night I . . . slipped out of my room on to the open terrace. Beyond our garden and walls are fields of ripening rice. Through the gaps of the village groves to the North glimpses of the river are seen. The whole scene slept in the darkness like the vague embryo of some future creation.

In that future I saw my country, a woman like myself, standing expectant. She has been drawn forth from her home . . . by the sudden call of some Unknown . . . . I know well how her very soul responds . . . how her breast rises and falls. . . . She is no mother. There is no call of her children in their hunger . . . no household work to be done . . . . So she lies to her tryst, for this is the land of the Vaisnava poets. She has left home, forgotten domestic duties; she has nothing but an unfathomable yearning which hurries her on . . . . (Ibid., 93)
But the mask ultimately falls to the ground. In a spur of extreme lustful attempt Sandip jumps to grab and possess Bimala. To protect her honour, she resists and pushes him back. Sandip gets exposed. He is literally ‘destroyed’.

Nikhilesh stands in complete contrast to Sandip. He is seen by many critics and commentators as to represent the thoughts and ideas of Tagore himself who at that time was busy with various programmes of constructive Swadeshi, rural reconstruction, mass contact and national education. Tanika Sarkar records the historical setting of the novel in some details:

. . . . His Chandrababu was possibly based on the figure of Aswini Kumar Dutta of Barisal whose rural bases and upliftment schemes he admired and preferred as opposed to the agitational extremism of Aurobindo Ghosh and Bipin Chandra pal. He gradually emerged as a strong critic of the extremists, their violent rhetoric and its encouragement of terrorism among very young people as well as its distance from the needs of the rural masses. He was especially disturbed by the alienation its cultural and political symbolism caused among Muslims. The extremists’ programme of boycotting British cloth resulted in great hardship to rural petty traders and peasants, most of them Muslims and low-caste Hindus. Another point of distance lay in his commitment to a Universalist vision of undifferentiated moral concepts of justice and truth which could not be divided into nationalistic particularities and interests. Even though, at several points in the past, he had come very close to a hard cultural nationalism himself, Rabindranath now removed himself from celebration of a closed culture. He now considered culture an inclusive and open value system, though discriminating about ethical stances, which needs to grow through continuous encompassment of new values, not through processes of ethnic cleansing. (33)
Such ideas did not take much time to raise against Tagore the charge of a cultural surrender. He was criticized, as has been discussed above, for not being enough patriotic and the marginalization was even more painful because he never could truly take himself away from the spirit and vibrancy of the national struggle. A division appeared between idealism and practicality. In the *Home and the World* it finds expression in the conflict between Nikhilesh and Sandip.

Nikhilesh does not believe in extremist philosophy, supported vehemently by Sandip:

> The impotent man says ‘that which has come to my share is mine’. And the weak man assents. But the lesson of the whole world is: ‘That is really mine which I can snatch away’. . . . The world into which we are born is the world of reality. When a man goes away from the market of real things with empty hands and empty stomach, merely filling his bag with big-sounding words, I wonder why he ever came into this hard world at all. . . . What I desire, I desire positively, superlatively.  

*(The Home and the World, 45-6)*

Nikhilesh in contrast, has nothing to desire for personal consumption. He is rather troubled by his social distance from the very poor, ignorant, humiliated people of the country, and tries his best to erase it in all possible and impossible ways. Like King Lear, gaining full knowledge of the self and the other in the storm scene, upon the open heath, Nikhilesh gets exposed to extreme pain and loss by Bimala’s departure from him, and it enables him to come down to the ‘poor naked souls’ and search for the face of his beloved country in their faces. He explores the agony of thousands of little farmers and cultivators in Panchu, who is fated to be equally exploited by the British and the new nationalist leaders. Nikhilesh stands upright to protest and protect him from the clutches of both. Sumit Sarkar offers a critical interpretation of Panchu’s story from historical perspectives of the time:
Near-landless, surviving through bartering cheap imported cloth and trinkets for grain from women of Namasudra households living in a segregated area amidst swamps, Panchu has to mortgage the little land he possesses due to his wife’s illness; his Brahmin-dominated panchayat imposes a monetary *prayaschitta* (ritual penance) on him when she dies . . . Panchu’s woes are compounded by the additional burden of swadeshi. He is bullied by Sandip’s student cadres (back home from Calcutta for their vacations) for the crime of petty trading in foreign goods. While Nikhilesh as benevolent and philanthropic zamindar refuses to impose the boycott on his tenants, the notoriously oppressive neighbouring landlord, Harish Kundu, has Panchu beaten up and plans to evict him from his tiny bits of homestead land. Meanwhile, the incessant and aggressive Hindu imagery deployed by Sandip’s band culminates in plans for organizing a massive Durga Puja, for which Harish Kundu levies additional cesses on his largely Muslim tenantry. This leads to a Muslim backlash, encouraged by mullas from Dacca. The novel ends amidst the fires of communal violence. (149)

Contemporary sources, both archival and non-official, as Sarkar refers to in the essay, highlight this dark side of extremist swadeshi, that found out thousands of Panchus instead of British Government as easy target of its counter attack. Specially notable among these is the research of the Japanese historian Nariaki Nakazato. Sumit Sarkar summarizes Nakazato’s views in clear terms:

Nakazato indicates a coincidence in time between the swadeshi movement and an important shift in agrarian relations that sharpened tensions in the countryside considerably. Prices were rising and under its pressure, zamindars and the gentry in general (particularly the bhadralok intermediate tenure holders) were trying to extend the practice of produce rent or bargadari (sharecropping). This practice
was a convenient one for the landlords, since there were no ceilings on rent enhancements on bargadari of the kind imposed on money rents by the Rent Act of 1885. . . . Bargadari also became more extensive since many among the bhadralok were getting into trade in agricultural produce at this time and were eager to acquire immediate physical control over the harvested crops. On all these counts, tensions sharpened between the gentry and sections of the peasantry who were a part of bargadari system. Most of these peasants were upwardly mobile Muslims and in some areas, Namasudras. These groups felt that it would be beneficial for them to switch to money rents. Commutation was legally permissible, if peasants applied for it during settlement operations – which consequently could become a time for sharpened class struggle. And here the coincidence with the swadeshi movement was decisive. Matters came to a head in 1907-8 in the Gournadi region which lay in the northern part of Bakarganj district, and which was the homeland of the prominent nationalist leader, Ashwini Dutt, and a major base of bhadralok swadeshi activity. J.C. Jack, an official with pro-peasant sympathies, was conducting settlement operations there just then. Jack felt it his duty to inform peasants of this particular provision (section 40) of the 1885 Act. This set off a rush of commutation applications from many Namasudras and Muslims, which, in turn, aroused violent bhadralok indignation and resistance. In this climate of peasant hostility, abstract patriotic appeals to boycott foreign cloth and salt met with firm refusals. There were even instances of counter boycotts of rent and services to bhadralok. (151-2)

This general air of doubt, distrust and agitation ultimately led to communal riots. Government records speak of Hindu shrines which came under attack by iconoclastic Muslim rioters on the ground that the Hindu landlords forcefully introduced a new iswar britti cess to
construct these temples. In time, Government officers came to investigate the alleged oppression of tenants by zamindars, especially those who had been suspected of swadeshi involvement. Nationalist newspapers shouted back that by encouraging the Muslim tenants to withhold rents, the Government in reality wants to implement the divide and rule strategy. These papers were openly in support of the pro-zamindari bias of the swadeshi propagandists. One notable newspaper of contemporary days Daily Hitavadi prescribed on February, 23, 1908:

It would be easy to convert illiterate and half educated villagers to Swadeshism, subjecting them to social control and threatening them with social boycott . . . .

The dread of being deprived of the services of the priest, the barber and the washerman will act powerfully to keep the refractory spirits under control.

Tagore had already warned against this in his essays, for instance, in “Sadupay” (The Honest Means):

We have claimed affinity and brotherhood from them without ever having tried to be close to them earlier. . . . We imagine that the Mother has become real for the whole country through songs and emotional ecstasy alone.

(Rachanabali, vol. X, 527)

In his analysis, Sumit Sarkar notes how Nikhilesh finds out in the Harish Kundu – Panchu episode, the knot of a terrible trio: poverty, zamindary exploitation and religious dogma, patronized by the higher castes. In the novel, Nikhilesh says:

I recalled then, Panchu, caught in the toils of poverty and fraud – it seemed as if he embodied all the poor peasants of Bengal. I saw Harish Kundu, ever faithful in his rituals, with all the marks of proper piety on his forehead. . . . One will have to fight till the end this monstrosity of greed and power, which has fattened itself
through sucking the blood of the dying, and burdens the earth with its sublime immovability – while below it lie all those who starve, remain blinded by ignorance, worn down by endless toil. This is the task that has remained postponed for century after century.  

*(The Home and the World, 155)*

Nikhilesh does not suffer from any bias and is careful to safeguard the interest of his Muslim tenants equally. His stand is severely challenged by Sandip’s one eyed arrogance which openly declares:

. . . though we have shouted ourselves hoarse, proclaiming the Mussulmans to be our brethren, we have come to realize that we shall never be able to bring them wholly round to our side. So they must be suppressed altogether and made to understand that we are the masters . . . ‘If the idea of a United India is a true one’, objects Nikhil, ‘Mussalmans are a necessary part of it’. ‘Quite so’, said I, ‘but we must know their place and keep them there, otherwise they will constantly be giving trouble’.  

*(Ibid., 120)*

The contrast of the two opposite views has been keenly analyzed by Tanika sarkar in her analysis of two representative songs, Bankimchandra’s hymn *Bandemataram*, sung in the novel *Anandamath* on the eve of a battle between Hindu ascetics and an eighteenth century Muslim Nawab who is backed by the British, and Tagore’s ‘Janaganamanaadhi8nayaka”, the present national anthem of India:

The song begins with an evocation of the land – green, peaceful, nurturing, bounteous. ‘Heavy with crops and shining with water, cooled by the spring winds/green with vegetation . . . whose nights smile in the silver moonlight/whose laughter is bright, whose words are sweet/Mother who gives us happiness, who bless us . . . ’ Mother is plenty, she is pleasure. Then the land becomes the goddess – fully armed, vindictive, death-dealing. She is crowned as
the supreme Deity within the Hindu pantheon. ‘All the myriad arms bear sharp weapons . . . all temples worship your image. The words initially are elongated, lush, flowing deep sounds. They then become harsh, jagged, slashing like swipes of a fatal sword.

The nation, in its imagining, is at war, is war itself. It can compel worship only in this incarnation. It can be realized through death, vengeance, and violent expulsion of what is foreign. The nation is no longer a land that nourishes the people. It is entirely separated from both land and people, and is elevated over both. It cares nothing for their welfare, their livelihood, and their survival. It commands their death in war just as much as it commands the death of its enemies. It requires endless human sacrifice. . . .

In 1913, during his exile from nationalism, Rabindranath wrote ‘Janaganamana’ a song for the nation in which a very different form of patriotic love is imagined. The land is dedicated to a God above all nations, presiding equally over all of them. . . . God is universal justice, goodness and morality, qualities to which the nation must aspire. . . . Moreover . . . the country is evoked as an entity made up of many peoples, many landscapes, many histories and cultures, including the latest deposit of the Western one. It is not a sacred substance, one and indivisible and beyond history. (41-2)

Nikhil differs from Sandip in this that the land he praises is not a melting pot of diversities. It is rather a space of dispersion of identities, a domain where differences are displayed and yet are bound together in mutual love and respect by a spiritual consciousness, tirelessly at work to weave a nation and extending it limitlessly to accommodate both the home and the world.
This realization and insightful restrain separate him from the other characters in and outside the novel. His story cannot end in victory because such was the pattern of historical events. Indian nationalism still had miles to go before achieving freedom officially. But its spiritual domain already lent the warmth necessary to break the ice of age old immobility. In *The Home and the World*, Nikhilesh ignites that fire of truth through sparks of personal agony, suffering and sacrifice:

‘I do not care about fine distinctions,’ I [Bimala] broke out. ‘... I am only human. I am covetuous. I would have good things for my country. If I am obliged, I would snatch them and filch them. I have anger. I would be angry for my country’s sake... I would smite and slay to avenge her insults... I would... call her Mother, Goddess, Durga – for whom I would redden the earth with sacrificial offerings. I am human, not divine.’

Sandipbabu leapt to his feet with uplifted arms and shouted, ‘Hurrah’. The next moment he corrected himself and cried, ‘Bande Mataram.’

A shadow of pain passed over the face of my husband. He said to me in a very gentle voice: ‘Neither am I divine, I am human. And therefore I dare not permit the evil which is in me to be exaggerated into an image of my country – never, never.’  

*The Home and the World*, 38

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C. Nationalism

The evil, Nikhilesh warns about in *Home and the World*, is narrow nationalism. Tagore explains its nature elaborately and exhaustively in his book *Nationalism* (1917), which is in fact, a printed version of his three lectures: ‘*Nationalism in Japan*’, ‘*Nationalism in the West*’, and ‘*Nationalism in India*’, delivered in 1916 in his visit to Japan and America. It does not require reiteration that Tagore was not an academician of political theory. What he says on nationalism, therefore clearly comes from his awareness of the contemporary world situation and his first hand experience of the oppression, exploitation and torture faced by the ruled nations under the nationalist strategy of the colonial rulers. He exposes its secret paradigm and mean objectives blatantly. “What is the Nation?” Tagore asks pointedly and then proceeds to explain:

A nation, in the sense of political and economic union of a people, is that aspect which a whole population assumes when organized for a mechanical purpose. . . .

It is the aspect of a whole people as an organized power. This organization incessantly keeps up the insistence of the population on becoming strong and efficient. But this strenuous effort after strength and efficiency drains man’s energy from his higher nature where he is self-sacrificing and creative. 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. Yet in this he feels all the satisfaction of moral exaltation and therefore becomes supremely dangerous to humanity.

(*Nationalism*, 67)

Man has certain obligation to the civilization of Man. But under the overwhelming political and imperial influence of Nationalism, an extreme form of greed and self-seeking
induces Man to introduce the reign of machine. His uncontrollable desire to grab immediate
dependence and spoils his moral personality:

By this device the people who love freedom perpetuate slavery in a large portion
of the world with the comfortable feeling of pride in having done its duty; men
who are naturally just can be cruelly unjust both in their thought, accompanied by
a feeling that they are helping the world to receive its deserts, men who are honest
can blindly go on robbing others of their human rights for self-aggrandizement,
all the while abusing the deprived for not deserving treatment. We have seen in
our everyday life even small organizations of business and profession produce
callousness of feeling in men who are not naturally bad, and we can well imagine
what a moral havoc it is causing in a world where whole peoples are furiously
organizing themselves for gaining wealth and power. (Nationalism 68)

Tagore compares the grim, mechanical aspect of this ‘soul-less organization’ to a
‘hydraulic press’ and ‘an octopus of abstractions sending out its wriggling arms in all
directions of space and fixing its interminable suckers even into the far away future’ (Ibid.,
32). Such comments, bearing Tagore’s insightful apprehension regarding the monstrosities
made possible by the conjunction of the rhetoric of national glory with the growth of
Capitalism in the 20th century, easily takes one back to Marx and Engles, who from the
pages of The Manifesto of the Communist Party (1848), may be seen to render similar
warnings years earlier:

The bourgeoisie keeps more and more doing away with the scattered state of the
population, of the means of production, and of property. It has agglomerated
production, and has concentrated property in a few hands. The necessary
consequence of this was political centralization. Independent, or but loosely
connected provinces, with separate interests, laws, governments and systems of
taxation, became lumped together into one nation, with one government, one code of laws, one national class interest, one frontier and one custom tariff. (39)

Capitalism, growing unchecked to its farthest stage, takes the form of Imperialism in order to acquire and monopolize political power, that enables it to carry on the wheels of oppression, plunder and economic exploitation with increased vigour and endless brutality upon the subjugated colonies and nations, much in the same way as Marx and Engles from *The Manifesto of the Communist Party* forewarned:

The need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere. . . . It compels all nations, on pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois mode of production; it compels them to introduce what it calls civilization into their midst, i.e., to become bourgeois themselves. In one word, it creates a world after its own image. (37-8)

This arrogant voracity, this conceited, insane and endless pursuit after greater amount of wealth and power, this monopolist systemization of the big nations to eschew and consume all other less powerful nations and no-nations, through luring rhetoric and political strategy, Tagore condemns outright. This new applied science of robbery, he terms as Nationalism, in the narrowest sense of the word:

The government by the Nation is neither British nor anything else; it is an applied science and therefore more or less similar. . . . Our government might have been Dutch or French or Portuguese and its essential features would have remained much the same as they are now. (*Nationalism*, 40)
With a careful analyses, Tagore continues:

. . . the idea of the Nation is one of the most powerful anesthetics that man has invented. . . . Nation is the greatest evil. . . . Its one wish is to trade on the feebleness of the rest of the world, like some insects that are bred in the paralyzed flesh of victims kept just enough alive to make them toothsome and nutritious. Therefore it is ready to send its poisonous fluid into the vitals of other living peoples, who not being nations are harmless. . . . And for all this the Nation has been claiming the gratitude of history and all eternity for its selfishness; ordering its band of praise to be struck from end to end of the world, declaring itself to be the salt of the earth, the flower of humanity, the blessing of God hurled with all his force upon the naked skulls of the world of No-Nations. (Ibid., 47-48)

Questions may arise here regarding the true definition, meaning, nature and scope of the term ‘Nationalism’, as attempts have already been made to challenge and refute Tagore’s interpretation and views on this. In fact, his critics have raised two specific objections against Rabindranath. First, does ‘Nationalism’ mean merely an endless pursuit of wealth and power, without any reference to the shared collective existence and cultural homogeneity? Second, how can Tagore, himself glorifying the nation and patriotic activities in the earlier stages of his career, denounce it now in favour of universalism and internationalism?

To take the first issue first, the counter-views, definitions and interpretations of ‘Nationalism’, produced by disregarding its functional abuse and concentrating more on the other positive elements, considerably vary and differ in their ideological construction of the notion. Thus taking cue from Toynbee, many critics consider Nationalism to be “the assumption of an identity by a group of people primarily on the basis of territory, language, religion and culture”(336). Well into the 20th century, Stalin defined a nation as “. . . a historically evolved, stabled community of language, territory, economic life and
psychological make-up, manifested in a community of culture” (8). But the idea of a nation’s historical evolution, then is contested in contrary theoratization which prefers to see the nation as a product of ‘historical amnesia’ or as an ‘imagined community’ (Anderson 17).

The richest opinion in this regard, however comes from no other than Rabindranath himself, who in the first essay “Nation Ki” of the volume Atmashakti (1905), in Bengali, written fifteen years earlier in 1901, analyses all the constituent elements of ‘Nationalism’ separately. Clearly acknowledging the fact that the word ‘nation’, with its essential European origin and root, does not have a right Bengali synonym, Tagore, after the French theorist Earnest Renan, argues that even though unity of race, religion, language, and sharing of a common Geographic territory enhances the attachment among individuals of a nation, these are only external factors in its development. The centre of a nation, according to Tagore, is made of two elements: a) the rich heritage of a shared collective memory that constantly reminds a group of people of the past glories of their community, and b) the common collective desire to protect and carry forward this rich heritage through struggles and sacrifices of the present. Sacrifices are especially important, since, the fellow feeling and unity derived in sorrow is stronger and more durable than that derived in joy and mirth.

If ‘common will’ thus becomes the central factor in the construction of nation, doubt has also been expressed regarding its consistency and durability, for, ‘common will’ is no permanent factor and its strength depends upon many other corollary elements. Tagore, of course, recognizes the risk, but then, as he says, everything in this world is susceptible to change. Nations in future, may all get assimilated into the common melting pot under European dominance and take one singular identity. But at present, Tagore does not find any sign of it and he welcomes the present difference since it restricts the jurisdiction of each nation and thereby ensures separate individual identity of all. One law and one master would
damage – so Tagore contends – this healthy diversity of a rich concert which a solo music performance, however enchanting, can never attain.

This is where the narrow Nationalism of West interfered and by its acquired advantage in the economic, political and military fields, tried to hammer out all diversity into a common single line agenda, bantered years after in a poem ‘Hawk Roosting’, by Ted Hughes: “I kill wherever I please because it is all mine” (Golden Treasury, 564).

Rabindranath in Nationalism, protests against this arrogant inhumanity and his words with warnings of the fiery waves of war, ask that rough, blind force to pause, think and deviate from the lures of supreme loss, ruin and death:

. . . this cruel war has driven its claws into the vitals of Europe, when her hoard of wealth is bursting into smoke and her humanity is shattered into bits on her battlefields. . . . Men, the fairest creations of God, came out of the National manufactory in huge numbers as war making and money-making puppets, ludicrously vain of their pitiful perfection of mechanism. . . . These monsters grow into huge shapes but never into harmony. And this Nation may grow on to an unimaginable corpulence, not of a living body, but of steel and steam and office buildings, till its deformity can contain no longer its ugly voluminousness – till it begins to crack and gape, breathe gas and fire in gasps, and its death-rattles sound in cannon roars. In this war the death throes of the Nation have commenced. Suddenly, all its mechanism going mad, it has begun the dance of the Furies, shattering its own limbs, scattering them into the dust.

( Nationalism, 27)

Tagore called this ironic turn of history as the ‘fifth act of the tragedy of the unreal’.

Six years later, T.S. Eliot agreed in the Waste Land (1922) and saw its shattering columns:
Falling towers
Jerusalem, Athens, Alexandria
Vienna, London.
Unreal. (41)

The second charge regarding the duality of Tagore, exemplified in the construction of nationalist sentiment in Bengal and India, in the early part of his career, and his subsequent distance and departure from that stand in search of an internationalism that greets the universal man and makes way for the fruition of thousand other possibilities of life – however, is more complex and its root goes deep into the discourse of colonial dichotomy. For colonization, along with a massive economic exploitation, unleashes schemes of a cultural aggression too. It destroys the conquered civilization. It empties the colonized people of all their traditional belief systems. It undermines their very sense of self, and thereby draws forth two reactions: first, the colonized people in their struggle to reclaim the ‘self’ of the emerging nation, goes back to the distant past of lost culture and with renewed vigour, revives it into the present and preserves it with a nostalgic care and attachment. Second, the colonial-cultural attack hits them so powerfully that it releases forces within the colonized societies to pay back the colonizers in their own coin, enlightenment fails there to enlighten truly and all possibilities of further emulation gets enmeshed in a mad pursuit after revenge, all energy gets exhausted in a supreme drive for the disavowal of the colonizer’s civilization. The emerging nation is imagined then, in this arena of growing difference and hostility, copying, what Benedict Anderson calls, the ‘Western Models’.

To fabricate resistance, these reactions work together or alone as per the need and desire of the dominated and thereby foreground the contrary pulls of culture that give birth to duality, a contradiction that seems almost insurmountable. For, as Dipankar Roy shows:
The essential national self is fashioned in the codes of Western, overtly virile masculinity and the Universalist, nationalist consciousness; - almost its alter ego – has also drawn largely from the Western value-systems. The Western episteme seems to be at work in both cases, with two completely incompatible results. Ashis Nandy’s study, *An Intimate Enemy* can help us overcome this impasse. According to him, forces unleashed by the post-enlightenment Europe to propagate all-encompassing spirit of reason and its unitary model of nation-state resulted in absolutizing the West, – a domain of vigorous, enterprising, rational race to whose masculine spirit the ‘non-West’ must bow down. The colonial experience only helped to legitimize this kind of Western consciousness as the mainstream which engulfed all other dissenting voices. This necessitated for the newly-fashioned Western ‘subject’ to construct the Oriental- Other. (391)

Both Roy and Nandy see this as an act of vehement disavowal on the part of the East, of its supposed ‘effeminacy’ by fashioning a counter-masculine self. Tagore seems to have done exactly this, though in his own way. In a letter written from Cuttack, dated February 10, 1893, he records the construction of the ‘departure’ from the dominant culture of the colonizers:

As I sit in a corner of the drawing room after dinner, everything round me looked blurred to my eyes. I seemed to be seated by the head of my great, insulted motherland, who lay there in the dust before me, disconsolate, shorn of her glory. I cannot tell what a profound distress overpowered my heart.

How incongruous seemed the mem-shahibs there, in their evening-dresses, the hum of English conversation, and the ripples of laughter! How richly true for us is our India of the ages; how cheap and false the hollow courtesies of an English dinner party.  (*Glimpses of Bengal*, 97-98)
The departure necessitates a construction of one’s own cultural identity or space where not only the rich and unique heritage of the mother land is reclaimed back with all its glorious past but passionate care is also taken continually to shape and reshape, to construct and reconstruct the ‘colonial other’. This is the spiritual domain of Nationalism and in Tagore, this has not been ‘imagined’ after any model provided by Europe or America, as Benedict Anderson wrongly claims. “The replicatory tendency of the colonized people”, Dipankar Roy explicates the Anderson model, “is driven with a mad desire for revenge to do the enemy exactly what the enemy has done to him, so that colonizer and colonized would meet eye to eye, is the fantasy of envy and violence that has been the leitmotif that keeps coming back in the mainstream masculinist, anti-imperialist discourse”.  

(387)

Tagore never steps into the shoes of revenge. He never supported negativism. His life long struggle was to promote self-esteem, self-power and self-reliance, against the cheap imitation of proud and prejudiced cultural and political aggression of the West which he never spared in his criticism. Kripalani cites his irritation:

The soil in which we are born . . . is the soil of our village, the mother earth in whose lap we receive our nourishment from day to day. Our educated elite, abstracted from this primal basis, wander about in the high heaven of ideas like aimless clouds removed from this our home.   

(155)

Of course he glorified mother Bengal in numerous songs and poems, of course he excavated the rich resource of ancient India and weaved his dream-land that emerges anew leaving behind all conflict, discord and disunity. But even there in that ‘imagining of the nation’ he was not swept off his feet by any desire of revenge, jealousy and hatred against the colonizer. Thus in his response to Swadeshi and boycott, he said in the essay “Abastha o byabastha” (Disease and Remedy) :
Now as our response to the government’s decision to partition of Bengal, the resolution that we have made to avoid as far as practicable buying foreign goods and use instead swadeshi articles, has to be put calmly, deeply, on the basis of permanent welfare of the land. The joy that I feel in respect of this present enterprise is not because it will harm the English, nor fully because it will help native traders to earn more profits…I am only thinking of our spiritual gain. To my mind, if we always consciously prefer using swadeshi products in place of foreign one . . . then our native land will have full possession of our hearts.

(_Rachanabali_, 12: 744-5)

This was not anything new or sudden in Tagore, rather this was the essential message he has struggled to drive home throughout his career, against all policies of dry rhetoric, agitation and mendicancy. As early as in 1883 (B.S 1290), in the essay “National Fund” he regretted:

In our land, the other name of political agitation is begging. . . . A beggar gains nothing; a beggar nation also gains nothing. We may get everything from the English by begging, except self-confidence. . . . The fruits of begging are transitory, while those of self-dependence are permanent. . . . The amount of labour they are spending to make the government aware of its obligations would have paid enormously if it were spent on the task of building the people’s consciousness.           (_Rachanabali_ , 3: 168).

Thirty seven years later in his message sent to the first memorial meeting, presided over by M.A. Jinnah on April 13, 1920, he is seen to be equally vehement against all rhetoric of sound and fury and its hollow, artificial show. Opposing the proposal of the erection of a memorial for the victims of the massacre at Jalianwalabagh, he who had already resented and renounced his knighthood, wrote:
Let those who try to burden the minds of the future with stones, carrying the black memory of wrongs and their anger, but let us bequeath to the generations to come memorials of that only which we can revere – let us be grateful to our forefathers, who have left us the image of our Buddha, who conquered self, preached forgiveness, and spread his love far and wide in time and space. (Das, 3: 753)

Rabindranath in his nationalist discourse, then, does not suffer from any incongruity or duality, but participates whole heartedly in a linear development which at different stages of matuarisation no doubt accepts changes and revisions, but never shifts away from the root course and fundamental traits. In fact in all these he, time and again, recognizes the will of Providence that keeping him inactive in the player’s seat, itself plays the music, unseen. To this he bows in reverence and wonder:

What is this play of yours that you do not let me say what I have thought I will! You snatch the words from my lips, and you speak them yourself, blending them with your own music….Sitting on my doorstep, I was telling homely tales to my people, but you burnt them in fire and in tears you drenched them, moulding them into images after your heart! (Bose 58)

Keeping his allegiance undisturbed forever, to truth, beauty and universal good, Tagore, the priest to the religion of man, utters his warnings in Nationalism:

There is always the natural temptation in us of wishing to pay back Europe in her own coin, and return contempt for contempt and evil for evil. But that again would be to imitate Europe in one of her worst features, which comes out in her behavior to people whom she describes as yellow or red, brown or black. And this is a point on which we in the East have to acknowledge our guilt. . . . It is really because we are afraid of our own weakness, which allows itself to be overcome
by the sight of power, that we try to substitute for it another weakness which
makes itself blind to the glories of the West. When we truly know that Europe
which is great and good, we can effectively save ourselves from the Europe
which is mean and grasping. (26-7)

The political civilization of Europe is based upon exclusion. It tries to subdue all
conflicts by organizing the mechanical forces, by conquest. Tagore denounces this outright.
But simultaneously he recognizes that the true self power and confidence can never be
achieved unless and until one recognizes self-weakness and respects the good and positive
things even in the enemies. First he recognizes that India has never had a real sense of
nationalism. He looks back at himself and says:

Even though from Childhood I had been taught that idolatry of the nation is
almost better than reverence for God and humanity, I believe I have outgrown
that teaching, and it is my conviction that my countrymen will truly gain their
India by fighting against the education which teaches them that a country is
greater than the ideals of humanity. (Ibid., 65)

At the same breath he finds out love of justice, curiosity, perseverance, diligence of
labour, love of reason, logic and scientific understanding of the mysteries of the world and
many other positive qualities in Europe. He wanted his country and countrymen to acquire
these in order to come out of their inertia, langour and age-old immobility. Therefore he
dreamt of a combined civilization of the East and the West and could not support the non-
cooperation movement of Gandhiji. In a letter from Chicago on March 05, 1921, he
lamented:

What irony of fate is this that I should be preaching co-operation of cultures
between East and West on this side of the sea just at the moment when the
doctrine of non-cooperation is preached on the other side?

(Letters from Abroad, 56)
Therefore he could say:

Whether India is to be yours or mine, whether it is to belong more to Hindu, or the Moslem, or whether some other race is to assert a great supremacy than either - that is not problem with which Providence is exercised. . . . It is our vanity which makes us think that it is a battle between contending rights, – the only battle is the eternal one between Truth and untruth.                (Rachanaboli, XI: 38)

True it is that this abstract appeal for truth in defying untruth, did not earn for Tagore applause and popularity, when those words had been spoken. He felt deep agony and shuddered in watching the dehumanization in Japan. But Japan pitied him merely as a preacher from “a pale, decaying land, where all things droop to ruin” (Guha xx), and America expressed mock sympathy for him: “Tagore seems to oppose the idea of a nation because he belongs to a race which has no nation of its own. Such a race is to be pitied, not blamed” (ibid., xxiii).

Both Japan and America have swallowed their words long ago when they realized the inner truth of Tagore’s message, through their own loss and ruins during the World War II. But the incomprehension persists. Thus Frank. J. Korom, in his recent article “The Role of Folklore in Tagore’s Vernacular Nationalism”, brings back the old charge:

The development of a psychological inferiority complex among the colonized arises most often when the subjugated group accepts the ideology of the dominant class, but then uses that very same ideology against the colonizers. Rabindranath Tagore, the subject of this essay, admitted this himself when he wrote, “It was said of Asia that it could never move in the path of progress, its face was so inevitably turned backwards. We accepted this accusation, and came to believe it”. (Sen 58)
A greater misreading is next to impossible, for Tagore was never hopeless about man. Even in the last lecture of his life, ‘Crisis of Civilization’, in spite of his gross disillusionment about European progress, he retained this faith, “I shall not commit the grievous sin of losing faith in Man” (Das, vo. 3, 726). In the essay Korom cites, perhaps willfully Korom escapes his rejoinder:

To a western observer our civilization appears as all metaphysics, as to a deaf man piano-playing appears to be mere movements of fingers and no music. He cannot think that we have found some deep basis of reality upon which we have built our institutions. (*Nationalism* 11)

Man must find out the deep basis of his reality, the essence of his humanism, – that was Tagore’s message to mankind. Thus he could say:

It is an insult to his humanity if man fails to invoke in his mind a definite image of his own ideal self, of his ideal environment which it is his mission externally to reproduce. It is the highest privilege of man to be able to live in his own creation. His country is not his by the mere accident of his birth, he must richly and intimately transform it into his own, make it a personal reality. And what is more, man is not truly himself if his personality has not been fashioned by him according to some mental picture of perfection which he has within.

(Das Gupta, *Tagore on Nationalism and Education*, 337)

This supreme self belief in Man and truth led Tagore to journey from the land of nation to that of No-nation. Thus he devised a new domain of Nationalism, which is the spiritual domain, in all senses of the term and standing upon it he calmly declared:

I will never allow patriotism to triumph over humanity as long as I live. I took a few steps down that road and stopped: for when I cannot retain my faith in universal man standing over and above my country, when patriotic prejudices overshadow my God, I feel inwardly starved. (*Selected letters* 71)
Notes

1. This refers to Curzon’s famous ‘Round and Round” note of May 24, 1902 and Sarkar (1994, p. 10) quotes from Home Public Progs A, December 1903, n. 149-60: “For 14 months it never occurred to a single human being in the departments to mention the matter, or to suggest that it should be mentioned. Round and round, like the diurnal revolution of the earth, went the file, stately, solemn, sure and slow . . . .”

2. Govt. of India (Home) to Govt. of Bengal, No. 1902 of Sept. 13, 1904. A confusion strikes here. Sarkar also in the second list mentions Coach Bihar. But various maps of this period show Coach Bihar to be outside the proposed New Province, as it was a separate native state under British India.


6. Risely’s Note on Feb. 7, 1904 (mentioned above).

7. Telegram from Viceroy to Secretary of State, May 24. 1905.

8. Minto to Morley, Feb 05, 1906, Minto Papers, M 1005.

9. Detailed description of the activities on this day is given in the book “Gharoya” in Bengali, by Abanindranath Tagore.

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