

SOME DISCOURSES ON NATIONALISM: AN ANALYSIS OF MAHATMA GANDHI, RABINDRANATH TAGORE AND JAWAHARLAL NEHRU'S VISIONS ON NATIONALISM

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ABSTRACT

The paper attempts to highlight the discourses that were emerging during the colonial times from the intellectuals of that time, particularly from Mahatma Gandhi to Rabindranath Tagore to Jawaharlal Nehru. The paper gives a separate section to develop and present the ideas of the above-mentioned intellectuals and this paper also attempts to situate the visions of these intellectuals within the present day dichotomy of nationalism/anti-nationalism. This author perceives that the dichotomies of nationalism/anti-nationalism fail to encompass the nuanced ideas developed by these intellectuals. The paper ends by pointing out the limitations of the present day social science disciplines to capture the humanistic ideas developed by these intellectuals.

KEYWORDS: *Modernity, Nationalism, Gandhi, Tagore, Nehru, Internationalism, Humanism*

INTRODUCTION

'If one asks me, I Know; if I want to explain it to someone who does ask me, I don't Know'

-St. Augustine¹.

Despite the gradual fading of centuries, still St. Augustine's dictum is imperative. There's much room for conundrum in analyzing the abstract ideas like Modernity. When one dwells into the nuances of this abstract entity called 'Modernity', two catchy terms act as the guardian of the same- Nationalism and Capitalism. Of the both, Capitalism has been encountered at least on the theoretical basis by the Marxian Socialist's utopias; but Nations, whose premature death has been forecasted from its inception itself is thriving like anything and everything. It has more or less become a normative (as to have a biological mother or gender). In the present day, the influence of nationalism is so deeply intoxicated that one tends to believe that nation were a historical inevitability and is perennial. Even a critical analysis on the question of Nationalism (the whose carving is always for homogenization, neglecting the historical realities) can be termed as 'anti-nationalism'. The echoes of these kinds of 'anti-national' clamoring have more or less become the politics of the university spaces of the present day India.

¹ Augustine. *The Confessions of Augustine*, Doubleday & Co., Newyork, 1960, p.287, as cited from Vincent Pecora ed. *Nations and Identities Classic Readings*, Blackwell Publishers, United Kingdom, 2001, p.1

It is at this particular and peculiar juncture, the scope of the present paper is worthy, as it attempts to initiate discourses on the nationalism. The present essay tries to analyze the conceptualization of M.K. Gandhi (The father of Indian Nation), Rabindranath Tagore (The National Poet) and Jawaharlal Nehru (The first prime minister of independent India) on the question of Nationalism. Though their primary concern was with Indian nationalism, it can be extended to bring out a generalized vision for Nation as an institution and Nationalism as its driving ideological force. The essay has been divided into two sections. The first section tries to summarize the main conceptualizations of the above-mentioned intellectuals whereas the second section deal with the conclusions that one could draw out.

Jawaharlal Nehru's Vision on Nationalism

Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru views the idea of the nation as a historical reality and nationalism as something which is 'inevitable'². He tries to see the role of culture in giving coherence to this ideology. To him, despite the interactions and mingling with other cultures, India always had a long line of unbroken cultural continuity from the times of Indus valley civilization. 'The modern Indian culture' can trace its roots in Indian soil itself primarily because of the conglomeration of specified geography (which gave the idea of India as a distinct territory) along with the intellect of its 'forefathers' (who according to Nehru had the 'wisdom' to build 'structures for cultural stability')³. Because of this cultural continuity, there's some sort of emotion which one can associate with India and that was taken its form as nationalism. He denounces the middle class's intellectualism which has shifted the focus from nationalism to internationalism (which has kept its basis on the labor/proletariat movements). To him, even this internationalism should be seen as a subordination to some organizations, which is again dominated by the west⁴. For Nehru, all other identities wane out to the national identity of a person. He focuses mainly on the religious identity of a person. To quote him, 'An Indian Christian is looked upon as an Indian wherever he may go. An Indian Moslem is considered an Indian in Turkey or Arabia or Iran, or any other country where Islam is the dominant religion'.⁵ Hence it is clear that there's a polemical effort of homogenization and also an effort to place national identity over the other in Nehru's writings.

However to view him as an apostle of aggrandizing nationalism or as someone who sees nation above its citizens will be a misreading of history. He accepted the diversities within the Indian nation. He acknowledges the fact that there is an ample difference between a Pathan and a Tamilian; at the same time, for both of them, the idea of being an Indian is common and deep-rooted. He sees that both of them are troubled by the common enemy called Colonialism and its vested fixed deposit (i.e poverty). Nationalism for Nehru is the tool to get rid of this colonial agency along with its associate poverty, so as to reinstate the lost legacy and glory of colonial subjects. Unlike the present day politician's polemics against the chanting of *Bharat Mata*, Nehru would never have an issue for the same. Because for Nehru, *Bharat Mata* was essentially those millions of people inhabiting there; and the victory to her meant victory to these millions of people and not just for the nation⁶. His conceived nation's main purpose was to 'raise the whole level of the Indian people,

² Jawaharlal Nehru, *The discovery of India*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1946, p.52.

³ Ibid, pp.50-52.

⁴ Ibid., p.53.

⁵ Ibid., p.62.

⁶ Ibid.,p.60.

psychologically and spiritually and also, politically and economically'. To him, it was through the building up of 'real inner strength of the people', this purpose can be achieved⁷. Hence humanism was the crux of the intellectual outlook of Nehru's Nationalism.

Mahatma Gandhi's Vision on Nationalism

The question gets more nuanced as when one tries to analyze Gandhi's understanding of nationalism. Actually, Gandhi in himself could be a separate branch of study within the social sciences, primarily because of his complex, dynamic and evolving personality. Unlike the others, Gandhi was both an intellectual and a politician; and he has equally intermingled both of it without any rigidity. His understanding of nationalism (to be specific Indian nationalism) is structured within his own political struggles against colonialism. Hence he equates it with the attainment of liberty or *Swaraj* (though he has intentionally kept it as a vague and used it as a political rhetoric without much coherence).

To him, *Swaraj* can be envisaged through two key methods. First is the method of Non-cooperation, which acted as the pillar of his idea, passive resistance. This idea of non-cooperation can be further deconstructed into two levels: a) the construction of a homogenized vision for both Hindus and Muslims; or in other words, the consolidation of a national community which is structured on the premises of anti-colonialism and b) differentiation of non-Indians for Indians through the act of not accepting the legitimacy of the imperial rule. That is to opine that his idea of non-cooperation attempted in consolidation a national community (in which 'collective amnesia' was a prerequisite) as well as differentiating it from the 'other' (whose views doesn't coincide with this national community).

Second method was based on his economic vision of the society, which was known as the Cult of *Charkha*. To him, Poverty created by the nexus of aggrandizing nationalism with vested capitalist interests served as the hindrance to *Swaraj*; and its persisting because of the pauperism of job opportunities. Hence, being self sufficient formed the basis for the attainment of *Swaraj*. On a more physiological level, Gandhi views the love for foreign cloth a sin for Indians as there are indigenous clothes available. Hence, by burning this 'foreign' cloth, one's burning away the sin which a man/woman acquired by wearing it. To Gandhi, the 'plea for spinning wheel is the plea for recognizing the dignity of labor'⁸. To conclude, through the cult of charkha, Gandhi is specifically emphasizing on the foreignness attached to the British cloth in the native soil; which is largely an objective resolution against the industrialization of the western nationalism, as it rejects the dignity of human labor and makes the human mind idle.

To summarize, though Gandhi doesn't endorse the crux of western Nationalism, he believes in the structure of the same in India. The crux of western nationalism rejects the dignity of the people in third world countries. To him, nationalism serves as a tool for the erosion of colonial power and for the attainment of the *Swaraj* (on both material and spiritual level), which will raise the Indians on par with the British (or any other nations). This might be a very reductionist view into the nuanced philosophical approach of Gandhi. Because, after all when others thought of non-

⁷Ibid., p.57.

⁸ Sabyasachi Bhattacharya ed., *The Mahatma and the Poet: letters and debates between Gandhi and Tagore 1915-194*, National Book Trust, Delhi, 1997, p.94

cooperation as non-cooperating with the British and its policies, Gandhi read it as ‘come and cooperate with us on *our own terms*, it will be well for us, well for you and the world (emphasis mine)⁹.

Rabindranath Tagore’s Vision on Nationalism

Now let’s turn our attention to the views of Rabindranth Tagore. Despite being accorded with the title of ‘National poet’, it is from Tagore’s writings that one witness the strongest critique against the phenomenon of Nationalism. Critical readings of his texts (primarily the English ones) may have made scholars to conceptualize him as an apostle for internationalism (or even as an ‘anti-national’ in the present day India?). As Sabyasachi Bhattacharya has opined, this is a reductionist over simplification of Tagore’s evolving approach to the antinomies of nationalism as he perceived them¹⁰. This reductionism is primarily because scholars are well versed only with his 1917 work, ‘*Nationalism*’ and however they forget the fact that this was written in the background and aftermath of the first World war, which made the aggrandizing nature of Nations naked in front of humanity.

This essay tries to shift the focus from the question of nationalism/internationalism to the ideal of humanism, which was the core of Tagore’s’ view. Hence he tries to analyze the relationship between the Nation and Humanity. His own understanding forces him to belief that nationalism as it is understood in the western sense of the term goes ‘against the harmony of social life’ and the ‘evil day for humanity’¹¹. He makes an important distinction between *Samaj* (or society) and *Rashtra* (or Nation). For him, the Society is the end in itself and it is the ‘spontaneous self-expression of man as a social being’ and hence it is ‘natural regulation of human relationship’. To him, it is an ideal for co-operating with one another¹². However, on the other hand, Nations (which traces its origin from scientific revolution and the idea of ‘survival of the fittest’) replaced this cooperation with competition. Hence, western nationalism, which is driven by professionalism and selfishness, is not based on social cooperation but on the competition with one another. He sees Western nationalism as making slaves out of both the core and the periphery. To him, British people are ‘living under a delusion that they are free’ but in reality, they are ‘sacrificing their freedom and humanity to this fetish of nationalism’ by living a life in a ‘dense poisonous atmosphere of worldwide suspicion’¹³. Tagore’s criticism gets pointed towards to the emergent Nationalism in Japan too. Though he applauds Japans’ economic striving; he rejects it for losing the soul of Japan for mere material gains. He criticizes Japans’ imitation of ‘political civilization’ from Europe, which is based on exclusiveness. For him, imitation won’t allow Japan to develop something of their own and it shows the weakness of the self¹⁴.

⁹ Ibid., p.96.

¹⁰ See Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, ‘Antinomies of Nationalism and Rabindranath Tagore’, EPW.

¹¹ Rabindranath Tagore, *Nationalism*, Niyogi Books, Delhi,2012, p.10.

¹² ,Ibid.,p.8.

¹³ Ibid.,p.23.

¹⁴ Ibid.,p.49.

Coming to the question of Indian nationalism, Tagore comments, 'India has never had a real sense of nationalism'¹⁵. To Tagore, in India, the problem is not political but Social. Hence being consolidated to a Nation is not the solution to the problem of India. India is a land of the mixture of different races. Hierarchy of society on the basis of race/caste accompanied by social slavery is the real problem of India. India in reality, is many countries packed up in one geographical area, which is just the opposite in the case of Europe in which one country split into many¹⁶. Political freedom doesn't give us freedom when our mind is not free¹⁷ and hence the solution to the problem of races has to be situated in the upbringing of spiritual unity among the minds. In abstract, Tagore opines it's not just the British which is ruling India, but it is Nation (or the government of a nation) which is ruling India. So the fight against colonialism is in a sense to get rid of this phenomenon of the Nation. Otherwise, it will be winning political freedom at the cost of moral freedom. He also glimpses of the possibility of the end of nations as the faith in humanity won't allow the tyranny of nations to perpetuate¹⁸.

Ashis Nandy is of the opinion that both Gandhi and Tagore aren't genuine nationalists and the core of their outlook is patriotism¹⁹. He is arguing that in Tagore's writing, there is an outright rejection of the west and the principles it put forward. However, it's very evident that neither Tagore nor Gandhi does an outright rejection of the same. In the case of Gandhi, there is no need to explain as his own words are self explanatory ('hate the sin not the sinner'). In the case of Tagore, he distinguishes between the spirit and the Nation of the west. For him, the spirit of the west marches with the banner of freedom, but a nation of west forges a chain of organizations, which pushes for Nation's hidden slavery. Hence he advises to uphold the spirit and reject Nation of the west²⁰.

Tagore's views are important mainly because of two reasons: a) it deviates from the cliché idea of reducing man as mere political or material embodiment and to connect with freedom. However, being a humanist to the core, he takes it into a higher philosophical level by visualizing the spiritual needs of a human being. b) He also deconstructs the shibboleth that Europeanization is Modernization. He believes that a mere imitation of nationalism from the west won't make India modern as it just Europeanization. To him, true modernism is the freedom of mind, and not of slavery imposed by the Nationalism of the western sense²¹. Hence his work should also be seen as a critique of Eurocentricism too.

¹⁵ Ibid., p.94.

¹⁶ Ibid.,p.101.

¹⁷ Ibid.,p.107.

¹⁸ Ibid.,pp.40-41.

¹⁹ For understanding the difference between 'nationalism' and 'patriotism', See Nandy, Ashis. "Nationalism, Genuine and Spurious: A Very Late Obituary of Two Early Postnationalist Strains in India.", *Interdisciplinary Studies in the Humanities*, v. 3, 2012.

²⁰ Tagore, *Nationalism*, p.18.

²¹ Ibid.,p.67.

CONCLUSIONS

It is at this juncture, I propose the importance of analyzing the chains with which our discipline, History is tied up to. Social sciences in general and History in particular, haven't deconstructed itself from the holds of positivist traditions, which again trace its roots to the emergence of Science. It is because our vision is organized on the basis of compartmentalization and classification, which tends us to identify and fix up categories like Nationalists, anti-Nationalists; internationalists etc. However, in reality, historical events and personalities can't be categorized that easily. As E.H.Carr rightly opined the great men in history is both the product and agent of history²². Gandhi, Tagore, and Nehru are very dynamic and evolving personalities; it mightn't be that simple to classify them into broad categories.

It is also important to point out that despite debating for pushing forward their own way of emancipating the society, all the three intellectuals never had any personal enmity against each other. For all of them, the motive was the welfare of humans, reduction of the dominance of the aggrandizing west and also to develop the inner strength of the masses in order to unfetter the Colonialism. However, their successor's cries are more of political rhetoric and less of intellect. It is only when these present-day politicians move forward with the spirit of oneness which their predecessors have outlined, India will meet its 'tryst with destiny'.

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²² See 'Society and Individual' in E H Carr, *What is History*, Penguin Books, 1961.