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THE SENATOR GEORGE J MITCHELL INSTITUTE

FOR GLOBAL PEACE, SECURITY AND JUSTICE

WORKING PAPER SERIES

ISSN 2399-5130 (Online)

Gurudev Tagore: The Bard of Bengal

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In late 1961, when I joined Birmingham University in the UK as an undergraduate, I was selected as part of the cast of students performing the play *The Post Office* by Rabindranath Tagore. Tagore was the Indian Bengali Hindu literary icon known as Gurudev or blessed or divine teacher.[1] With this play we represented our university in competition with other universities such as Oxford and Cambridge at a week-long theater festival held in Bristol. Speakers during the exhilarating week included figures such as Harold Pinter. An announcement mentioned an actor making a film about Lawrence of Arabia. He was unknown, a Peter O' Toole. I planned to attend the session but in the end the item was cancelled due to the speaker's filming commitments in the Arab world.

While the other universities performed plays by great Western playwrights including Tennessee Williams, ours was unique in that it was by an Eastern playwright. This was unusual for the time. I was the only South Asian member of the cast, which itself was a cross-cultural gesture, in the spirit of Tagore. It was a tiny role, especially for someone fresh from his triumph as Mortimer Brewster in the annual school play *Arsenic and Old Lace* at Burn Hall in Pakistan, a role made famous by Cary Grant in the movie; but I hastily set aside any artist's ego as it gave me an introduction to Tagore. It was a portal to a veritable Aladdin's cave of delights—of stories, plays, images, verses and led to noble thoughts of world peace and universal love.

Tagore's play *The Post Office* had been endorsed by the Irish poet and playwright William Butler Yeats, which facilitated its publication and fame in the West. Around the same time, Tagore was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature, which gave more prominence to *The Post Office*. The play, widely hailed as a masterpiece, is suffused with Tagore's philosophic and religious worldview. It reflects Hindu philosophy and mysticism, which in a sense Tagore represents. It

[1] References to "I" refer to me, Akbar Ahmed, and "we" to all three authors.

touches the mysticism we are familiar with through the Abrahamic religions, but in some senses is even deeper. It was staged in Dublin, London, and Berlin, and it was broadcast on the radio in Paris the night before the Nazis took the city in 1940. In 1942, despite the Nazis banning the play,[2] it was staged by Janusz Korczak, head of a Jewish orphanage in the Warsaw Ghetto, in order to give hope to the children and avert their depression.[3] Tragically, three days after the performance, Korczak and the children were sent to the Treblinka concentration camp where they were killed. Discussing *The Post Office* during the coronavirus pandemic in 2021, the scholar Ragini Mohite noted that it "has been a resilient part of the public consciousness in times of generation-defining crises."[4]

The play is about a young boy who has a terminal illness and for his own protection is sealed up in his house. He is only able to experience the world by looking out of his window. Positive and cheerful despite his illness, he longs to experience the world and speaks to passersby about it. They are from diverse backgrounds and social positions, and the boy is fascinated by all of them. One character, for example, Gaffer, who dresses as a fakir or Sufi Muslim holy man, indicates an Islamic and Afghan background.

The boy describes with excitement the many things he will do when he is well. When he asks about a building he observes with a flag, he is informed that it is the king's post office—and he is facetiously told that one day there might be a letter for him from the king. The boy takes this seriously, however, and loves the idea. He finds hope that one day he will receive a letter from the king. The king represents the divine, and towards the end of the play the boy is clearly connected with the spiritual world. In his moment of death, he will experience a moment of release where he will become one with the Divine Being.

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[2] Ragini Mohite, "Reading Tagore's 'The Post Office' During the Pandemic: Reflections on the Nature of Education," Liverpool University Press Blog, May 4, 2021: https://liverpooluniversitypress.blog/2021/05/04/reading-tagores-the-post-office-during-the-pandemic-reflections-on-the-nature-of-education/

[3] Jai Chakrabarti, "'The Post Office': A Play from India to Wartime Poland," Jewish Book Council, September 15, 2021: https://www.jewishbookcouncil.org/pb-daily/the-post-office-a-play-from-india-to-wartime-poland

[4] Ragini Mohite, "Reading Tagore's 'The Post Office' During the Pandemic: Reflections on the Nature of Education," Liverpool University Press Blog, May 4, 2021: https://liverpooluniversitypress.blog/2021/05/04/reading-tagores-the-post-office-during-the-pandemic-reflections-on-the-nature-of-education/

It is this sense of Oneness, of a unity that encompasses diversity, that Tagore embodies throughout his work, which ranges across poetry, plays, novels, academic writings and essays, music including opera, and painting. Tagore was a tall tree in an Indian forest of tall trees, a forest thick with towering names like Gandhi, Jinnah, Iqbal, Nehru, and Azad. He was perhaps the first to be internationally recognized, winning the Nobel Prize in 1913. He was then knighted by King George V, but Tagore subsequently returned the knighthood after the brutal British massacre at Jallianwala Bagh.

Tagore dominated Bengal's already rich and complex literary world, writing over 1,000 poems, some 200 books, over 40 plays, and more than 2,000 songs.[5] He is known as a crucial figure in the literary, political, and cultural movement known as the Bengal Renaissance, which balanced tradition and modernity, religion and science, and East and West. It transformed Bengal and deeply influenced South Asia as a whole—for example it was a key influence on the movement led by Gandhi which achieved independence from British rule in 1947. Watching Gandhi emerge as a political force, Tagore was the first to give him the title Mahatma or Great Soul,[6] while Gandhi called Tagore Gurudev and "'The Great Sentinel,' the conscience of the sub-continent."[7] Jawaharlal Nehru, who thought of Tagore as his intellectual guru,[8] described both Tagore and Gandhi as "in the long line of India's great men" and "supreme as human beings."[9]

Today, Tagore's songs are the national anthems of not one but two nations, India and Bangladesh, while his work inspired the writing of the national anthem of a third, Sri Lanka. We should note that in the case of Bangladesh, a Muslim nation had selected a national anthem written by a Hindu. *Amar Sonar Bangla* was written by Tagore in 1905 but adopted by the new nation in 1971. For Bengalis, Tagore remains a very special figure and part and parcel of their

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[5] Fakrul Alam and Radha Chakravarty, eds. *The Essential Tagore* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), pp. 313, 373; Amartya Sen, "Tagore and his India," The Nobel Prize, August 28, 2001: https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1913/tagore/article/

[6] Nikhil Bhattacharya, "Rabindranath Tagore and Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi," MK Gandhi.org, May 5, 2011: https://www.mkgandhi.org/articles/tagoreG.php#:~:text=Tagore%20first%20called%20Gandhi%20a,the%20Great%20Sentinel%20or%20Gurudev%22

[7] William Radice, "Introduction." In Rabindranath Tagore, *Selected Poems* (London: Penguin, 2005), p. 29.

[8] Sunil Khilnani, *Incarnations: A History of India in Fifty Lives* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016), p. 244.

[9] Amartya Sen, "Tagore and his India," The Nobel Prize, August 28, 2001: https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1913/tagore/article/

very identity. Among Bengalis, Tagore's songs, for example, "are sung, hummed, or played…in every possible situation."[10] In Bengali the word Rabindrik refers to those things with characteristics associated with Tagore.

Tagore was a perpetual artistic innovator, "creating new forms and styles in his poetry; working fundamental changes in Bengali vocal music; introducing novel kinds of drama, opera and ballet; exploring subjects from nursery-rhymes to science in his essays; evolving a unique style in the paintings and drawings that he produced in large quantities from 1928 on; above all, enormously expanding and altering the resources of the Bengali language" and "inventing a range of lyric metres and verse-forms that no writer before him in any modern Indian language had dreamed of."[11] Influences on Tagore's literary, dance, and musical compositions ranged from European literary traditions to Balinese dance-drama to north and south Indian classical music.[12] Tagore was also an educator, having established Visva-Bharati University in West Bengal, one of the major universities of India.

For us, the authors, Tagore is a great "Mingler," someone who embraces the "Other" regardless of religion, race, ethnicity, or nation. Indeed, Tagore himself said, "When the streams of ideals that flow from the East and from the West mingle their murmur in some profound harmony of meaning it delights my soul."[13] Through his artistic works and the sheer force of his personality and dedication, Tagore reached out to the "Other" in love on a global level. While Tagore's popularity as a literary figure has declined in the West over the decades, he remains an iconic figure in the East, particularly South Asia. While in the West he has primarily been seen as a literary figure, his importance for the West and the world is greater than that. It is his philosophy and the big ideas he presented across the different mediums in which he worked that are most important for us to consider.

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[10] Alam and Chakravarty, *The Essential Tagore*, p. 313.
[11] Radice, "Introduction," pp. 20-21.
[12] Fakrul Alam and Radha Chakravarty, "Introduction." In Fakrul Alam and Radha Chakravarty, eds. *The Essential Tagore* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), p. 14.
[13] Rabindranath Tagore, *The Religion of Man* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1922), p. 88.

Today we live in a sharply polarized world of continuing technological advancements, for example the rise of AI. For Tagore, the modern world contained both great potential and poison. The potential was for humans to increasingly meet and know one another, to gain an appreciation for the unity of humanity within our distinctive identities and traditions. The poison was alienating organizational mechanization, technological advancements in killing and destruction, economic greed, and nationalism, all which came in a kind of Western package of modernity which, Tagore was greatly concerned, would be adopted and mimicked by the nations struggling for their independence from European powers such as those in Asia, thus leading to global disaster. He lived through the horrors of the First World War, and his final writings in 1941 were of alarm as the planet entered the Second World War.

At a time of rising ethnonationalism and conflicts across the world, with numerous commentators and spiritual leaders like Pope Francis having declared we are either entering or about to enter a Third World War, we argue that it is important to review and revive Tagore's rich legacy. We hope that this piece helps accomplish the important task. Tagore's vision of humanism and hope for an inclusive India and an inclusive world can lead us on the path of love and unity and away from the poisons of hatred and intolerance.

The Life of Tagore

Tagore was born in Jorasanko Thakur Bari, near Calcutta in India in 1861. His Brahmin family was highly accomplished and affluent with a long history. With Calcutta then serving as the British capital of India, the Tagore family, which had close links with the British, was situated at the center of colonial administration. The family was full of "firsts." Rabindranath's grandfather, Dwarkanath, for example, was the first Indian bank director, was among the first Indian industrialists, involved in shipping and mining and trading in indigo, silk, sugar, tea, and coffee, and was the first Indian to partner with a European businessman as an equal in the creation of Carr, Tagore and Company in 1834.[14] Rabindranath's brother, Satyendranath, was the first Indian to join the British Civil Service, and his sister Swarnakumari Devi was the first Indian woman novelist and the first woman to edit a journal in India.

[14] Stanley Wolpert, *A New History of India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 221.

While the Tagores were wealthy businessmen and landowners, possessing large estate holdings, they had more than wealth—they had a vision of destiny in the uplift of Bengal and India and the reconciliation of tradition and modernity. They wished to adopt the best of the British while retaining the best of their own culture and use their wealth and influence for cultural enrichment and the good of the society.[15] They did this across different areas of life including newspapers, literature, and the arts, and became leaders in what was known as the Bengal Renaissance. In yet another "first," for example, Dwarkanath was the first "bi-musical Indian," meaning he was the first Indian with "the practical ability to play/perform both Indian and western music."[16]

The key figure in providing this direction to the Tagores was the Hindu reformer Raja Rammohun Roy, of whom Dwarkanath was a dedicated follower. In 1828, Roy founded the Brahmo Samaj movement, which was the "most influential reform organization of nineteenth-century Hinduism" and "the lead organization in the emergence of a broader modern Hinduism."[17] The movement promoted a Hinduism that was large in scope, intellectual, philosophical, humanistic, inclusive—for example, embracing other religions such as Islam—and emphatically modern, all while being based in the ancient Upanishads. Thus Roy, in the words of the historian Stanley Wolpert, could "train himself to become an Englishman while remaining a Bengali brahman."[18] Dwarkanath could on the one hand lead the Brahmo Samaj while at the same time meeting and moving in the circles of Queen Victoria, Charles Dickens, and William Thackeray.

Rabindranath was born into this dynamic and exciting environment. His parents' fourteenth child, he grew up surrounded by the arts such as literature, theater, and music, in which his siblings excelled. He began writing poetry as a child, and his first book of verse came out when he was 13 years old, followed by his publishing of essays on poets such as Dante at the age of 16. There were repeated efforts to send Rabindranath for formalized schooling, both in India and

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[15] Radice, "Introduction," p. 19.
[16] Sharmadip Basu, "The bi-musical subject: Dwarkanath Tagore and European music in early-nineteenth century Calcutta," *South Asian History and Culture*, vol. 15, no. 4, 2004, p. 375.
[17] David J. Neumann, *Finding God Through Yoga: Paramahansa Yogananda and Modern American Religion in a Global Age* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019), p. 52.
[18] Wolpert, *A New History of India*, p. 218.

in England, but he always resisted such structures. He was instead taught by his father, his siblings, and tutors in his home—one of whom, for example, guided Tagore's translation of *Macbeth* into Bengali when he was 12.[19]

Tagore was steeped in the interfaith ideas of Roy, stating of Roy, "It was he who first felt and declared that for us Buddha, Christ and Mohammed have spent their lives; that for each one of us has been stored up the fruits of the discipline of our Rishis."[20] While his father led Brahmo Samaj, which featured and furthered Roy's intellectual and philosophical approach to religion, however, Rabindranath's notable religious experiences which shaped his life were felt viscerally and emotionally. In 1882, for example, while staying at his brother's house in Calcutta, he had a profound emotional and religious experience which gave him a life altering insight into what he called "spiritual reality." [21] He explained it thusly: "One morning I happened to be standing on the verandah…The sun was just rising through the leafy tops of those trees. As I continued to gaze, all of a sudden, a covering seemed to fall away from my eyes, and I found the world bathed in a wonderful radiance, with waves of beauty and joy swelling on every side. This radiance pierced in a moment through the folds of sadness and despondency which had accumulated over my heart, and flooded it with this universal light."[22] He was now aware of "the joy aspect of the Universe. And it came to be so that no person or thing in the world seemed to me trivial or unpleasing."[23]

"From infancy I had seen only with my eyes," he explained, discussing the significance of the experience, but "I now began to see with the whole of my consciousness," which had been expanded.[24] "I had never before marked the play of limbs and lineaments which always accompanies even the least of man's actions," he said, but "now I was spell-bound by their variety, which I came across on all sides, at every moment. Yet I saw them not as being apart by themselves, but as parts of that amazingly beautiful greater dance which goes on at this very moment throughout the world of men, in each of their homes, in their multifarious wants and

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[19] Radice, "Introduction," p. 33.
[20] Rabindranath Tagore, *Greater India* (Triplicane, Madras: S. Ganesan, 1921), p. 87.
[21] Tagore, *The Religion of Man*, p. 94.
[22] Rabindranath Tagore, *My Reminiscences* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1917), p. 216.
[23] Tagore, *My Reminiscences*, p. 216.
[24] Tagore, *My Reminiscences*, p. 218; Tagore, *The Religion of Man*, p. 94.

activities."[25] He put down his experience in verse, writing, "I know not how of a sudden my heart flung open its doors,/ And let the crowd of worlds rush in, greeting each other."[26] The experience had "illuminated for me the whole universe, which then no longer appeared like heaps of things and happenings, but was disclosed to my sight as one whole."[27]

Another significant event in his life followed—his father's decision to send Tagore to rural Bengal to look after the family estates there. Tagore described this period as the "most productive" in his life[28] in which he produced some of his best work. Perhaps for the first time, Tagore was in close contact with rural people, and a new world opened up to him. The result of this interaction was the appearance of ordinary people as protagonists for the first time in Bengali literature.[29] Tagore was now involved in management and in economic and political affairs affecting people's lives. He saw how ordinary people lived, and tried to improve their lives. Most of his tenants were Muslims, and he described them with affection: "I love them from my heart."[30] Observing relations between Muslims and Hindus, he noted how they were able to live together in a seamless and organic way. He was especially fascinated by mystic Muslim and Hindu folk music which further shaped his religious outlook and accorded with his own views on the unity of the divine.

In 1901, Tagore, then in his early forties, established a school on family land near Bolpur, West Bengal which he called Santiniketan, meaning abode of peace. The school was inspired by the model of the forest hermitage ashram of ancient India and utilized an experimental method of teaching. Learning was "unstructured" and "classes were held under the trees, where observation of nature was encouraged through study and excursions."[31] Tagore hoped to cultivate "love of nature and sympathy with all living creatures" among the students.[32] The school would be a

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[25] Tagore, *My Reminiscences*, p. 218.
[26] Tagore, *My Reminiscences*, p. 219.
[27] Tagore, *My Reminiscences*, p. 222.
[28] Mohammad A. Quayum, "Rabindranath Tagore: A Sectarian or a Cosmopolitan Writer?," *Asian Studies Review*, vol. 49, no. 2, 2025, p. 393.
[29] Alam and Chakravarty, *The Essential Tagore*, p. 491.
[30] Quayum, "Rabindranath Tagore," pp. 393-394.
[31] Kathleen M. O'Connell, "Foreword to the Second Edition." In H. B. Mukherjee, *A Study of the Educational Thought and Experiment of Rabindranath Tagore* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2021), p. x.
[32] H. B. Mukherjee, *A Study of the Educational Thought and Experiment of Rabindranath Tagore* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2021), p. 69.

major focus for the remainder of his life. Notably, it was established entirely independently of British control or funding, a considerable undertaking at the time.[33]

Tagore accomplished such achievements despite experiencing great tragedies in his life. His wife died at the age of 29, followed nine months later by the death of his daughter, and four years after that his youngest son died of cholera at the age of 13. He also lost his sister-in-law, with whom he was very close, to suicide. Dealing with death shaped Tagore's spiritual views and approach to life. As he wrote, "When a seedling is fenced into a dark space, its sole effort is to somehow escape that darkness, to emerge into the light, stretching upwards as if on tiptoe, as far up as possible. Likewise, when death suddenly imprisoned my heart inside a dark nothingness, my entire being struggled desperately, day and night, to penetrate that darkness and come out into the light of existence. But when the darkness conceals the way out of darkness, can there be any sorrow greater than that? And yet, through this unbearable grief, from time to time, I felt the touch of a sudden joyous breeze. I was surprised at it…I had been forced to give up the one I had clung to for support. Seeing this as a loss, I suffered agony; but simultaneously, perceiving it as a sort of liberation, I experienced a vast sense of peace…Death had created the distance that is required for one to see the world whole, and to see it in all its beauty."[34]

In 1903, Lord Curzon, the Viceroy of India, announced that Bengal would be partitioned between Hindu and Muslim administrative areas. This announcement supercharged Bengali and Indian nationalism and patriotism against the British. Huge protests broke out, and Tagore was front and center in the movement, writing patriotic songs that were sung across the country. The movement was known as Swadeshi, meaning of one's own country, and promoted indigenous industry and crafts and boycotts of foreign goods. The movement could not stop the partition which occurred in 1905, however, although the partition was revoked six years later.

Yet Tagore soon began to grow disillusioned with the tactics and vision of the nationalist activists, which included terrorist attacks, riots, and murders. Muslims, Tagore noted, were particularly affected because many were poor and were faced with economic destruction if they

[33] Radice, "Introduction," p. 20.
[34] Alam and Chakravarty, *The Essential Tagore*, pp. 47-48.

were forced to boycott foreign goods, for example, and were seen as disloyal by many Hindu nationalists. "I will never allow patriotism to triumph over humanity as long as I live," he said in 1908.[35] Tagore could not condone violence, believing that India should not pursue the path of violence and that good could come only from constructive work pursued in a tolerant spirit.[36] He threw himself into this task, publishing copious writings and focusing on the uplift of rural people.

With Tagore's fame in India growing, in 1912 he departed for England to study its educational methods. Along with him he carried a collection of his poems, *Gitanjali*, which he had translated into English. The collection originally written in Bengali contains 157 poems on the themes of love, devotion and spiritual longing. This collection would change Tagore's life. He circulated the translation in England, and a copy was sent to William Butler Yeats, who was amazed at what he read. Yeats attested, "I know of no man in my time who has done anything in the English language to equal these lyrics. Even as I read them in this literal prose translation they are exquisite in style as in thought."[37] Tagore now shot into global fame, a rise that is as remarkable as it was unlikely as an Indian subject at the high noon of the British Empire. *Gitanjali* was published in 1912 and was an instant sensation. The *Times Literary Supplement* declared the work to be "the psalms of a David in our time."[38] The following year, he was awarded the Nobel Prize, the first Asian and first non-Westerner to receive the honor. Two years after that he was knighted. Tagore has been described as the world's "first international literary celebrity."[39]

Tagore was greatly disturbed by the advent of the First World War, and began to speak more loudly and openly about the dangers of nationalism, which he was familiar with in India in the aftermath of the partition of Bengal. He promoted spiritual human unity, and he redoubled his

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[35] Amartya Sen, "Tagore and his India," The Nobel Prize, August 28, 2001: https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1913/tagore/article/
[36] Satyajit Ray, "Portrait of a Man." In *The UNESCO Courier: 60 Years of Friendship with India*, November 2009, p. 16.
[37] Kaylan Kundu, "Rabindranath Tagore: A Renewed Interest in the West." In Rama Datta and Clinton Seely, eds., *Celebrating Tagore: A Collection of Essays* (New Delhi: Allied Publishers Private Limited, 2009), p. 286.
[38] Alam and Chakravarty, "Introduction," p. 10
[39] Amit Chaudhuri, "Foreword: Poetry as Polemic." In Fakrul Alam and Radha Chakravarty, eds. *The Essential Tagore* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), p. xx.

efforts building up his school in Santiniketan which reflected his vision—the motto of the school was "where the world becomes a single nest." In 1918, he upgraded and expanded his school to become Visva-Bharati University, meaning the communion of the world with India. The mission of the school, Tagore said, was "to seek to establish a living relationship between the East and the West, to promote inter-racial amity and intercultural understanding and fulfill the highest mission of the present age—the unification of mankind."[40] The school's constitution specifically mentions that "the study of the religion, literature, history, science, and art of Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, Zoroastrian, Islamic, Sikh, Christian, and civilisations may be pursued along with the culture of the West…in amity, good-fellowship, and co-operation between the thinkers and scholars of both Eastern and Western countries, free from all antagonisms of race, nationality, creed, or caste and in the name of the One Supreme Being."[41]

Prominent European academics helped Tagore develop the school, and students arrived from across India and beyond, including China, Japan, and the West.[42] Tagore spoke of his intent to invite "students from the West to study the different systems of Indian philosophy, literature, art and music in their proper environment, encouraging them to carry on research work in collaboration with the scholars already engaged in this task."[43] Over time Tagore continued to develop the school by adding departments focusing on different world traditions. In 1927, for example, a department of Islamic studies was established, with a chair of Persian studies following in 1932, and a department of Chinese studies in 1937.[44] One of the earliest graduating students of Visva-Bharati was the distinguished Muslim Bengali writer Syed Mujtaba Ali.[45]

During this period, the Indian independence movement under the leadership of Gandhi gained strength. When rumors circulated that Gandhi had been arrested, violence broke out among Indians, and the British launched a harsh crackdown including the imposition of martial law. In Amritsar, British troops fired into crowds killing hundreds of people. In response to this, Tagore

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[40] Mukherjee, *A Study of the Educational Thought and Experiment of Rabindranath Tagore*, p. 221.
[41] Quayum, "Rabindranath Tagore," p. 398.
[42] Mukherjee, *A Study of the Educational Thought and Experiment of Rabindranath Tagore*, pp. 229-233.
[43] Rabindranath Tagore, *Creative Unity* (London: Macmillan, 1922), p. 173.
[44] Quayum, "Rabindranath Tagore," p. 386.
[45] Quayum, "Rabindranath Tagore," p. 392.

returned his knighthood given what he described as the "degradation not fit for human beings" with which the British were treating Indians.[46]

In terms of Tagore's relationship with Gandhi, the two great men were close but had a complex relationship. While Tagore embraced Gandhi and accepted him as the leader of the Indian independence movement based in nonviolence, the two sometimes disagreed on tactics, for example the strategy of boycotting foreign goods—Tagore felt this could stoke exclusionary nationalism by associating what is foreign with what is impure.[47]

The rest of Tagore's life was spent in constant activity in India and abroad, speaking to audiences across the world about his message of peace and promoting intellectual and artistic cooperation and dialogue between nations. He gained disciples from the West and around the world who moved to India to learn from him and were devoted to him. He continued to receive accolades, for example in 1931 on the occasion of Tagore's 70th birthday, *The Golden Book of Tagore* was published, co-sponsored by Gandhi, Albert Einstein, the French writer Romain Rolland, Kostis Palamas of Greece, and the Indian scientist Jagadish Chandra Bose, Tagore's close friend. Tagore died in 1941 at the age of 80 in Jorasanko Thakur Bari, his family estate where he was born.

Tagore on the Unity of Reality

As a quintessential Mingler, Tagore celebrated human diversity and argued that it constituted a single entity. Humanity is, he said, "a divine harp of many strings."[48] For Tagore, humanity was fundamentally at one with the world, nature, and cosmos itself—this was part of his understanding of "unity," the ultimate reality or God: "humanity is composed of individuals, yet they have their interconnection of human relationship, which gives living solidarity to man's world. The entire universe is linked up with us in a similar manner."[49] To illustrate his view,

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[46] "Tagore renounced his Knighthood in protest for Jalianwalla Bagh mass killing," *The Times of India*, April 13, 2011.
[47] Erving E. Beauregard, "Tagore and Gandhi: The Complementary Nature of Indian Genius," *University of Dayton Review*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1964, pp. 22-23.
[48] Tagore, *Creative Unity*, p. 202.
[49] Tagore, *The Religion of Man*, p. 222.

Tagore quoted from an ancient Hindu text, the Shvetashvatara Upanishad, stating, "He who is one, above all colours, and who with his manifold power supplies the inherent needs of men of all colours, who is in the beginning and in the end of the world, is divine, and may he unite us in a relationship of good will."[50]

Key to Tagore's life outlook was the consciousness of the world and universe as a unitary whole. He referred to this unitary whole as God, or Brahma in Hinduism, and with names including "the One,"[51] "the Creator,"[52] the "Infinite,"[53] "the supreme Lover,"[54] "the universal Unity,"[55] "the divine Reality,"[56] and "Being, the ultimate reality."[57]

While things in the world may appear to us to be distinct and different, they are in fact all interrelated and interdependent. Thus, the diversity we observe in the world is necessarily so and derives from the same unity. Tagore argued that "the One appears as many"[58] and "the nature of Reality is the variedness of its unity"[59]— it is a "unity which comprehends multiplicity."[60]

When we search for the points in which apparently distinct facts or elements come together, an entity or wholeness appears in which we gain deeper and more authentic insight into what we are perceiving. As Tagore explained, "What is the truth of this world? It is not in the masses of substance, not in the number of things, but in their relatedness…It is not in the materials which are many, but in the expression which is one."[61] As he also put it, "truth consists, not in facts, but in harmony of facts."[62] If one is only looking very closely at the smaller components of something, like roots of a tree or leaves, they may not appreciate the wider unity or whole of the tree. To further expound on the tree example, Tagore notes that even when we perceive

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[50] Tagore, *The Religion of Man*, p. 50.
[51] Tagore, *The Religion of Man*, p. 188.
[52] Rabindranath Tagore, *Personality* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1917), p. 189.
[53] Rabindranath Tagore, *Sādhanā: The Realisation of Life* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1915), p. 91.
[54] Tagore, *The Religion of Man*, p. 105.
[55] Tagore, *The Religion of Man*, p. 227.
[56] Tagore, *The Religion of Man*, p. 205.
[57] Tagore, *The Religion of Man*, p. 192.
[58] Tagore, *Sādhanā*, p. 97.
[59] Tagore, *Personality*, p. 72.
[60] Tagore, *Sādhanā*, p. 26.
[61] Tagore, *Creative Unity*, pp. 5-6.
[62] Tagore, *Creative Unity*, p. 32.

something in its larger unity, there are still larger levels—there is no tree without its environment, without the sun, soil, and the seasons, and if any part of this inter-relation is checked, the tree will not survive.[63]

Tagore sought to aid us in appreciating that larger reality, where a person experiences "an illumination of his consciousness" in realizing "the spiritual unity reigning supreme over all differences."[64] The barrier to such a consciousness is the ego, because the ego is "all about me." This inwardness means the ego is not focused on what is outside one's self, what they are a part of. Our own "feelings and events," Tagore wrote, in their "vehement self-assertion they ignore their unity with the All."[65]

The good news for Tagore is that he believed that human beings, in addition to the ego, also have an instinctual urge to reach out beyond themselves—there is a "mysterious spirit of unity" or pull towards unity. We have within us, he argued, a "longing for magnitude…The truth that is infinite dwells in the ideal of unity which we find in the deeper relatedness."[66] It is part of being human.

In fact, Tagore believed that the different human religions came from this tendency to seek unity: "when, at first, any large body of people in their history became aware of their unity, they expressed it in some popular symbol of divinity."[67] In the human history of different groups, he contended, it was a "moral spirit of combination which was the true basis of their greatness," fostering "their art, science and religion."[68] Human progress and true civilization itself has to do with this process, what he called a "widening of the range of feeling…to extend the scope of our consciousness towards higher and larger spheres."[69] The ultimate truth for man, Tagore affirmed, is "in his extension of sympathy across all barriers of caste and colour."[70] "It is an impulse for

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[63] Tagore, *Personality*, p. 100.
[64] Tagore, *The Religion of Man*, p. 108.
[65] Tagore, *Creative Unity*, p. 39.
[66] Tagore, *The Religion of Man*, p. 66.
[67] Tagore, *Creative Unity*, p. 124.
[68] Rabindranath Tagore, *Nationalism* (San Francisco: The Book Club of California, 1917), p. 120.
[69] Tagore, *Sādhanā*, pp. 18-19.
[70] Tagore, *Creative Unity*, p. 27.

union," he further argued, "which drives our mind across our little home and neighbourhood to its love tryst abroad. It must unite with the great mind of humanity to find its fulfilment."[71]

The Importance of Love

If Tagore's body of work could be said to have one overarching theme, it would be love. Love is crucial for Tagore because it is through love that we transcend ourselves in order to embrace the larger Unity. In love, we shun our ego in favor of the "Other" and Unity, and when we do this we do not feel "emptiness" but "fulfillment."[72] When we embrace the larger unity of how things fit together through love, we experience "the joy that is at the root of all creation,"[73] as "love is the ultimate meaning of everything around us."[74] Whereas knowledge of God must necessarily be partial for humans, Tagore argued, "he can be known by joy, by love."[75] Love is actually necessary to understand humanity itself, as "we never can have a true view of man unless we have a love for him."[76]

In order to be truly happy, Tagore says a person must "establish harmonious relationship with all things with which he has dealings."[77] He affirmed that "joy is everywhere; it is in the earth's green covering of grass; in the blue serenity of the sky; in the reckless exuberance of spring; in the severe abstinence of grey winter; in the living flesh that animates our bodily frame; in the perfect poise of the human figure, noble and upright; in living; in the exercise of all our powers; in the acquisition of knowledge…Joy is the realisation of the truth of oneness, the oneness of our soul with the world and of the world-soul with the supreme lover."[78]

In love, Tagore further asserted, "all the contradictions of existence merge themselves and are lost. Only in love are duality and unity not at variance. Love must be one and two at the same

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[71] Rabindranath Tagore, *Thought Relics* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1921), p. 90.
[72] Tagore, *Creative Unity*, p. 75.
[73] Tagore, *Sādhanā*, p. 107.
[74] Tagore, *Sādhanā*, p. 107.
[75] Tagore, *Sādhanā*, p. 159.
[76] Tagore, *Sādhanā*, p. 111.
[77] Tagore, *The Religion of Man*, p. 133.
[78] Tagore, *Sādhanā*, p. 116.

time."[79] "It is only in the light of love," he said, "that all limits are merged in the limitless"[80] and all "sense of difference is obliterated."[81] Love is thus essentially the meaning of life, and "We live in this world when we love it."[82] For Tagore, "our love of life is really our wish to continue our relation with this great world. We are glad that we are in it; we are attached to it with numberless threads, which extend from this earth to the stars."[83] "The facts that cause despondence and gloom are mere mist," Tagore declared with confidence, "and when through the mist beauty breaks out in momentary gleams, we realise that Peace is true and not conflict. Love is true and not hatred; and Truth is the One, not the disjointed multitude."[84]

Tagore and the "Other"

For Tagore, the distinctions between different peoples and religions, the differences between "Self" and "Other" were not negative. He believed that the Self shapes the Other and the Other shapes the Self. Tagore argued, "At every step we have to take into account others than ourselves."[85] When we are by ourselves, we are like an eye without light and an object to gaze upon—and "our eye loses the meaning of its function if it can only see itself."[86] But when we relate to what is other than us, we widen "the limit of our self"[87] and realize "our own selves…through expansion of sympathy."[88] This process is a joyful one, as "we have our greatest delight when we realize ourselves in others, and this is the definition of love."[89] Tagore explained the idea by invoking Hindu teachings, stating, "In our religious literature, opposition is reckoned as one of the means of union."[90]

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[79] Tagore, *Sādhanā*, p. 114.
[80] Tagore, *My Reminiscences*, p. 239.
[81] Tagore, *Sādhanā*, p. 29.
[82] Rabindranath Tagore, *Stray Birds* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1916), p. 78.
[83] Tagore, *Sādhanā*, p. 112.
[84] Tagore, *Creative Unity*, p. 15.
[85] Tagore, *Sādhanā*, p. 60.
[86] Tagore, *Sādhanā*, p. 59.
[87] Tagore, *Sādhanā*, p. 60.
[88] Tagore, *Creative Unity*, p. 49.
[89] Tagore, *The Religion of Man*, p. 49.
[90] Tagore, *Greater India*, p. 92.

Tagore understood the different religions similarly as on one level distinct but on another to be reflecting the larger Unity. Tagore believed that the messengers of all great religions sought "the welfare of men" and the "the spiritual emancipation of all races."[91] "Whatever might be their doctrines of God," he argued, "their life and teaching had the deeper implication of a Being who is the infinite in Man, the Father, the Friend, the Lover, whose service must be realized through serving all mankind."[92] He expressed this vision in verse in poems like "Question," writing,

"God, again and again through the ages you have sent messengers
To this pitiless world:
They have said, 'Forgive everyone,' they have said, 'Love one
another."[93]

At his school at Santiniketan, Tagore commemorated the birth and death anniversaries of the founding prophets of different religions such as Jesus, the Prophet of Islam, and Buddha.[94]Tagore cited Jesus and Buddha as great spiritual leaders who reflected important teachings of the Upanishads,[95] stressed the importance of love, and inspired us with their reaching towards the ideal.[96] Tagore wrote, "When Buddha said to men: 'Spread thy thoughts of love beyond limits,' when Christ said 'Love thine enemies,' their words transcended the average standard of ideals belonging to the ordinary world. But they ever remind us that our true life is not the life of the ordinary world, and we have a fund of resources in us which is inexhaustible."[97]

In his writings and advocacy, Tagore argued against rigid sectarianism in religion, explaining that because "The self-expression of God is in the endless variedness of creation…our attitude towards the Infinite Being must also in its expression have a variedness of individuality ceaseless and unending."[98] Thus, he explained, there will be different understandings of God represented

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[91] Tagore, *The Religion of Man*, p. 71.
[92] Tagore, *The Religion of Man*, pp. 71-72.
[93] Rabindranath Tagore, *Selected Poems.* Translated by William Radice. (London: Penguin Books, 2005), p. 96.
[94] Ashim Dutta, *Mystic Modernity: Tagore and Yeats* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2022), p. 10.
[95] Tagore, *Sādhanā*, pp. 15-17.
[96] Tagore, *Sādhanā*, pp. 58, 77.
[97] Tagore, *Thought Relics*, p. 59.
[98] Tagore, *Thought Relics*, p. 74.

in different religions because "God is generous in his distribution of love, and his means of communication with men have not been restricted to a blind lane abruptly stopping at one historical point of time and place."[99] In a poem, Tagore writes, "The Sectarian thinks/ That he has the sea/ Ladled into his private pond."[100]

While religiously Tagore was rooted in the intellectual universality of the Upanishads, as we have seen in his discussion of love the expression of his devotion was of the heart as much, if not more so, than the head. An important reason for this was that Tagore's religious beliefs were shaped by his interactions with the folk culture of rural Bengal which cut across religious boundaries. Tagore, who had been steeped in the "high culture" of Calcutta and England before being dispatched by his father to oversee the family estates, was taken by expressions for the divine among poor and rural people. It is a conciseness of the unity of God expressed through love which, Tagore wrote, "transcends the limitations of race and gathers together all human beings within one spiritual circle of union.[101]

In the expressions of love among the rural people, Tagore came to appreciate, social hierarchies and religious distinctions were absent. While the "educated classes" of India often think in terms of Hindu and Muslim, he observed, they often miss the connections among the common people of both religions "going on beneath the surface" at a village level.[102] The love and unity being expressed also cut across social distinctions in a society where, he stated of Hindus, "our higher castes think nothing of looking down on the lowest castes as worse than beasts."[103]

Tagore was particularly fascinated by the Baul of Bengal, a mystic sect including Sufi Muslims and Hindus popular among the poor who offer the same invocations of love for the divine in their devotional songs. The Baul, Tagore explained, seek "from a direct source, the enlightenment which the soul longs for, the eternal light of love."[104] In doing so, they provide

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[99] Tagore, *Thought Relics*, p. 75.
[100] Quayum, "Rabindranath Tagore," p. 397.
[101] Tagore, *The Religion of Man*, pp. 79-80.
[102] Tagore, *Greater India*, p. 27.
[103] Tagore, *Greater India*, p. 101.
[104] Tagore, *Greater India*, p. 76.

"us a clue to the inner meaning of all religions."[105] In his description of the Baul, Tagore uses Sufi imagery, stating, "The pride of the Baül beggar is not in his worldly distinction, but in the distinction that God himself has given to him. He feels himself like a flute through which God's own breath of love has been breathed: 'My heart is like a flute he has played on.'"[106]

In terms of Islamic influences on Tagore, Tagore stated that the code of life of his own family was "a confluence of three cultures, the Hindu, Mohammedan and British."[107] In his thinking, Tagore was profoundly influenced by Muslims including the Persian poets Saadi and Hafiz, whose poetry Tagore readily quoted in his letters and conversations.[108]

In Tagore's literary works, he portrays Muslim characters with sympathy and empathy, such as the short stories "Kabuliwala" (1892) and "The Tale of a Muslim Woman" (1941). In "Kabuliwala," Rahmat, an Afghan Pashtun in Calcutta, strikes up a friendship with a five-year-old Hindu Brahmin girl, Mini, who reminds him of his own daughter in Afghanistan. The character of Rahmat has been described as "one of the most lovable characters in Bengali fiction."[109] "The Tale of a Muslim Woman," dictated by Tagore shortly before his death at a time of increasing Hindu-Muslim tension, similarly concerns the relationship between a female Brahmin and a Muslim. In this case an esteemed Muslim, Habir Khan, saves Kamala, the Brahmin woman, from bandits, but when he takes her back to her family, she is disowned because they believe she is contaminated by contact with Muslims. Khan allows her to live with his family in safety and security and permits her to freely practice her religion, telling her, "A true Mussalman will also respect a devout Brahmin."[110] Experiencing more love at her new house than her old, she and Khan's son fall in love and her religious vision expands—she even becomes a Muslim while stating of God, "He is neither a Hindu nor a Muslim."[111] It is believed that Tagore's story was inspired by Jodhabai, the Hindu Rajput princess who married the sixteenth century Muslim Mughal Emperor Akbar the Great.[112] Additionally, in Tagore's poem

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[105] Tagore, *The Religion of Man*, p. 19.
[106] Tagore, *Creative Unity*, p. 87.
[107] Tagore, *The Religion of Man*, p. 170.
[108] Quayum, "Rabindranath Tagore," p. 390.
[109] Quayum, "Rabindranath Tagore," p. 395.
[110] Alam and Chakravarty, *The Essential Tagore*, p. 647.
[111] Alam and Chakravarty, *The Essential Tagore*, p. 649.
[112] Alam and Chakravarty, *The Essential Tagore*, p. 493.

"Shah Jahan," about the Mughal emperor who was also Akbar's grandson, Tagore provides a striking and now well-known description of the Taj Mahal, built by Shah Jahan, as "a teardrop on the cheek of eternity," speaking as it does to universal emotions of grief and love.

Tagore particularly lauded Akbar the Great, a ruler who embraced all religions, writing "the meeting of the Mussulman and the Hindu produced Akbar, the object of whose dream was the unification of hearts and ideals."[113] In his praise of Akbar, Tagore joined Indian luminaries such as Nehru, who discusses Akbar at length as a symbol of Indian unity in his book *The Discovery of India.* But for Tagore, Akbar was not just an emperor and a political leader. Like the ancient Indian emperor Ashoka, Akbar was also a guru, Tagore wrote, "the greatest honor that India confers her children."[114] And as befitting a guru with a consciousness of the divine, Tagore believed, Akbar's rule was about love. As he explained, "Akbar's attempt at resolving all the religious differences by forging a bond of love was a unifying gesture. He had realized an ideal of unity, and with his liberality and sense of respect he had accessed the innermost recesses of all religions. He used to attend diligently the religious discourses of the Hindu, the Moslem, the Christian and the Parsee preachers. He had given important positions to Hindu women in the inner domain of the palace, the Hindu officers in the ministry and the brave Hindu warriors in the military rank. It is by love and not by politics that he had tried to unify the whole of India,—its King and subjects."[115]

Tagore was also deeply influenced by the fifteenth century poet Kabir, who was born into a Muslim family, studied under a great Hindu guru, and is revered by Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs alike. The only major work of translation Tagore published aside from his own work was a collection of Kabir's poetry. Another central influence was Lalon Shah Fakir, the Bengali nineteenth century mystic poet with a similar background, but in reverse—Lalon came from a Hindu family but became a devotee of a great Muslim holy man. Tagore himself collected many of Lalon's songs from his disciples and archived them in a library at his Visva-Bharati University.[116] An additional inspiration for Tagore was Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism who

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[113] Tagore, *Creative Unity*, p. 104.
[114] Alam and Chakravarty, *The Essential Tagore*, p. 103.
[115] Sanyal, "The Englishmen and the Indians," p. 116.
[116] Quayum, "Rabindranath Tagore," p. 391.

also brought Hindus and Muslims together. Tagore's affection for Guru Nanak and Sikhism dated to when he was a child, when he would accompany his father to pray in the Golden Temple of Sikhism in Amritsar.[117]

Prominent Muslims frequently showed their affection and identification with Tagore. Kazi Nazrul Islam, the national poet of Bangladesh, dedicated his *Sanchita* (Collection) poetic anthology to the "Poet-Emperor, Rabindranath Tagore," and Tagore dedicated *Bosonto* (Spring), his dance-drama, to Nazrul.[118] The Bengali Muslim poet Golam Mostafa even claimed Tagore for Islam, stating, "there is so much of Islamic content and ideals in his writings that he can be called a Muslim without hesitation."[119] Tagore himself encouraged such a connection, affirming, "I am like one of those Sufi saints, poets, and artists."[120] He also wrote in a poem, "O that I were an Arab Bedouin!" and while meeting with Bedouin in Iraq, a chief told him that the Prophet of Islam "has said that the person whose words and actions do not threaten anyone is a true Muslim."[121] Tagore concluded from the experience, "I am a son of Bengal…in front of me sits a being of a completely different order. However, the language of humanity's deepest utterances is one that we both recognize."[122]

In terms of Europeans, Tagore also embraced them, stating, "I have been fortunate in coming into close touch with individual men and women of the Western countries, and have felt with them their sorrows and shared their aspirations. I have known that they seek the same God, who is my God—even those who deny Him."[123] He said that he realized from the time when he lived with a British family, the Scotts, while studying in London as a young man, that "human nature is everywhere the same."[124] He cites in his work several extraordinary Europeans who made a profound personal impact on him, including a Swede named Karl Hammargren who came to Bengal after being inspired by the work of Raja Rammohun Roy and served the people there.[125]

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[117] Alam and Chakravarty, *The Essential Tagore*, p. 124.
[118] Quayum, "Rabindranath Tagore," p. 392.
[119] Quayum, "Rabindranath Tagore," p. 392.
[120] Quayum, "Rabindranath Tagore," p. 390.
[121] Alam and Chakravarty, *The Essential Tagore*, p. 782.
[122] Alam and Chakravarty, *The Essential Tagore*, p. 782.
[123] Tagore, *Creative Unity*, p. 98.
[124] Tagore, *My Reminiscences*, p. 165.
[125] See Tagore, *Creative Unity*, pp. 100-103.

In India, Tagore said, the presence of the Europeans was "a human fact"[126] on the ground. He argued against retribution for colonization, stating, "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 this "would be to imitate Europe in one of her worst features which comes out in her behaviour to people whom she describes as yellow or red, brown or black."[127]

For Tagore, the benefit of the European presence was that it enabled Bengal and India to link with the wider world and come into their own at the same time. The West could thus bring out the best in Bengal and India. Tagore lamented that due to the asymmetrical colonial power dynamics, when Indians met the English, the English were seen as "merely a merchant, or a military man, or a bureaucrat" rather than a human being.[128] It was this human connection that Tagore craved, which could benefit both peoples.[129] From the perspective of the English, Tagore said, "it has become quite possible for him to rule the subjugated race without loving them…we are complete strangers."[130] The media was also a problem, with Tagore arguing, "The English newspapers are making it almost impossible for the English to carry on with their administration of India by constantly criticizing the Indians and expressing their contempt for them."[131] The English were not interacting with Indians as they actually were, but as they imagined them. Only when India could meet the Englishman "as his equal, will all reason for antagonism, and with it all conflict, disappear. Then will East and West unite in India, country with country, race with race, knowledge with knowledge, endeavour with endeavour."[132]

It is on this basis that Tagore contested Rudyard Kipling's statement concerning East and West, "Never the twain shall meet," by replying, "It is true that they are not yet showing any real sign of meeting. But the reason is because the West has not sent out its humanity to meet the man in the East, but only its machine."[133]

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[126] Tagore, *Creative Unity*, p. 109.
[127] Tagore, *Nationalism*, p. 107.
[128] Tagore, *Greater India*, p. 95.
[129] Tagore, *Greater India*, p. 95.
[130] Jharna Sanyal, "The Englishmen and the Indians," *South Asian Review*, vol. 25, no. 1, 2004, p. 111.
[131] Sanyal, "The Englishmen and the Indians," p. 113.
[132] Tagore, *Greater India*, p. 101.
[133] Tagore, *Creative Unity*, p. 109.

An Urgent Warning on Nationalism

There is no better way to enter a discussion of Tagore's views of nationalism, one of the central themes in his thought and writing, than through one of his most acclaimed novels, *The Home and the World* (1916). In the book, which was later adapted into a film by the renowned Indian filmmaker Satyajit Ray, two Begali Hindu friends, Nikhil and Sandip, compete for the affection of Nikhil's wife Bimala. Bimala is a Hindu woman who Nikhil, a wealthy landlord, has encouraged to come out of traditional gender seclusion, or purdah. Nikhil, who is firmly modern in his sensibilities and has drawn his universalist philosophical religious views concerning the unity of all from the Upanishads, ensured that Bimala has been exposed to the culture of both India and the West. Sandip, on the other hand, is a firebrand activist of the Swadeshi nationalist movement who sees Bengal and India as a divine goddess which must be purified of foreign influence. While Nikhil embraces Muslims as a "necessary" part of India, Sandip is anti-Muslim, vowing, "they must be suppressed altogether and made to understand that we are the masters."[134] The humanist Nikhil is very similar in outlook and social position to Tagore himself, Sandip voices the Hindu nationalist perspective, and Bimala represents Bengal and India. Like Bimala, India is a developing traditional society that is faced with two models of modernity—all-embracing universalism or the exclusivist nationalism of the Western nation-state model. Bimala is torn between both men, and the tale ends in tragedy.

While Tagore did all he could to stem the tide of nationalism, the tragic fate of the characters of *The Home and the World* reflect what Tagore was seeing around him and his fears for the future of India and humanity in general. On the final day of the nineteenth century, he had prophesied the horrors of the twentieth, writing,

"The last sun of the century sets amidst the blood-
red clouds of the West and the whirlwind of hatred.
The naked passion of self-love of Nations, in its
drunken delirium of greed, is dancing to the

[134] Rabindranath Tagore, *The Home and the World* (London: Penguin Books, 2005), p. 120.

clash of steel and the howling verses of vengeance."[135]

During the First World War, Tagore saw Western nations tear each other apart, and he died during the Second World War, when it was all happening again. Nehru, writing from prison during the worst of the Second World War, expressed some relief that Tagore had not lived to see it, stating, "Perhaps it is as well that [Tagore] died now and did not see the many horrors that are likely to descend in increasing measure on the world and on India."[136]

Tagore was clear that what he saw as the problem was not "Europe" per se, but a model of identity and political organization developed in Europe. Tagore lamented what nationalism was doing to Europeans, who he argued had great legacies of humanism, spirituality, and rule of law. Tagore contended that Europe's virtues included stressing "the higher obligations of public good above those of the family and the clan," "liberty of conscience," [137] the continent's "Christian culture of centuries" which inspired those who "stood up for the rights of man irrespective of colour and creed,"[138] and its medical advances and achievement in "alleviating those miseries of man which up till now we were contented to accept in a spirit of hopeless resignation."[139]

And yet, Tagore believed that the ideology of the nation was emerging supreme, which was challenging all of this and driving the Western nations to "suicide."[140] Nationalism, Tagore asserted, is "a cruel epidemic of evil" that has humanity in its "iron grip."[141]

Tagore defined nationalism as "the aspect of a whole people as an organized power."[142] For him nationalism was a product of modernity and has both a social identity and a technological and economic component. It is about power and the self-preservation of the "people" or "race."[143]

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[135] Tagore, *Nationalism*, p. 157.
[136] Amartya Sen, "Tagore and his India," The Nobel Prize, August 28, 2001: https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1913/tagore/article/
[137] Rabindranath Tagore, *The Spirit of Japan: A Lecture* (Tokyo: The Indo-Japanese Association, 1916), p. 32.
[138] Tagore, *Nationalism*, p. 83.
[139] Tagore, *Nationalism*, p. 85.
[140] Tagore, *Nationalism*, p. 87.
[141] Tagore, *Nationalism*, p. 27.
[142] Tagore, *Nationalism*, pp. 131-132.
[143] Tagore, *The Religion of Man*, p. 159.

Nationalism posits how a modern people is to be organized and how they are to relate to others. Tagore saw the nation as connected intimately with the scientific advances and mechanics that bring it into being, building up a vast structure that disconnects people from one another. Nationalism is a "poison" contained within modernity which he believed would bring humanity to ruin. It is based on "exclusiveness," and, concerning the "Other," it "is always watchful to keep at bay the aliens or to exterminate them."[144]

Tagore argued that nationalism is inculcated through state policy, particularly in the field of education. Under nationalism, Tagore stated, "the whole people is being taught from boyhood to foster hatreds and ambitions by all kinds of means, by the manufacture of half-truths and untruths in history, by persistent misrepresentation of other races and the culture of unfavourable sentiments towards them, by setting up memorials of events, very often false, which for the sake of humanity should be speedily forgotten, thus continually brewing evil menace towards neighbours and nations other than their own. This is poisoning the very fountainhead of humanity.[145]

Tagore also felt that nationalism on the Western model was challenging and overturning millennia of moral and spiritual teachings.[146] Spirituality was now being diverted away from the Unity of all inwards towards the "Self" and one's own group, people, religion, or race. Spirituality was thus being distorted to the extent that people were not even aware of what was being altered and what was being lost.

For Tagore, nationalism was about the ego which, the great religions teach us, prevents us from encountering the "Other"—he described nationalism as "organized selfishness."[147] The nation with its "pure" people becomes a god to be worshipped, as Sandip does in *The Home and the World*, part of what Tagore calls "The Cult of the Nation."[148] Nationalism is the ego run amuck. There is additionally a strong element of a desire for economic gain and greed in nationalism, to

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[144] Tagore, *Nationalism*, p. 76.
[145] Tagore, *Nationalism*, pp. 98-99.
[146] Tagore, *Creative Unity*, p. 151.
[147] Tagore, *Creative Unity*, p. 120.
[148] Tagore, *Creative Unity*, p. 146.

make the nation rich at the expense of others. The people of the world, Tagore observed, witness "successful" nations prospering in "commercial adventures or in foreign possessions, or in both" and conclude that "for a nation, selfishness is a necessity and therefore a virtue."[149]

Whereas relationships between countries have the potential to be amicable and embracing, Tagore believed that nationalism was harming international relations. Nationalism fostered "suspicion" and "distrust"[150] between countries, with relations determined on the question of national self-interest. Under nationalism, Tagore argued, "Nation can only trust Nation where their interests coalesce, or at least do not conflict."[151] Each country is perpetually "casting its net of espionage into the slimy bottom of the others, fishing for their secrets, the treacherous secrets brewing in the oozy depths of diplomacy."[152]

Tagore was particularly concerned that non-Europeans—the subjects of the European empires and those of rapidly "developing" countries, would turn their backs on their own histories of inclusion to unthinkingly embrace Western-style nationalism. As Tagore put it, nationalism "is ready to send its poisonous fluid into the vitals of the other living peoples, who, not being nations, are harmless."[153] In Tagore's visits to Asian countries like Japan and China he implored his audiences not to adopt the model of Western nationalism lest they lead themselves to ruin. He exhorted the Japanese, for example, to "never to follow the West in its acceptance of the organized selfishness of Nationalism as its religion, never to gloat upon the feebleness of its neighbours, never to be unscrupulous in its behaviour to the weak, where it can be gloriously mean with impunity, while turning its right cheek of brighter humanity for the kiss of admiration to those who have the power to deal it a blow."[154] Instead, Japan "must infuse the sap of a fuller humanity into the heart of the modern civilization" by taking and contributing its own unique humanistic culture to the world.[155]

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[149] Tagore, *Creative Unity*, p. 150.
[150] Tagore, *Nationalism*, p. 54.
[151] Tagore, *Nationalism*, p. 54.
[152] Tagore, *Nationalism*, pp. 51-52.
[153] Tagore, *Creative Unity*, p. 43.
[154] Tagore, *Nationalism*, pp. 52-53.
[155] Tagore, *Nationalism*, p. 87.

Tagore believed that the world was in danger of being seduced by the modern model of the nation which posits "scientific" ideas as objective truth and in the process ignores morality. Thus what we think of as "modern," "advanced," and "cutting edge" is often totally amoral, but it is seen as a virtue and not a vice by peoples seeking modernity to the extent that they are ready to shed their own deep moral traditions in favor of it. Basing state policy on ideas like "Survival of the Fittest," believing it to be "scientific" as Tagore felt Japan was in danger of doing, was a reductionist distortion of reality—it "immediately transforms the whole world of human personality into a monotonous desert of abstraction, where things become dreadfully simple."[156]

Such "scientific" ideas should not form the basis for the morality of a state. Instead, modern peoples and states must not forget timeless human moral lessons concerning the "Other": "those who can see, know that men are so closely knit, that when you strike others the blow comes back to yourself. The moral law, which is the greatest discovery of man, is the discovery of this wonderful truth, that man becomes all the truer, the more he realizes himself in others." [157] Nations "who sedulously cultivate moral blindness as the cult of patriotism," however, "will end their existence in a sudden and violent death."[158] "Never think for a moment," Tagore warned, "that the hurts you inflict upon other races will not infect you, and the enmities you sow around your homes will be a wall of protection to you for all time to come."[159]

As scholars have noted, Tagore's views of nationalism contributed to his decline in popularity in Europe and the United States, where he had initially made a considerable impact.[160] In Asia, nationalists also voiced their opposition to Tagore. In Japan, there was growing hostility against Tagore as he spoke out against Japan's invasions of neighboring countries, describing Japan as a "menace to the defenceless peoples of the East."[161] In Beijing, China, a leaflet was circulated during Tagore's visit which read, "Dr. Tagore would have nationality and politics abolished, replacing them with the consolidation of one's soul. These are a refuge and a source of aesthetic

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[156] Tagore, *Personality*, p. 52.
[157] Tagore, *Nationalism*, p. 97.
[158] Tagore, *Nationalism*, p. 97.
[159] Tagore, *Nationalism*, pp. 98-99.
[160] Alam and Chakravarty, "Introduction," pp. 13-14.
[161] Alam and Chakravarty, "Introduction," p. 14; Amartya Sen, "Tagore and his India," The Nobel Prize, August 28, 2001: https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1913/tagore/article/

joy for the sluggards, but not for us. We cannot but oppose Dr. Tagore, who upholds these things which would shorten the life of our nation."[162] In India, the Hindu nationalist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) organization reportedly forbade members from reading Tagore's work.[163]

Tagore's Vision for India

When Tagore passed away in 1941, India was on the threshold of independence which would follow six years later. While he never experienced an independent India himself, he outlined clearly in his life's work his vision for the country. For Tagore, India's essential identity lies in its deep spiritual roots reflected in the Upanishads going back thousands of years—this identity is again characterized by a unity of its many constituent parts and peoples. As Tagore argued, "It is of this harmony, and not of a barren isolation that the Upanishad speaks."[164] Harmony itself, as reflected in Tagore's understanding of the divine Unity, was of crucial importance in India and everywhere else. As he argued, "Harmony is the very basis of society."[165]

In contrast, Tagore believed that nationalists in India were upsetting this harmony by focusing on a fragmented and segmented understanding of identity that did not take into account the nation as it really was. This included their understanding of history and its link to social identity in the present. Examining the ideology of most Indian nationalists of his time, for example, Tagore detected a devotion to the supposed perfection of the past over the process of diverse national consolidation and coexistence. The nationalists had the belief, Tagore said, "That our forefathers, three thousand years ago, had finished extracting all that was of value from the universe."[166] They held "that we have come to a final completeness in our social and spiritual ideals, the task of the constructive work of society having been done several thousand years before we were born" by "superhuman" ancestors possessing "supernatural power."[167] This perception of past

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[162] Alam and Chakravarty, "Introduction," p. 14.
[163] Rahul Bhatia, "'Nobody knows what I know': How a loyal RSS member abandoned Hindu nationalism," *The Guardian*, August 1, 2024.
[164] Tagore, *The Religion of Man*, p. 182.
[165] O'Connell, "Foreword to the Second Edition," p. xii.
[166] Tagore, *Greater India*, p. 86.
[167] Tagore, *Nationalism*, pp. 144-145.

perfection meant that "all our miseries and shortcomings" are blamed on the "Other"—"the historical surprises that burst upon us from outside."[168]

Such a belief, which confines "the entire nation…to the past forever" means "there is no possibility of us melding with one another,"[169] a process which is essential for a nation. It will only lead to isolation and ultimately death because, "If we insist on segregating ourselves in our pride of exclusiveness, fondly clinging to the belief that Providence is specially concerned in our own particular development...our institutions as specially fit only for ourselves, our places of worship as requiring to be carefully guarded against all incomers, our wisdom as dependent for its safety on being locked up in our strong rooms; then we shall simply await, in the prison of our own contriving, for the execution of the death sentence which in that case the world of humanity will surely pronounce against us."[170] Instead, India should "make a fresh start on the highway of time" with "wisdom, love and work, in the expansion of insight, knowledge and mutuality."[171]

In outlining his own interpretation of national identity, he described "the true Indian view" as attaining a consciousness in which we understand "all things as spiritually one."[172] He spoke of India's "genius for synthesis"[173] and "power of binding together,"[174] and argued, "The realisation of unity in diversity, the establishment of a synthesis amidst variety, —that is the inherent, the *Sanatan* Dharma [Eternal Order] of India. India does not admit difference to be conflict, nor does she espy an enemy in every stranger. So she repels none, destroys none; she abjures no methods, recognises the greatness of all ideals; and she seeks to bring them all into one grand harmony."[175] "India," Tagore said in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, "is there to unite all human races."[176]

Examining Indian culture and history, Tagore discerned generally good relations across cultural and religious boundaries in India: "Whomsoever we came into contact with we drew into the

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[168] Tagore, *Nationalism*, pp. 144-145.
[169] Alam and Chakravarty, *The Essential Tagore*, pp. 197-198.
[170] Tagore, *Greater India*, p. 84.
[171] Tagore, *Greater India*, p. 86.
[172] Tagore, *Creative Unity*, p. 49.
[173] Tagore, *Greater India*, p. 27.
[174] Tagore, *Greater India*, p. 25.
[175] Tagore, *Greater India*, p. 31.
[176] Mohammad A. Quayum, "Nationalism, Patriotism, Cosmopolitanism: Tagore's Ambiguities and Paradoxes (Part II)," *The Daily Star*, April 4, 2020.

circle of relationship," including "neighbours and villagers irrespective of race or caste. The householder was bound by family ties to preceptor and teacher, guest and wayfarer, landlord and tenant,—not ties prescribed by religion or law, but of the heart."[177] In India there was what Tagore described as an "adjustment of races, to acknowledge the real differences between them where these exist, and yet seek for some basis of unity. This basis has come through our saints, like Nanak, Kabir, [the Bengali Hindu saint] Chaitnaya and others, preaching one God to all races of India."[178] Tagore concluded, "To establish a personal relationship between man and man was always India's main endeavour."[179]

This meant that for Tagore, the history of India was not only the history of the Hindus. He argued, "in the evolving History of India, the principle at work is not the ultimate glorification of the Hindu, or any other race."[180] Tagore used the metaphor of water to discuss religious identity in India, stating that Indian culture was like a "river" which initially included the "streams" of "the Vedic, the Puranic, the Buddhist, and the Jain."[181] Yet he explained that just as a river in a particular country includes not only its own waters but waters from afar—the Brahmaputra River, he points out, originates in Tibet but nonetheless flows into the mighty Indian Ganges—other religions have joined Indian culture. Speaking of Islam, Tagore stated that the "The Muhammadan…has repeatedly come into India from outside, laden with his own stores of knowledge and feeling and his wonderful religious democracy, bringing freshet after freshet to swell the current. To our music, our architecture, our pictorial art, our literature, the Muhammadans have made their permanent and precious contribution. Those who have studied the lives and writings of our medieval saints, and all the great religious movements that sprang up in the time of the Muhammadan rule, know how deep is our debt to this foreign current that has so intimately mingled with our life."[182]

When Islam arrived in India, Tagore explained, "Synthetical re-actions began almost immediately, and a common ground was in course of preparation where the boundary lines

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[177] Tagore, *Greater India*, p. 16.
[178] Tagore, *Nationalism*, p. 119.
[179] Tagore, *Greater India*, p. 16.
[180] Tagore, *Greater India*, p. 82.
[181] Tagore, *Creative Unity*, p. 194.
[182] Tagore, *Creative Unity*, pp. 194-195.

between Hindu and Muslim were growing fainter and fainter."[183] For centuries, Tagore said, "Hindus and Mussalmans have…been brought up together in the arms of the same Motherland."[184]

The same is true of the English and European Christians in India. Like groups such as the Dravidians, Aryans, Greeks, Persians, and Muslims who arrived in India before them, Tagore asserted, the English were now part of the nation: "At last now has come the turn of the English to become true to this history and bring to it the tribute of their life, and we neither have the right nor the power to exclude this people from the building of the destiny of India."[185] A pluralistic, independent India, Tagore hoped, could facilitate "a reconciliation"[186] and "deep association"[187] with the West. In addition to these essential influences on India, Tagore also noted the role and presence of Sikhism and Zoroastrianism, and further observed the deep connections India historically had with "The Chinese, Japanese, and Tibetan" cultures.[188]

Tagore celebrated that, as he stated, "all the four great religions of the world are here together—Hinduism, Buddhism, Mohamedanism, and Christianity. It is evident that India is God's chemical factory for the making of a supreme religious synthesis."[189]

Nationalism in many ways is about who is understood to constitute the "We" of the nation and who is considered the "Other" or outsider. Given his extensive writings on nationalism, Tagore was aware that in the modern world nation-states constitute themselves into a citizenry and pursue their policies internationally. For this they must have some basis of coming together. In India, opposition to the English alone, Tagore argued, was not enough to forge a nation.[190] For Tagore, the only viable model was that of Indian synthesis based in love,[191] and he was clear that it is only the diverse peoples of India collectively who should decide the affairs of the nation.

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[183] Tagore, *Greater India*, p. 28.
[184] Tagore, *Greater India*, p. 59.
[185] Tagore, *Nationalism*, p. 27.
[186] Tagore, *Nationalism*, p. 26.
[187] Tagore, *Nationalism*, pp. 130-131.
[188] Tagore, *Creative Unity*, p. 195.
[189] Tagore, *Greater India*, p. 28.
[190] Alam and Chakravarty, *The Essential Tagore*, p. 147.
[191] Alam and Chakravarty, *The Essential Tagore*, pp. 146-147.

Tagore asked, “Who is this ‘We’? Bengali, Marathi or Panjabi, Hindu or Mussalman? Only the larger ‘We’ in whom all these,—Hindu[,] Moslem and Englishman, and whosoever else there be,—may eventually unite shall have the right to dictate who is to remain and who is to leave.”[192]

With India thus constituted, it could play its role on the world stage for the benefit of all humanity—because what was the world if not a macrocosm of the unity in diversity that India represented? As Tagore contended, “That we in India should attain Unity, is a much greater thing than any particular purpose which our union may serve,—for it is a function of our humanity itself.”[193] For Indians who may feel that embracing religions like Christianity and Islam was against Hinduism, Tagore argued that it “will not be un-Hindu, it will be more especially Hindu.”[194] Tagore was emphatic that, for example, “No holy book states Hindus must hate Muslims.”[195] He found in India a “breadth of understanding in which the differences of East and West do not hurt, or conflict with, one another, but where both find their ultimate harmony.”[196]

Thus India had a mission, a sacred mission, not only to constitute itself into a modern nation incorporating all of its diverse people, but provide its model to a world in crisis. In doing so the world could benefit and follow this course towards global unity—to, in Tagore’s language, “realize the truth of the human soul in the Supreme Soul through its union with the soul of the world…it still urges us to seek for the vision of the infinite in all forms of creation, in the human relationships of love, to feel it in the air we breathe, in the light in which we open our eyes, in the water in which we bathe, in the earth on which we live and die.”[197] He also felt that Asia in general had this similar potential as India, to illuminate the world like the Eastern morning sun and help humanity reach the ideal of unity.[198] And he issued a warning, to India, Asia, and the world, that “unless we discover the ties which unify us and endeavour to strengthen them, we are doomed.”[199]

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[192] Tagore, *Greater India*, p. 86.
[193] Tagore, *Greater India*, p. 91.
[194] Tagore, *Greater India*, p. 32.
[195] Alam and Chakravarty, *The Essential Tagore*, p. 142.
[196] Tagore, *Greater India*, p. 90.
[197] Tagore, *Personality*, pp. 167-168.
[198] Tagore, *The Spirit of Japan*, p. 35.
[199] Tagore, *Greater India*, p. 63.

In terms of a practical model from the past that India—and the world—could look to, Tagore pointed to India under Akbar the Great. Taking the title of a Tennyson poem about Akbar, Tagore called on Indians to achieve "Akbar's Dream"—a Subcontinent united through love. As Tagore explained, "Love is a unifying principle not a divisive one. Akbar's attempt at resolving all the religious differences by forging a bond of love was a unifying gesture."[200]

Yet, new hatreds were spreading, Tagore observed, and "the lack of love is so greatly felt in this country that people have become apprehensive and restless."[201] Tagore saw this particularly in what he called "the terrible animosity between the Hindus and the Moslems which is growing by the day."[202] Tagore attributed much of the Hindu-Muslim conflict to "our scant knowledge of each other. We live side by side and yet very often our worlds are entirely different."[203] British administration was playing a role because, Tagore explained, "the English policy lacks that ideal of love by which Akbar tried to unite fragmented India…laws and disciplinary measures cannot unite people; you need to enter into their hearts, understand their sufferings, and have to love them sincerely,—you need to approach them, hold their hands and unite them. Trying to restore peace solely by employing police force and handcuffs may vouch for overwhelming authority but that is not exactly what Akbar's dream was all about."[204] Tagore argued, "It is only through sympathetic understanding of each other's culture and social customs and conventions that we can create an atmosphere of peace and goodwill."[205] For India to succeed in the future and become a truly mighty nation, Tagore was adamant, it would have to reach out to the "Other" in love—exactly as Akbar did, in human to human relationships bringing together Indians of all religions and communities to fulfill their destiny and guide the people, nation, and the world to see each another as One. In the field of global race relations, for example, Tagore hoped India could "begin this wider work of racial reconciliation throughout the world."[206]

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[200] Sanyal, "The Englishmen and the Indians," p. 116.
[201] Sanyal, "The Englishmen and the Indians," p. 117.
[202] Sanyal, "The Englishmen and the Indians," p. 117.
[203] Quayum, "Rabindranath Tagore," p. 393.
[204] Sanyal, "The Englishmen and the Indians," p. 117.
[205] Quayum, "Rabindranath Tagore," p. 393.
[206] Mukherjee, *A Study of the Educational Thought and Experiment of Rabindranath Tagore*, p. 363.

Let us note here that Tagore saw in the US a similar potential to lead the world in forging unity in diversity. Like India, Tagore said, the US is "welding together into one body various races," and he explained, "In my country, we have been seeking to find out something common to all races, which will prove their real unity. No nation looking for a mere political or commercial basis of unity will find such a solution sufficient. Men of thought and power will discover the spiritual unity, will realize it, and preach it."[207] He described the US as a "country of expectation, desiring something else than what is"[208] which, unlike Europe, "is not pessimistic or blasé."[209] Tagore argued, "of all countries of the earth America has to be fully conscious of this future, her vision must not be obscured and her faith in humanity must be strong with the strength of youth."[210]

The Legacy and Urgency of Tagore

Looking at the present state of both India and the world, we are far from what we may call Tagore's Dream. Across the globe, nationalism has surged, and in India, Akbar has reportedly been removed entirely from the all-India undergraduate syllabus promulgated by the central government run by the ruling Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).[211]

Yet this is precisely the reason that Gurudev Tagore is needed today more than ever. For Bengalis, Tagore remains an incredibly important figure. Dr Shilpa Das Gupta, from West Bengal, India, and a senior official at American University in Washington DC, is the host of the *Ohh Folk* folktale storytelling podcast**.** When asked what Tagore means to her today she replied**,** "Rabindranath isn't just a poet I read or a melody I sang in school functions and local shows—he is the music behind my childhood memories, the scent of *Shiuli* (Coral jasmine) in my middle-class Bengali autumns of adolescence. He lives in my lullabies, celebrations, rebellions, beginnings, tears, and prayers. As someone who takes immense pride in being a Bengali by birth, I think, he is not just a heritage— he is bloodstream. And even today, in the chaos of reels and

[207] Tagore, *Nationalism*, p. 127.
[208] Tagore, *Nationalism*, p. 124.
[209] Tagore, *Nationalism*, p. 124.
[210] Tagore, *Nationalism*, pp. 126-127.
[211] "Prof. Irfan Habib addresses the AMU Community on 29 April 2025 at Arts Faculty Lounge," Samim Asgor Ali JNU, YouTube.com, April 29, 2025: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jio00bh6Bhc

hashtags, his words whisper to the new generation of Bengalis: to pause, to feel, to dream deeper. Rabindranath still knows how to speak to our wounds, in a language truer than time." Muslim Bengalis also continue to hold Tagore in deep reverence, as attested by these words by Dr. Tareque Mehdi of Bangladesh which were shared with us. Mehdi, founder of the Bangla Collective which connects the global Bengali community, stated, "Rabindranath Tagore is not just a writer; he is a polymath who has seamlessly bridged the past and the present in his writings and philosophy. His life-inspired writings remain just as relevant to me and today's generation because he captured those timeless human emotions and insights that continue to resonate across ages."

It is time for South Asia generally, the West, and the world to recover what Bengalis already appreciate—the greatness and relevance of Tagore for our fraught world. For Tagore's beloved India and the other nations of South Asia which have emerged after independence—Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka—Tagore presents a vision of unity and love both within and between nations. The independent status of the different countries should not prevent their governments and peoples from coming together in the cause of unity and forging better and closer relations. The stakes are high, as Tagore argued, "Either we shall be saved together, or drawn together into destruction."[212]

Then there is the importance of, as Tagore phrased it, the home and the world—the linkage of one's own native land with humanity and the unity of all. Like other Minglers, Tagore stressed that we need to think of the welfare of our "own" people and location and the world at the same time, because all are connected. Tagore's work is suffused with affection for Bengal—his song which serves as the national anthem of Bangladesh begins "I love you, my Bengal of gold"[213]—and for the world at large, for him there is no contradiction. As he explained, "Man has two aspects; on the one hand he is isolated and independent; on the other hand, he is related to all. To ignore any one of these aspects would be unreal."[214] "The problem the world over," he further observed, "is not how to become one through removing individual differences, but how to unite

[212] Mukherjee, *A Study of the Educational Thought and Experiment of Rabindranath Tagore*, p. 100.
[213] Alam and Chakravarty, *The Essential Tagore*, p. 330.
[214] Mukherjee, *A Study of the Educational Thought and Experiment of Rabindranath Tagore*, p. 182.

through preserving them"[215]—this means that the solution is "Neither the colourless vagueness of cosmopolitanism, nor the fierce self-idolatry of nation-worship."[216] Problems facing only "one's own nation" cannot be solved unless "the problem of the entire mankind is solved."[217] While we may fear the "Other" and the unknown, for example the world outside our home, Tagore wants us not to be afraid, but to know that in a profound way the world is our home. His perspective comes through clearly in these verses addressing the divine: "Thou hast made the distant near and made a brother of the stranger./ I am uneasy at heart when I have to leave my accustomed shelter, I forget that there abides the old in the new, and that there also thou abidest."[218]

One positive example and model Tagore gives of home meeting the world is the *mela* festivals of Bengal, whereupon small rural villages embrace the world at large. On such festive occasions, Tagore explained, "the village forgets its narrowness in a hospitable expansion of heart. Just as in the rains the water-courses are filled with water from the sky, so in *mela* time the village heart is filled with the spirit of the Universal…those who come to a *mela* are already in the open, holiday mood, for they have left plough and hoe and all cares behind."[219] However, they still retain, as the village, their own unique identity—as Tagore notes, "Personality, at the human level, can only be realized through locale, through the immediate culture and language and land to which one belongs."[220] This idea is evident in Tagore's Santiniketan school and his expressed hope: "Let the illusory geographical boundary lines vanish from at least one spot in India. Let the whole world settle there fully. Let our 'Santiniketan' be that spot."[221]

The *mela* and Santiniketan are examples of Tagore's central teaching that each people, culture, religion, nation, and civilization cultivates what it is to be human in their own particular way while reaching towards the universal. It is on this basis that people should be able to have dialogue and make their contribution to a global civilization, as all are reaching towards the same

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[215] Mukherjee, *A Study of the Educational Thought and Experiment of Rabindranath Tagore*, p. 61.
[216] Tagore, *Nationalism*, p. 15.
[217] Mukherjee, *A Study of the Educational Thought and Experiment of Rabindranath Tagore*, p. 100.
[218] Rabindranath Tagore, *Gitanjali (Song Offerings)* (London: Warbler Classics, 2021), p. 36.
[219] Tagore, *Greater India*, p. 11.
[220] Radice, "Introduction," p. 24.
[221] Mukherjee, *A Study of the Educational Thought and Experiment of Rabindranath Tagore*, p. 112.

unity. He stated, "every nation is a member of humanity, and each must render an account of what it has created for the weal of mankind. By the measure of such contribution does each nation gain its place."[222] The Sanskrit term used for civilization, *sabhyatā*, itself means "the state of being one with the many where there is light," and Tagore points out that "All great civilizations have been possible only where the streams of different cultures have mingled together."[223] Conversely, he believed that "Only one thing has been at the root of the decline of human civilizations, and that is the perversion of, or obstruction to, human relationship."[224]

Tagore felt that such a process of building global human relationships could be undertaken through literature, by encouraging world literature exchange,[225] as well as in political formations. He envisioned a world body which he believed could help bring humanity into "one nest," by creating what he called "a 'great federation of men…a unity, wider in range and deeper in sentiment, stronger in power than ever', where people of all races, religions, and cultures, East and West, would come together as 'residents of the common planet.'"[226] After all, he said, "the West is necessary to the East. We are complementary to each other because of our different outlooks upon life which have given us different aspects of truth."[227] Tagore expressed hope for what he described as "a grand field for the co-ordination of the cultures of the world where each will give to and take from the other."[228]

In an age of advances in technology such as AI, we also should heed Tagore's exhortation that modernity should be neither unquestionably embraced or applied in an unthinking way. As Tagore noted, "Modernism is not in the dress of nation, the Europeans...These are not modern, but merely European. True modernism is freedom of mind, not slavery of taste. It is independence of thought and action, not tutelage under European schoolmasters. It is science, but not its wrong application in life.[229] It is not, as Kipling asserted, East and West which can never

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[222] Tagore, *Greater India*, p. 29.
[223] Mukherjee, *A Study of the Educational Thought and Experiment of Rabindranath Tagore*, p. 365.
[224] Mukherjee, *A Study of the Educational Thought and Experiment of Rabindranath Tagore*, p. 136.
[225] See R. Radhakrishnan, "Between World and Home: Tagore and Goethe," *South Asian Review*, vol. 41, no. 3-4, 2020, pp. 226-242.
[226] Quayum, "Rabindranath Tagore," p. 398.
[227] Tagore, *Nationalism*, p. 26.
[228] Mukherjee, *A Study of the Educational Thought and Experiment of Rabindranath Tagore*, p. 370.
[229] Tagore, *The Spirit of Japan*, pp. 12-13.

truly meet, but humanity and technology which tears us away from our humanity, with Tagore writing, "Man is man, machine is machine,/ And never the twain shall meet."[230]

Tagore hoped that advances in science and technology could be used to benefit humanity in its ability to coexist with one another, and not to benefit only the narrow and selfish nation. He also made the point that independence from the West was not sufficient to be truly free, remarking, "political freedom does not give us freedom when our mind is not free…We must never forget in the present day that those people who have got their political freedom are not necessarily free, they are merely powerful."[231]

Ultimately, Tagore put perhaps his greatest emphasis on education as crucial for bringing people together. As he said, "The deepest source of all calamities in history is misunderstanding. For where we do not understand, we can never be just."[232] In his own time, he stated, "All the trouble that we see now-a-days is caused by this failure of East and West to come together. Bound to be near each other, and yet unable to be friends, is an intolerable situation between man and man, and hurtful withal."[233] Education is the true meeting point between East and West, and with his Visva-Bharati University, Tagore endeavored to bring people together through education. The goal was to attain what Tagore called "sympathetic knowledge" about each other,[234] and he affirmed, "Knowledge is the greatest factor in the unification of mankind."[235] It is also about love, establishing "the bond of love and friendship between man and man" in all our diversity.[236] He explained, "Education is…the breaking of the shackles of individual narrowness…The highest aim of education should be to help the realisation of the unity, but not of uniformity…A sound educational system should provide for the development of variety without losing the hold on the basic or spiritual unity."[237] All countries possessing what Tagore called true civilization, he contended, "extend free intellectual hospitality to the world through their universities."[238]

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[230] Mukherjee, *A Study of the Educational Thought and Experiment of Rabindranath Tagore*, p. 362.
[231] Tagore, *Nationalism*, p. 145.
[232] Tagore, *Creative Unity*, p. 172.
[233] Tagore, *Greater India*, p. 96.
[234] Tagore, *The Religion of Man*, p. 234.
[235] Mukherjee, *A Study of the Educational Thought and Experiment of Rabindranath Tagore*, p. 68.
[236] Mukherjee, *A Study of the Educational Thought and Experiment of Rabindranath Tagore*, p. 291.
[237] Quayum, "Rabindranath Tagore," p. 398.
[238] Mukherjee, *A Study of the Educational Thought and Experiment of Rabindranath Tagore*, p. 184.

"Civilisation must be judged and prized," he argued, "not by the amount of power it has developed, but by how much it has evolved and given expression to…the love of humanity."[239]

Tagore called on all of us to forge a new global civilization based not on nationalism with its militarism and "economical and political competition and exploitation," but on spirituality and love.[240] In the history of humanity, Tagore asserted, "men had to choose between fighting with one another and combining, between serving their own interest or the common interest of all."[241] Conflicts in the past in which different peoples were often geographically isolated from each other was one matter, but in the modern world, we cannot escape one another: "The races of mankind will never again be able to go back to their citadels of high-walled exclusiveness. They are today exposed to one another, physically and intellectually. The shells which have so long given them full security within their individual enclosures have been broken, and by no artificial process can they be mended again. So we have to accept this fact, even though we have not yet fully adapted our minds to this changed environment."[242]

The question was, as he saw it, "whether the different groups of peoples shall go on fighting with one another or find out some true basis of reconciliation and mutual help; whether it will be interminable competition or coöperation. 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…we have to prove our humanity by solving it through the help of our higher nature."[243]

Tagore was aware, living as he did in an age of national and global conflict and rapid social change brought on by modernization, of the tendency of people to dismiss those calling for love and coexistence as out of touch. He argued, "I know what a risk one runs from the vigorously athletic crowds to be styled an idealist in these days, when thrones have lost their dignity and

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[239] Tagore, *Sādhanā*, p. 111.
[240] Tagore, *Personality*, p. 218.
[241] Tagore, *Nationalism*, p. 120.
[242] Tagore, *The Religion of Man*, p. 157.
[243] Tagore, *Nationalism*, p. 121.

prophets have become an anachronism."[244] Nevertheless, the difficult situation of the world made him even that much more motivated to promote global love and unity as the only solution. We can all do our part, including on a small scale: "If we succeed in igniting a genuine spark of fire among those who are around us, then that fire shall progress in carrying its own flag of fame…Never trust in numbers or in quantity. Truth, even though small in amount, conquers the world."[245]

With an optimism driven by his faith, Tagore hoped for a "new world" in which humanity will live in friendship, a world where "power becomes ashamed to occupy its throne and is ready to make way for love,"[246] a world which "basks in the open sunlight of mind and breathes life's free air."[247] Tagore dreams of a "heaven of freedom," "Where the mind is without fear…Where knowledge is free…Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls."[248] Only if we can move forward, "discarding languor, breaking old habits, opening one's eyes to the world, can our vision break free of its confinements and our soul be reborn, to feel the touch of the spirit that animates the universe."[249]

Let us conclude with a prayer for universal peace by Tagore that we may achieve this world through embracing the unity of all and thus be filled with life, joy, healing, and prosperity: "O giver of thyself!...Give us strength to love, to love fully, our life in its joys and sorrows, in its gains and losses, in its rise and fall. Let us have strength enough fully to see and hear thy universe, and to work with full vigour therein. Let us fully live the life thou hast given us, let us bravely take and bravely give…We would pray to thee to let the irresistible current of thy universal energy come like the impetuous south wind of spring, let it come rushing over the vast field of the life of man, let it bring the scent of many flowers, the murmurings of many woodlands, let it make sweet and vocal the lifelessness of our dried-up soul-life. Let our newly awakened powers cry out for unlimited fulfilment in leaf and flower and fruit."[250]

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[244] Tagore, *Nationalism*, p. 113.
[245] Mukherjee, *A Study of the Educational Thought and Experiment of Rabindranath Tagore*, p. 132.
[246] Tagore, *Nationalism*, p. 61.
[247] Tagore, *The Religion of Man*, p. 163.
[248] Tagore, *Gitanjali (Song Offerings)*, p. 19.
[249] Alam and Chakravarty, *The Essential Tagore*, p. 764.
[250] Tagore, *Sādhanā*, p. 134.

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