

# Understanding The Issue of Nationalism In The Context of Present Times - Building A Resolute Theory Inspired From The Mind of Rabindranath Tagore

Paper Submission: 15/10/2021, Date of Acceptance: 23/10/2021, Date of Publication: 24/10/2021

## Abstract

The idea of Nationalism and what it stands for has been a contested issue. It has been defined in innumerable ways and has been conceptualized through various perspectives. Standing at the crossroads of a global pandemic COVID-19 which is being allegedly seen by a section as a classic case of biological warfare waged against the entire world, it leaves one to question whether nationalism is just a feeling of love and service for one's country or an attempt at aggressive expansion of nation's power. The aim of the research is to throw light on the idea of nationalism through the songs composed by the famous Indian poet laureate Rabindranath Tagore often referred to as the "Bard of Bengal". Tagore was aware of the perils of nationalism especially the one that was rooted in the Western concept of nation state. His songs and poems give an insight into a new brand of nationalism that was based on not just love for the mother land but also the people that form a nation. It was based on the acceptance of India's unique political and social pluralist framework.

**Keywords:** Nationalism, Universal Brotherhood, Motherland, Devotion.

### Introduction

Presently the world is passing through a severe threat i.e., the spread of deadly virus corona since its outbreak in China. Academicians as well as social activists are still in doubt whether this threat is biological or political. It is yet uncertain as there is no such definite proof against or for this allegation. But there is some circumstantial evidence to take this issue forward on political grounds. The spread of virus over the globe already exposed the fragility of the economy mostly in the capitalist countries of the world. Thus the capitalist hegemony in the world system is facing the crisis. These effects may be targeted, but it is trickling to other developing and underdeveloped countries of the world which have mostly adapted democracy as state ideology. Besides this, the spread of this virus is much less in the country from where it originated. Economy is in running condition whereas every nation has already locked down everything even social life is under crisis. If we consider this circumstantial evidence and the reason behind it, the straightway reasoning goes to the point of narrow nationalism vis a vis threatening major democracies and subsequently toppling other economies at the expense of mankind and civilization. Therefore alienation of life and forceful halt of state activity of all other countries, is clearly the impact of negative nationalism.

Nationalism simply said, is an emotion of love towards state and population, the urge for prosperity so that the state can be in the best possible position in the world, holding stiffly its national identity. However, the extremity of any emotion ultimately leads one to dark. The sense of nationalism seeks to attain prosperity and richness for one's own country in all aspects but narrowing it down to unhealthy competition or race of lagging far behind others is the worst form, from which the world and mankind has suffered earlier too.

Nationalism having traces of humanitarian elements is the only key to development of any nation which seeks to protect mankind and carve out the path for mutual beneficial interaction among nations which involves extending the hand of cooperation, promoting national interest along with serving the interest of mankind. For this to happen a nation needs a rigorous philosophical training of the population to make the psychological space to make the balance between these.



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Probably this is the reason that so many political thinkers in recent times have provided several theories on nationalism

#### **Objective of the Study**

Having thought that, a real philosophical ground can only truly show the path for 'true nationalism' which is a path of prosperity of nation as well as mankind and provide an impetus to mutual cooperation amongst all nation, the present study is going to dive deep in the lines of Rabindranath Tagore's patriotic songs especially to find out the essence of true nationalism which is not a menace to civilization or mankind, rather it is vocal about invoking respect for both one's own motherland and other nation too, acknowledging not just the cultural heritage of one's own country but also to experience the fragrance of other cultural heritage at the global level.

Tagore has composed a total of fifty patriotic songs and one hymn of Indian freedom struggle i.e., Vande Mataram the lyrics of which is penned by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya but the tune given by Tagore in this case is in itself a major source of spirituality of nationalism.

#### **Review of Literature**

The term nationalism is closely interlinked with the concept of nation. Since the concept of nation has been defined from various perspectives like cultural, political, and psychological as a corollary it makes the process of arriving at the definition of nationalism quite a challenge. While one form of nationalism can mean the right to freedom and self determination the other kind might have an aggressive and expansionist character. Therefore a review of the existing literature on nationalism by eminent theorists reveals the infinite dimensions from which one can understand nation and nationalism. This study will help us to situate Tagore's ideas and draw a parallel if any with other thinkers.

To begin with one of the most prominent theory of nationalism was advanced by Edward Shills an influential U.S. sociologist in his article "Primordial, Personal, Sacred and Civil Ties" (1957) in which he argues that nationalism is as natural as the ties of blood relation or more specifically the feeling of unity owing to genetic links or cultural similarities. He regards the nation as "an primordial entity greater than the sum of its part. This idea considers nation as an age old institution dating back to antiquity."<sup>10</sup>

In his work *Nations and Nationalism* (1983) Ernest Gellner, a British-Czech philosopher and social anthropologist contradicts the above mentioned viewpoint and opined the view that rather than being a natural and universal phenomenon associated with sentiments, nationalism is the product of an industrialized society. It seeks to promote cultural homogeneity where 'it must be one in which they can all breathe and speak and produce'.<sup>20</sup> It tries to promote high culture rather than localized, diversified low culture. On similar lines Anthony Smith, a British historical sociologist in his various works like *Theories of Nationalism* (1971), *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (1986), and *National Identity* (1991) traces the origin of nationalism to ethnicity. He expresses the view that the nation came into being as a response to modern times however it has an ethnic core which could mean having a common descent, a shared history, a distinct shared culture etc. However the transition from ethnic sentiment to nationalist feeling was made possible by centralizing economy, polity and culture.

Another eminent thinker of nationalism is Benedict Anderson, an Irish political scientist and historian whose work "*Imagined Communities, Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*" (1983) is the most cited text in the field. He argues that nation is not natural or pre-existing. It is instead an imagined political community on the premise that all the members of a nation probably will never see or will be able to see each other face to face yet they might be united by the feeling of oneness. This imagination is made possible by factors such as print capitalism which provided the opportunity to connect people and institutions like museums to glorify the past, maps to draw national borders etc.

An important addition to the above literature is the work of British historian Eric J. Hobsbawm "*Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*" (1990) who decodes the concept of Nationalism from a Marxist perspective. He regards nationalism as a tool of the ruling class to suppress working class solidarity and instead encourage national loyalty. He argued that a belief in

historical continuity and cultural purity is a myth created by nationalism to sustain itself. It only promotes a false belief to support the claims of the ruling class.

Since the chief concern of this research is to understand nationalism from the mind of Tagore, it is essential to know that various attempts have been made in this regard; however most of them fall short in unraveling the concept through his literary works.

Many recent articles have also come up on Tagore's notion of nationalism. To be specific Tagore on nationalism most of the time eventually referred to the notion of nationalism as conveyed and exposed by the western nation. But it is rare to find Tagore's own conceptualization of nationalism.

Rabindranath Tagore on Nationalism and Communalism (1991) by Gautam Chattopadhyay tells about Tagore's views on nationalism and communalism which have been forwarded by the western countries. He rejected both and welcomed a healthy international atmosphere where every nation can live happily.

Mohammad A. Quayum in his article Tagore and Nationalism (2004) presented Tagore's views on Nationalism which western countries were demonstrating at that phase and also narrated why Tagore opposed that kind of nationalism. Kian Hudson in an article named "How to Think about Nationalism"(2021) throws light on the various debates over the meaning of nationalism which can either mean universal moral obligations towards all on ground of humanity or particular moral obligations towards co-citizens, wherein policy making should finely balance and attempt to reconcile universal and particular moral obligations, if possible. Another significant research on the various dimensions of nationalism is put forward in the article Nationalism: What we know and What We Still Need to Know by Harris Mylonas and Maya Tudor (2021) which highlights the ascendancy of nationalism with the onset of the global Coronavirus pandemic. The authors attempt to underline the various forms in which nationalism is understood and cautions against exclusionary nationalism. They highlight the pertinent point that nationalism can be based on shared values and that national solidarity does not require external aggression or use of violence. Availability of recent research articles on the theory of nationalism as well as Tagore's idea of nationalism presents an account about the different elements and varying aspects of nationalism but hardly tells about the cognitive level behind a soul containing nationalist feeling and ethics of nationalism. Extracting the lines of Tagore's songs and explaining his mind on the feelings of nationalism is purely absent. The present research article focuses on these issues not addressed yet and Tagore's culmination regarding nationalism –how can be dealt and how to bring the fragrance of true nationalism which is the key to the every prosperity and development of nation-this is the prime motto of the present paper which is absent in earlier writing so far literature review is concerned

### Research Gap

A careful observation of the existing valuable literature on nationalism reveals that the true meaning and purpose of nationalism is still ambiguous. While Edward Shills associates it with genetic links having familial ties, Gellner links it as a tool of cultural homogenization which meant to secure the stability of modern industrialized society. He argues that nationalism became a "*sociological necessity in the modern world.*" An attempt by Anthony Smith to associate the origin of nationalism to ethnicity highlighting that it's a feeling of having a common descent, shared history and culture. It is a modern phenomenon, "*an ideological movement for attaining and maintaining autonomy, unity and identity for a population which some of its members deem to constitute an actual or potential 'nation'*".<sup>3[i]</sup> A further attempt as has been made by Anderson Benedict to instead treat the nation as imagined political community because "*the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings.*"<sup>4[iii]</sup>

Leaving this theoretical pragmatism if we analyze the history of the origin of nationalism along with the analysis of human psychological cognition, one can easily infer that nationalism in all its aspects is a particular psychological state which is having a definite drawback and it is on these drawbacks that it is dependent for its survival. Sowing the soil with the seeds of nationalism requires impetus of several sensual "anti thesis" on the "thesis" of mindset.

Recent theorists are more concerned about the phenomenon of nationalism but not about the background which allows the true nationalism to flourish and which ultimately promotes the progress of mankind exceeding the narrow boundaries of nation.

Many of the scholarly articles on Tagore's nationalism have already expressed it as a broader theory of nationalism which is an end in itself to reach the harmony of completeness in humanity. However, there is a lack of research on Tagore's culmination of that backdrop for igniting the feelings of nationalism. Neither piece is prevailing to lucidly elaborate on a comprehensive theory given by Tagore encompassing all aspects that he propounded.

This research piece will be a focused introspection by analyzing the contents of the Tagore's songs on:

1. Tagore's propagation to prepare the mindset to have the feeling of nationalism
2. Tagore's mind on the elements of nationalism and its limitations.

### Methodology

The whole study will be on the basis of the method of content analysis to dig out a resolute theory of true nationalism for all nations to save the submerge of civilization as well as mankind. The content of patriotic song of Tagore which is one of the most powerful containers of Tagore notion of nationalism will be analyzed here, why Tagore is chosen here the answer is the philosophy of Tagore often found as universal in appliance after serious investigation and research on that ; the degree of positivity is also incredible and mainly concerned for the prosperity and progress in all aspects. It will be beneficial for the present context if any nation cares to believe his mind and preaching regarding nationalism

The present study will focus on content analysis of Tagore songs, especially patriotic songs, having found out after going through Gitabitan- a book which is a collection of all 2,232 songs written by Tagore. Hence here the universe is Tagore songs collected in Gitabitan and the sampling frame is Tagore's patriotic songs. Then in the next stage of sampling collection clubbing of songs, on the bias of message or narration will be done particularly on the specific aspect of nationalism and from each cluster of the songs ,any two songs will be taken into sample randomly to avoid biases.

In the next stage each song's deep content analysis i.e, the interpretation of messages will be done. All this will finally culminate in a new positive and progressive theory of nationalism which is most essential today's time. It is written with the hope that Tagore's positivity would wither away all dark as soon as all start to introspect every word of his songs and pay heed to his words.

Psychology or behavioural science tells us that any mental state has to be evoked. Its a process which requires a prelude which involves time to develop. This kind of development can be encouraged through various means. Rabindranath Tagore invoked strong love towards the motherland by various means of his creations like novel, short stories, poems , lectures and so on. Among all the most expressive are the songs as well as the tunes of the Songs specially the patriotic songs. Tagore really holds all aspects of nationalism which is rare in present Indian societal context. Any truly felt emotion is based on the foundation of either a fact or a belief. In the absence of these two no emotion can strike a chord of the mind or soul. Tagore, through his songs tries to cultivate this emotion by reminding the people about how incredibly beautiful and rich our motherland is. He felt that the notion of the uniqueness of India which lies in the diversity of the landscape, culture, and biodiversity needs to be disseminated amongst the people. This was done through the lines of the various songs which carried this emotion.

The song Vande Mataram from the novel Anandamath written by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay and set to tune by Tagore addresses the nation as the motherland and glorifies her beauty and abundance. The motherland is praised for being the one with the purest and sweet water (*sujalām*),the one who has pure and healthy food and fruits (*suphalām*),the motherland he worships has the cold and refreshing breeze that smells of aromatic sandalwood (*malayaja-śitalām*),the one with a heartwarming smile and sweet voice.The motherland is praised for it is she that gives the boon of peace and happiness.

Through the words “banglar maati, banglar jol...purno hok” Tagore prays for his land and country. He prays to the Almighty for the wellbeing of the land, air, soil, home and work of his fellow countrymen. He hints that prosperity of the nation is possible when unity of mind and soul is there. So his prayer is focused on fostering a feeling of brotherhood amongst all. In the song ‘Amar Sonar Bangla’( My golden land of Bengal) which has been adopted by Bangladesh as its national anthem, he praises the eternal beauty of the motherland, its sky, its green abundance, its ever flowing river streams, its biodiversity. While financial prosperity might be lacking he still feels overwhelmed by the magnificence of its cultural and environmental resources. Since Tagore belonged to Bengal, he is able to see the entire nation through the prism of Bengal. The lines ‘ Ogo Maa tomar dekhe dekhe aankhi na fire’ (O Mother, seeing you I can’t take my eyes off you) are reflecting his deep adoration for his nation. He wants to invoke the same spirit in every Indian’s heart through his songs.

‘Sarthak janmo aamar jonmechi ei deshe’( My life is meaningful since I have born in this country) ,these lines are uttered by Tagore in acknowledgment of the fact that his life has assumed greater significance by the virtue of his birth in India. During his stay in England he realizes that his country is beyond any comparison, its magnetic moon, its infinite blue sky is found nowhere. It’s the only place where he finds comfort and solace.The poet prays to Almighty to allow him to stay in his country ‘ei bharote rakho nityo, Prabhu’, he refers the nation as ‘tumi pita, tumi mata’( You are my father and my mother).He wants all his countrymen to be tied in a thread of mutual feeling of love for their motherland. The song flows in the form of a prayer which is ‘Give birth, in this India, thy kind blessing, my lord, an extend, thy fearlessness, thy unconquerable, nectar-light message,

Thy perpetual and immortal hope,

Kindle and ignite the inextinguishable light of religion above all the critical danger and difficult time.’

Tagore believed that our Motherland tweets the spirit of soulful sacrifice, benevolence and peace to the World. THAT is her distinctiveness. He felt that, all our earthly beloveds, our sources of happiness and peace, are blessings of our Mother India. Tagore urged us to embrace our Mother with love and devotion through the lines of “ O Amar Desher Mati...”.He is grateful for what he has received and feels how little he could do for his nation. The songs expresses the following emotion:

‘O, the land of my country, on thee do I touch my forehead.

To thee I bow down head thou heart mingle with my body,

Thou has united with my heart and mind,

Thy that soft green hued image is deep in my heart.

O my mother, “am born in thy lap, death of mine is in thy heart, on thee is my play in weal and woe.’

In using the metaphor of natural disaster, he calls upon his countrymen to set aside their differences religious, social and economic and come forward to rescue the nation in face of any challenge. He hints at universal brotherhood in face of both internal and external threats. He asks his fellow countrymen if they are willing to give their service when the call for help comes ? Through his songs he instills the feeling of love and devotion in the heart of his fellow Indian. He motivates them that in spite the darkness of the British rule, one day it would be replaced by the light of freedom provided they hold themselves strong ‘o re mon hobei hobe’, ...‘uthe dara bhenge porish na’ (stand strong, don’t break down).He urges the people not to lose heart and be courageous as the only duty of the sons of soil is to stand strong against all odds.

Tagore stresses on the love for his mother and is ready to dedicate himself for the service of the nation ‘apon shakti apon bhakti chorone tor’(At your feet I offer my strength and devotion). He reminds the people of the nation that if they want respect, dignity and a good life, first they have to willingly offer the same to the motherland. Even if one is alone in their struggle he fills hope in the heart through his words ‘jodi tor dak sune keo na ashe tobe ekla cholo re’.(If none speaks, O, O, my poor, if all turns their faces and fear,Then with a open heart speak alone what thee have in mind opening thy lips)

The national anthem of India 'Jana Gana Man,Adhinayak Jaya hai' (Hail to the ruler of the minds of the people) composed by Rabindranath Tagore reflects the true essence of what India is-the diversity of its landscape, language, religion, culture and presence of strong leadership. This kaleidoscopic variety and rich cultural heritage of India is quite unique.

### Conclusion

True nationalism is not just the love for a nation but also for the people who reside in it. This feeling of universal brotherhood reflects a broader view of nationalism since it's not only limited to undying love for nation but also loving each country men without any discrimination. The most dominant undercurrent of Tagore's songs is the unconditional love towards the nation and acceptance of the pluralist social framework that India is known for. His idea of nationalism is neither against the 'other' nor it discriminates on the grounds of race, class, caste, religion or nationality rather it is all encompassing and inclusive. In a nutshell, a line from his series of lectures which was compiled and named as *Nationalism (1917)* highlights his idea of nationalism in the most lucid fashion. *"I have no hesitation in saying that those who are gifted with the moral power of love and vision of spiritual unity, who have the least feeling of enmity against aliens, and the sympathetic insight to place themselves in the position of others, will be the fittest to take their permanent place in the age that is lying before us."*[1]

Tagore was also aware about the fact that any emotion taken to an utmost extent can ruin the person and his surroundings. Tagore was afraid that emotion of love towards nation can go beyond ethics resulting in clash and ultimately result to be a menace to the civilization. He expressed this fear through the lines of his song, 'worship (love towards nation) whether it would take me to any clash or ruin me? He in guise suggested to control the emotion of nationalism on realistic ground as emotion beyond reality always paves the way for sorrow and the same is true about nationalism. Ego or pride at an extreme level can lead one nation to be aggressive against the other. Tagore suggests that the armed force is actually hollow and could not bring more. Greed and lust ultimately doom the nation as happiness and prosperity is the ultimate which one nation loses if it starts to clash with other nation(s).He believed in peaceful cooperation and mutual respect being complementary to each other as nature bestowed each individual, each country, each nation differently and no nation is complete and self sufficient.

The relevance of discussing nationalism from the perspective of Rabindranath Tagore ignites the hope that if every nation focuses on its self development along with fostering a feeling of universal brotherhood and upholding the ties of humanity that binds everyone cutting across borders, the world will be free from the curse of international conflict and war resulting in a peaceful and harmonious existence of world of nations.

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