

# Tagore's Appraisal of the Ideas of Nationalism: a Study

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**Abstract:** According to Benedict Anderson nation can be defined as “imagined community”. Though nationalism has largely been accepted globally as a legitimate form of political organisation, Rabindranath Tagore had not an iota of positive sentiment towards the ideology of nationalism. Tagore's fundamental objection was on its very nature and purpose as an institution. To him nationalism is a social institution, a mechanical organisation, which has been modelled on certain utilitarian objectives in mind. He opined that as nationalism came into being in the post-religious phase of industrial capitalist socio-economic system, it was only an organisation of politics and commerce. To him, it would only bring harvests of wealth by the means of greed, selfishness, power and prosperity. Tagore's novel *The Home and the World*, the English translation of the original Bengali novel *Ghare-Baire* (published 1917) initially seems to explore the forces of modernism. But the novel's sharp criticism of the then nationalistic politics in general and the swadeshi movement in particular never misses the eye. While Sandip represents the then nationalistic politics and swadeshi movement, Nikhil represents, it can easily be said, Rabindranath Tagore's own views. The present paper shows that in his novel *The Home and the World*, in Sandip's actions, Tagore has anticipated all these drawbacks of nationalism mentioned by later literary-cultural critics. Thus, today, when the whole world is suffering from expressions of narrow nationalism, Rabindranath's novel *The Home and the World* is still relevant and contemporary in its subject-matter and philosophy of life.

**Keywords:** Nationalism, Tagore.

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## 1. DEFINITION AND KEY FEATURES OF NATIONALISM

According to Benedict Anderson nation can be defined as “imagined community”. But he finds that it is extremely difficult to analyse the concept of nation, nationality, nationalism. Hugh Seton-Watson says that for nation no scientific definition can be devised. A number of philosopher and social scientists including Ernst Gellner maintains that nationalism is an ‘invention,’ or ‘fabrication’. In spite of the difficulties involved in defining it, nationalism enjoys widespread political and emotional legitimacy in today's world.

To refer to Benedict Anderson once again, nation as a political institution is the result of European Enlightenment and Industrial Revolution. He says it is the decline of religious modes of thought along with the rise of the rationalist secularism of the Enlightenment is the fundamental reason behind the rise of the concept of nationalism in Western Europe. Ernest Gellner maintains that the rise of industrial-capitalism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries gradually resulted into the rise of nationalism.

## 2. TAGORE AND NATIONALISM

Though literature as well novel had such an active participation in the formation of the institution of nationalism and though nationalism was accepted globally as the only legitimate form of political organisation, it was Rabindranath Tagore who had not an iota of positive sentiment towards the ideology of nationalism. Tagore's fundamental objection was on its very nature and purpose as an institution. To him nationalism is a social institution, a mechanical organisation, which was modelled on certain utilitarian objectives in mind. He opined that as nationalism came into being in the post-religious phase of industrial capitalist socio-economic system, it was only an organisation of politics and commerce. To him, it would only bring harvests of wealth by the means of greed, selfishness, power and prosperity. The process would

sacrifice the moral, the complete man making room for the political and commercial man, the man of limited purpose. For him, nationalism is not “a spontaneous self-expression of man as social being,” where human relationships are naturally regulated, “so that men can develop ideals of life in co-operation with one another” (*Nationalism*, 5). Tagore considered nationalism a recurrent threat for human civilization.

### 3. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE TIME OF PUBLICATION OF *THE HOME AND THE WORLD*:

*The Home and the World* is set in the year 1905. During this time Lord Curzon, the then viceroy of Bengal divided Bengal Presidency (province) into two parts, Eastern and Western. This decision was in accordance with the British’s colonial policy of divide and rule. The decision resulted in widespread protests culminating in the swadeshi movement. Initially Tagore was an enthusiastic supporter and advocate of the movement. But with the passage of time, as the movement spread, Tagore gradually started to get more and more frustrated and disillusioned with it. By this time the movement began to indulge and valorise violence. Communal riots between Hindu and Muslim took place in 1906 and 1907. The swadeshi movement deepened the already unbridgeable gap between the Hindu elite and the landless Muslim lower class people some of whose only source of income was through the sale of imported goods. It was the Hindu elite who started the movement of boycotting the imported goods which were cheap to patronise the costly local goods which were, at that time, a luxury which only rich could afford. All these pained and distressed Tagore to the greatest possible extent and he distanced himself from the swadeshi movement as far as possible. He wrote *The Home and the World* as a critique of nationalism in general and the swadeshi movement and its pitfalls in particular.

### 4. THE HOME AND THE WORLD AS CRITIQUE OF NATIONALISM:

Initially the novel seems to explore the forces of modernism. But the novel’s sharp criticism of the then nationalistic politics in general and the swadeshi movement in particular never misses the eye. While Sandip represents the then nationalistic politics and swadeshi movement, Nikhil represents, it can easily be said, Rabindranath Tagore’s own views. *Ghare Baire* or *The Home and the World* has never been a comfortable text for most of its readers, says historian Prof. Sumit Sarkar while discussing the novel in the context of its time. The novel describes Sandip as a swadeshi extremist politician. His politics is of aggressive Hindu demagoguery. This politics, in the long run, resulted into a communal riot as it attempted to force the swadeshi boycott movement of British goods on unwilling Muslim or lower caste Hindu peasants. Tagore, for writing *The Home and the World*, has often been criticized of insufficient patriotism for taking a soft stance against the colonial political cultural domination. One reason of the criticism of insufficient patriotism is because of the then Bengal and Indian politics and history, which were engrossed with a single colonial-anti colonial binary. Nationalism at that time and even now is glorified without any reason as long as it is sufficiently anti-British and anti-colonial. Contrary to this criticism of Tagore’s not being sufficiently patriotic, there are comments of critics like Ashis Nandy who hailed *The Home and the World* as a great critique of conventional form of nationalism. In fact *The Home and the World* and many other writings of Tagore of the period of mid 1910s form a justified and relevant critique of nationalism, particularly in its chauvinistic form.

Like Nikhil, Tagore too tried to promote some indigenous swadeshi habits and enterprises long ago but failed. It must be taken in mind in this context that Tagore was completely against the moderate Congress way of ‘mendicancy’ i.e. begging, almost always unsuccessfully, for concessions from the rulers. After the partition of Bengal in 1905, method of agitation against the British changed. Boycott of foreign goods and schools started as a form of new agitational method. This form of passive resistance was adopted by the middle class Bengali nationalists. This middle class upper caste Hindu Bengalis, according to Prof. Sumit Sarkar, tended to have rentier interest in the land cultivated by lower caste Hindus and Muslims. Besides, mass contact of swadeshi movement was made through extremely emotional Hindu revivalism. All these reasons were crucial for distancing Muslims and lower caste Hindus from the swadeshi movement. That *The Home and the World* was Tagore’s critique of extremist nationalism in the sense its fetishism of the nation and the subordination of morality to its worship of nation.

Coming to the characters of *The Home and the World*, the novel under discussion, Sandip, representing swadeshi nationalists, has a dual character in his masculinity. He has a hard aggressive conception of masculinity which he exploits to draw other men and women. In one hand, he worships Bimala as an embodiment of motherland and on the other, he treats her as an object of eroticised patriotic adoration.

Nikhil, on the contrary, represents the ideal of zamindari paternalism to which Tagore himself subscribed. His very presence allows for a deep critique of swadeshi extremist nationalism, based on fetishisation of the nation. Bimala at the beginning of the novel remembers that Nikhil had anticipated much of swadeshi but he had never accepted the mantra of 'Bande Mataram'. It must be noted here that Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's hymn 'Bande Mataram' mixed devotion to motherland and worshipping Durga and Kali, and this was instrumental to alienate the Muslims from the swadeshi movement.

Apart from the critique of this failed patriotic movement and communal disharmony, Tagore also criticised the ruthless instrumentalisation of everything in the name of the nation. In *The Home and the World*, Sandip's story begins this way:

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." My country does not become mine simply because it is the country of my birth. It becomes mine on the day when I am able to win it by force. (*The Home and the World*)

Tagore here not only critiquing the extremist form of Indian nationalism, but also hinted at Sandip's villainy at the very outset. Again, in one place we find that Nikhil bursts out against the British atrocities in India as well as the atrocities perpetrated by the Indian nationalist terrorists:

It was Buddha who conquered the world, not Alexander—this is untrue when stated in dry prose—oh when shall we be able to sing it? When shall all these most intimate truths of the universe overflow the pages of printed books and leap out in a sacred stream like the Ganges from the Gangotri? (*The Home and the World* 134-35)

The novel, as mentioned earlier, has an allegorical quality. Nikhil and Sandip here represent two opposing visions for the nation. Bimala, allegorically again, repenting the country, is torn between the two. She does not know what would be the right guiding principle for her. Nikhil's vision is the vision of enlightened humanitarian. It is based on a true equality and harmony of individuals and nations. On the contrary, Sandip's vision is the vision of a radical, narrow-minded and aggressive nationalist. This vision creates a powerful sense of patriotism in individuals. It threatens to replace their moral sensibility with national prejudice and blind fanaticism.

Nikhil's truthfulness, selflessness and idealism are opposed to Sandip's sly, avidity and blatant vanity. While Nikhil appears divine, Sandip is diabolic. Nikhil is gifted with all the positive qualities. His foremost element is light and therefore he is wise, sharp, progressive and pure. Sandip is, on the contrary, a personality framed with fire and hence, greedy, brutal and negative. His philosophy is Machiavellian:

There is not the time for nice scruples. We must be unswervingly, unreasoningly brutal. We must sin" (*The Home and the World* 39).

He admonishes Nikhil, and adds:

Every man has a natural right to possess, and therefore greed is natural.... What my mind covets, my surrounding must supply (*The Home and the World*, 45).

Later he argues:

We are the flesh-eaters of the world; we have teeth and nails; we pursue and grab and tear. We are not satisfied with chewing in the evening the cud of grass we have eaten in the morning.... In that case we shall steal or rob, for we must live" (*The Home and the World*, 47).

This is the morality of the modern materialist-capitalist West that Sandip essentially follows, vis-à-vis Nikhil's Indian wisdom mediated by the wholesome and humane values of the Western civilization.

Nikhil pronounces a universal feeling, similar to that of Tagore himself throughout the novel. This results in a one to one argument that he has with Sandip. Sandip randomly equates god with nation, while Nikhil proves how it is imperative to bring together the entire human community to find god, and how the cult of nationalism, through a development of national egoism and bigotry, only spoils that purpose:

Sandip: I truly believe my country to be my God. I worship Humanity. God manifests Himself in man and in his country.

Nikhil: If that is what you really believe, there should be no difference for you between man and man, and so between country and country.

Sandip: Quite true. But my powers are limited, so my worship of Humanity is continued in the worship of my country.

Nikhil: I have nothing against your worship as such, but how is it you propose to conduct your worship of God by hating other countries in which He is equally manifest? (*The Home and the World*, 37)

Chandranath Babu, Nikhil's teacher as well as his moral guide and a source for many of his ideas, is even more critical in his pronouncement of the Tagoresque universal vision. He explains to his pupil:

I tell you, Nikhil, man's history has to be built by the united effort of all the races in the world, and therefore this selling of conscience for political reasons – this making a fetish of one's country won't do.... Here, in this land of India, amid the mocking laughter of Satan piercing the sky, may the feeling for this truth become real! What a terrible epidemic of sin has been brought into our country from foreign lands. (*The Home and the World*, 224-25)

Encouraged by such a righteous, transcendent, and progressive viewpoint, Nikhil acts as a real philanthropist in the novel. In spite of being a *Zamindar* (i.e. landlord) he never uses in his power or riches, but somewhat as a compassionate patriarch he tries his best possible to improve the condition of his subjects. He believes in the worth of education. He has been instrumental to educate many of his subjects. Some of his subjects were even offered the amenities in Calcutta funded by his generous scholarships. He believes from the very core of his heart that this is right way of building his 'nation', country. He opines that India can emerge out of its socio-cultural chaos by reactivating the mentality of the population. He also wants to save his country from its age-old corrupt ethical and religious principles. He urges his wife to get modern education with this idea of regeneration. He appoints Miss Gilby, an English tutor, for Bimala. All he wants is that Bimala creatively comprehends the world and starts a strong interaction between home and the world. He thinks that Bimala must step beyond the boundaries of her cultural tradition and change her former monolithic sensibility with a more lively, symbiotic and synergic mode of thought.

Being noble at heart, Nikhil has no ethnic, religious, class or sexual prejudice. When Sandip's followers, trained into nationalist psychosis, humiliates Miss Gilby, Nikhil extends his love and support to her. To Nikhil, Miss Gilby is just another human being like himself or any other person, not just a European to be looked through a mist of nationalist notion. He does not consider her an enemy of Bengal, only because she happens to be an English woman. He applies the same logic to Panchu, is a common villager, oppressed, insulted and humiliated by another zamindar. This zamindar evicted him for not responding to the call of swadeshi. Nikhil intervenes, saves and protects him. While it is obviously very probable that swadeshi would liberate these common people from the chains of British repression, ironically, it has become tyrannical to the same vulnerable mass. The Muslims see Sandip's gusto mostly as a Hindu programme, which is adverse to their cause. Hence Sandip (and his followers) looks upon them with rage and as religious minorities they are considered not strong enough to endure his pressures. So to make them to submit to his purpose, when Sandip plots against them, it is again Nikhil, who intervenes on their behalf. He maintains that as his subjects these Muslim peasants deserve his protection. And furthermore, as individuals, they have the same right to a choice as Sandip, Nikhil or Bimala has.

Of course Nikhil loves his country as much as, if not more than, Sandip, but he wont allow his love for the country to go beyond his conscience. He says:

I am willing to serve my country; but my worship I reserve for Right which is far greater than my country. To worship my country as god is to bring curse upon it (*The Home and the World*, 29).

On the other hand, Sandip believes that one ought to set "aside conscience [by] putting the country in its place" (*The Home and the World*, 165). According to Tagore, this radical view of Sandip will apotheosise the nation and place it away from truth and conscience. And this, certainly, would head for a disaster.

This thoughtless adoration of the nation and his belief that any action, however atrocious or unprincipled, is permissible if done for the sake of the nation ultimately turns him into a fearsome fanatic and dreadful criminal. Unhesitatingly, he uses conspiracy or brutality to achieve his objective.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Post-colonial critics like Ernest Gellner and Benedict Anderson have shown how nationalism results into the sentiments of illogicality, bigotry and hatred in people. Leela Gandhi has spoken of its by-products, racial discrimination and hatred, and the eagerness with which citizens are ready to both kill and die for it. Frantz Fanon, even before that, has elaborated that although the goal of nationalism is to create a horizontal relationship and fraternity within its people, in reality the nation never speaks of the hopes and aspirations of the entire “imagined community”, and hierarchy, factional hegemony, disparity and exploitation remain a common feature in it. In his novel *The Home and the World*, in Sandip’s actions, Tagore has anticipated all these drawbacks of nationalism mentioned by later literary-cultural critics.

Tagore, it can be said, is not so successful in achieving creative detachment in *The Home and the World*. It was due to his irresistible sympathy for Nikhil’s liberal, global ideology (which was actually his own) against Sandip’s commercial-capitalistic-nationalistic worldview, which he completely rejects. It is also possible that this artistic compromise was made intentionally by the novelist, bearing in mind the implication of his message. We must keep in mind that after all at that time Tagore was working against the widely held ideas of Indian and International politics. Hence, as a novelist he was forced to keep his characters simple, flat and one-dimensional, so that his proclamation would come out strongly and unambiguously.

Actually, Tagore was so intensely disturbed by swadeshi movement turning into a terrorist movement that he rejected even Gandhi’s freedom movement in later years. He did not involve himself in a nationalist movement again as he started to believe that fundamental nationalism, like religious orthodoxy, results into divisiveness and blind fanaticism.

Tagore believed that productive social work and education are the only ways for liberating India from political and cultural despotism from within and outside, and not a blind revolution built upon the quicksand of mob psychology.

This anti-nationalist emotion, envisaged against a backdrop of a larger ideology of love, creation and universal human companionship occupies Tagore’s novel *The Home and the World*. He pursues this message in quite a few of his other works. They include his lectures on *Nationalism* and his novel *Four Chapters*.

Hence, it depends upon the human civilization to work towards a global society, based on the principles of inclusiveness, equal opportunity and sympathy for all human beings, as an alternative to indulging in the model of chauvinistic nationalism, as it creates parochialism, binarism and racism, trapping people in a logic of self-centredness, exclusivism and immorality.

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