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# Description of Module

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<td>Prerequisites</td>
<td>Indian Nationalism, Colonialism, Swadeshi Movement, Caste and Indian Society</td>
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<td>To study the complex features of Indian Nationalism ,Tagore's critique of Nationalism and his ideas of Swadeshi Samaj</td>
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Tagore's Swadeshi Samaj and Critique of 'Nation'

1. Introduction: Tagore and his Ideas on the Nation and Nationalism

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) the youngest son of Debendranath Tagore, was educated at home. He was sent to England for formal education at the age of seventeen but he did not finish his studies there. Apart from his artistic and literary pursuits, he managed the family estates and this contributed to his interest in rural life around him and induced in him a zeal for social reforms. He started an experimental school at Shantiniketan where he tried out his Upanishadic ideals of education. This school is the present day Visva Bharati. He also started the project of rural reconstruction at Sriniketan. To give shape to his ideas of rural reconstruction, Tagore started a new type of school meant mainly for the children of neighbouring villages, who would contribute their knowledge for the welfare of the village community. 'Siksha-Satra' was set up at Santiniketan in 1924, but in 1927 shifted to Sriniketan. Tagore was a close friend of Mahatma Gandhi but differed with him on ideas of Nationalism and the Swadeshi movement. Tagore was knighted by the ruling British Government in 1915, but within a few years he gave up his knighthood in protest against the mass killing at Jalianwala Bagh.

After his initial involvement in the Swadeshi movement centring round the partition of Bengal in 1905, Rabindranath Tagore gradually moved away from the mainstream of nationalist politics around 1907. Tagore conceived of nationalism as an ideology that served the ‘instrumental end’ of power manifesting itself in the anti-human aspect of modern nation-states and therefore he critiqued the same from multiple spiritual, aesthetic and political positions. Although the terms state, nation and nation-state are often used interchangeably, state refers to a geographical area with a sovereign government while nation refers to a people bound by commonality of history, customs, value, language, culture, nation-state through a certain operation of power forcibly aligns the nation with the state and interprets the hyphen between state and nation as a chain,¹ artificially connecting the abstract idea of a nation with state machinery. Through many lectures and writings on this issue Tagore rejected key constitutive machineries and elements of the nation-state such as territory, sovereignty and governmental power. He built his thesis of transcendence from the political to the moral realm which could alleviate the suffering and oppression imposed on the Indian masses by the modern state. During his visit to Japan and the US in

1916-17 Tagore delivered a series of lectures strongly criticizing nationalism which was later published under the title *Nationalism*, subdivided into three sections: 'Nationalism in Japan', 'Nationalism in the West' and 'Nationalism in India'. For Tagore, 'nation' and 'nation-state' were mental constructs. According to Tagore:

Nationalism is a great menace. It is the particular thing which for years has been at the bottom of India's troubles. And in as much as we have been ruled and dominated by a nation that is strictly political in its attitude, we have tried to develop within ourselves, despite our inheritance from the past, a belief in our eventual political destiny.²

He differentiated between the idea of 'nation' in the West and the idea of 'society' in Indian history. According to him, the society or community reigned supreme in India. For Tagore a nation was 'the political and economic union of a people' organized for 'a mechanical purpose'.³ Tagore said that a nation could not be equated with an ‘ethnic’ or linguistic group because nation as a concept was distinctively modern and exclusively western. The nation was equated with the state as 'the organized self-interest of a whole people' which was least human and spiritual. This is why Tagore felt the need to replace the ideology of the nation with that of a *swadeshi samaj*, based on social relationships which would not be mechanical. In Tagore’s view, the Nation as an externally aggressive and competitive entity stood for the negation of freedom. It needs to be mentioned that Tagore’s “Swadeshi Samaj” connects *desh* as a region to *desh* as a Nation reflecting the intersection and interplay between *samaj* and *desh*. This provides the foundation for thinking of ‘Bharatvarsha’ as *swadesh* and *samaj* ⁴ or a larger community of people bound by common history and culture.

For Tagore like many critics of Nationalism this term connotes ‘Eastern countries oppressed by the West’. It is pertinent to examine Tagore’s criticism of Nationalism as responsible for all negative consequences of globalization and post-colonialism in Asian countries. Tagore’s ideas on Nationalism draw a clear distinction between the nation as nation-state with its machinery of coercion on the one hand and society as a representation of a life-world on the other. The nation-state is hostile to the true

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social man’ and therefore peaceful human existence is disturbed by the conflict between the state and the spiritual life-world of the social man

Tagore was often misunderstood as being ambivalent in his stand towards the British Empire because he did not necessarily reject everything that was western. Tagore’s philosophical critique of nationalism was firmly grounded in his critical reading of Indian traditions, the influence of his Brahma inheritance, and of the Upanishads on his ideas. The Tagore-Gandhi debates become a historical source for understanding Tagore’s unique idea of nationalism. As Ashish Nandy says, Tagore’s critique of Nationalism is also his critique of modernity and its various manifestations. Nandy also makes a note of Tagore’s capacity for making a distinction between nationalism, anti-imperialism, and patriotism, particularly at a time when these three ideas were synonymous for many national leaders of his time. At a time when there was confusion between the ideals of Nationalism and that of patriotism Tagore was able to make a distinction between the two. Tagore’s much discussed novel Gora problematizes this paradox of nationalism and patriotism and indicates that the nation is betrayed by the existing social order of orthodoxy. Rather, patriotism and its ideals can be realized by transcending the binaries of the East and the West through embracing the characteristics of a ‘Universal Man’.6

2. Indian Nationalism:

Tagore questioned all forms of western nationalism; for nationalism and nation-states seemed to him a great menace, a ‘geographical monster’. He did not approve of Indian nationalism being caught in a situation where the idea of nation-state would supersede that of Indian society and civilization. Tagore therefore emphasized that the core of Indian civilization must be sought in her villages. Tagore insisted that the uniqueness of the Indian civilization was reflected in the community life of the village, in its ability to ‘harmonize the disparate’. According to Tagore, ‘Our real problem in India is not political. It is social. This is a condition not only prevailing in India, but among all nations. I do not believe in an exclusive political interest’.7 The genesis of these ideas can be found in 1901 when Tagore wrote two consecutive articles (both published in Bangadarshan) on the idea of Nation: ‘Atmoshakti —Nation ki’ 8 .Tagore firmly believed that India never had Nationalism and Asian societies had borrowed the idea of

nationalism from the European paradigm. His novels such as *The Home and the World* and *Four Chapters* reflect his conviction that nationalism is only an organization of ‘politics and commerce’. By 1910 Tagore had moved away from nationalism to embrace ‘world humanism’.

Tagore’s ideas of nationalism had an impact on Gandhi and Nehru and found expression in their theory of inclusive nationalism which could conceive of a world of equal rights for its citizens and ‘equitable relations with all the countries and peoples of the world’ after it recovered from the horrors of colonial rule. Thus Indian Nationalism would be inclusive outside its borders and unlike other nationalisms would, after the British left India, have possibilities of overlooking the sufferings produced by colonialism. While generating an internal critique of Indian society particularly with reference to its caste system, Tagore emphasized that driving out the British from the country would not cleanse the social order until India opened herself up to the social accommodation of outcastes. Expelling other cultures or the cultural ‘other’ would be against India’s own history and therefore the nationalistic agenda of ousting the British out of the country would affect the positive possibilities of the colonial encounter.

Tagore made a clear distinction between Nation as a mental construct where there was minimal contact with state power, and society, the determining agency particularly in oriental communities rooted in the village. Therefore Tagore turned to the idea of rural re-construction which could uphold the life of the community and thereby contribute to the development of the nation. Thus for him religious unity and territorialisation of national boundaries were part of statist politics and policies which had no consequence for imagining the nation. In September 1916 Tagore travelled to Seattle, Chicago, and Philadelphia and delivered his critique of Nationalism and materialism which generated a lot of hostility. In 1921 he met Romain Rolland in Paris and shared a mutual vision of internationalism and subsequently laid stress on the notion of Asian solidarity when he travelled to China in 1924. As expressed by Barucha “he is a profoundly anti-nationalist nationalitarian, whose universality cannot be collapsed into political internationalism, still less into globalism”

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11 Ibid.56

12 Rustom Bharucha, *Another Asia: Rabindranath Tagore & Okakura Tenshin*, 2009, New Delhi, Oxford University Press. p. 110
3. Swadeshi Samaj

Tagore believed that Indian society had survived countless convulsions from time immemorial. Tagore developed these ideas more fully in a seminal paper called 'Swadeshi Samaj' (1904), or the ‘Self-sufficient Society’ where he raised very important issues – at once social, political, and moral. Tagore said that in the history of western civilization, the life of the people had always been controlled by the state, in ancient Greece and Rome and also in the modern European societies. But in the Orient, in China and India, for example, society and not state, had been the determining agency. He sought to replace the ideology of the nation with the idea of swadeshi samaj, samaj as a mediator between jati and desh. In Tagore’s words-

What is this Nation? A nation, in the sense of the political and economic union of a people, is that aspect which a whole population assumes when organized for a mechanical purpose. Society as such has no ulterior purpose. It is an end in itself. It is a spontaneous self-expression of man as a social relationship, so that men can develop ideals of life in cooperation with one another. It has also a political side, but this is only for a special purpose. It is for self-preservation. It is merely the side of power, not of human ideals.13

This privileging of the idea of ‘social’ over the political construction of ‘nation’ as an instrument of self-preservation was compatible with a liberal notion of communitarian well-being that had emerged in India in the late nineteenth century. This idea of communitarian well-being remained at the heart of Tagore’s inspirational hope of emerging into a free nation, which was not necessarily an emergence into a nation-state. For Tagore the elements of fear, mutual suspicion, and un-freedom lay at the root of the nation-state and its organization of power. He believed that it was possible to conceive of societies without a nation-state.

While imagining a new ‘swadeshi samaj’ Tagore was also in search of new art forms beyond mimicry of the West and the revival of indigenous art forms like the jatra. His new theory of theatre was formulated in his essay ‘Rangamancha’ where he also critiqued western realism and suggested a return to the indigenous Indian cultural traditions.14 While ideas of nationalism were influenced by literature, especially the eighteenth and nineteenth century novel in the in the West, Tagore was never enthusiastic

14 Abhijit Sen, 'In Search of a New Language for Theatre', India Perspectives Vol 24, No. 2/2010, p.38
about the dominant ideology of the Nation there. Tagore emphasized that the soul of Indian civilization lay in Indian villages, which were not merely places where people lived but were the core of the basic value-system in Indian culture. Villages in India have always sought to achieve total self-sufficiency in all basic needs – health, food, education, recreation and creativity. Thus in Tagore’s view villages had a life and world of their own and did not need intervention from the state. Tagore argued that it was the village that constituted the essence of Indian culture in ‘its ability to harmonize the disparate’.15 This view of an inclusive society constituted Tagore’s philosophy of rural reconstruction which he sought to implement in his Sriniketan project.

Tagore’s ideas of an inclusive nation-building project had village reconstruction as its most critical mission. Following the idea of Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948), Tagore believed that rural reconstruction needed absolute commitment to the cultivation of love and neighbourliness, restraint and sacrifice, self-help and hard labour through *atmashakti*. It needs to be noted that Tagore did not appreciate the role of modern technology in reconstructing the village. However, as reflected in his draft on ‘Swadeshi Samaj’, through his appeal to the people to elect a leader for their organization, he acknowledged the role of the liberal-democratic process and organization. Tagore suggested means and methods to develop economic self-sufficiency, one of which was to hold ‘Swadeshi melas’ where most of the people of the villages would come together overcoming their differences, keeping petty political issues out of the process of emancipation of the villages. It is an established fact that the poet had called ‘for the acceptance of a radical social programme against the divisive forces of caste, creed, poverty, and alienation between the elite and the masses’ and was keen to implement the principle of cooperation that existed in ancient Indian villages.16 But he sought to combine the principle of cooperation with that of *atmashakti* (self-reliance).17

Tagore believed that in order to recreate a *Swadeshi Samaj*, it was not enough to spin the ‘charkha’ as a solution to India’s problems. In the essay ‘The Cult of the Charkha’, Tagore mentioned that it was much more important to organize the people for the purpose of *Swaraj*. He was against the boycott of foreign goods and the ritualistic exhibition of burning them in public. For him such practices were not necessarily

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15 He explained it in great detail in 'Bharatbarsha Itihaser Dhara', or 'The Course of History in India' (*Prabasi*, 1319 B.S., Baishakh: 423-451), and in other essays,


patriotic gestures, but rather indicative of a frenzied people confused by the violent ideology of nationalism.

4. Tagore’s Critique of the Concept of 'Nation':

Tagore was categorical in his critique of the organized attempts of western nation-states at disciplining and wielding power over nature and human beings. He contrasted these endeavours with India’s attempt to practice a ‘contemplative life’ which had ‘for its object nothing less than the realization of the Infinite’\(^{18}\), which presents a moral economy of self-making. Tagore used words of moral reprimand for Western nation-states. He declared that when the big Western nations would be summoned on the Day of Judgment to explain their riches, they would not, in the face of tragedies enacted in History, be able to accept their progress and prosperity as well-deserved.\(^{19}\)

Tagore sought to realize the ‘completeness in the social and spiritual ideals’ embedded in Indian philosophical thought and this quest also governed his thoughts on the symbolism of the charka versus the incidences of blood-letting and killing. As far as spinning the charka is concerned, Tagore was critical of the iconography associated with it which went against the spirit of the cultivation of self-knowledge. Tagore was wary of the subjugation of a people to a system created through violence and this was the basis of his critique of Indian Nationalism. Therefore, in Tagore’s terms neither through uncritical rejection of western modernity nor through a straitjacketed acceptance of Indian tradition can Indians decolonize themselves. It is only through universalism that one can transcend the mechanical realization of freedom. While generating an internal critique of the Indian society particularly with reference to its caste system Tagore emphasizes that driving out the British from the country will not cleanse the social order until India herself opens up herself to the social accommodation of outcastes.

5. Conclusion:

Therefore, Tagore believed that there should not be wholesale rejection of the west. Rather, Indians should try to synthesise the best virtues of both. Tagore believed that interaction between cultures would propel the world towards harmony and global fellowship, through the appropriation of Santam, Sivam,

\(^{18}\) Rabindranath Tagore Omnibus, 2005, Vol.4 New Delhi, Rupa and Co. pp 82-3

\(^{19}\) Rabindranath Tagore, ‘Charka’ in Kalantar (In Bengali) (1925) 1986, Calcutta,Visva-Bharati, p. 634.
and Advaitam, principles he borrowed from the Upanishads. Elucidating this three-fold ideology, in a letter to Charles Andrews, sent from Kashmir, Tagore observed:

> The first stage towards freedom is the Santam, the true peace, which can be attained by subduing self; the next stage is the Sivam, the true goodness, which is the activity of the soul when self is subdued; and then the Advaitam, the love, the oneness with all and with God. Of course this division is merely logical; these stages, like rays of light, may be simultaneous or divided according to the circumstances, and their order may be altered, such as the Sivam leading to Santam. But all we must know is that the Santam, Sivam, Advaitam, is the only goal for which we live and struggle. (Letters 50)

In a poem entitled 'The Sunset of the Century,' written on the last day of the nineteenth century, Tagore indicts nationalism as a source of war and carnage.

> The last sun of the century sets amidst the blood-red clouds of the West and the whirlwind of hatred. The naked passion of the self-love of Nations, in its drunken delirium of greed, is dancing to the clash of steel and howling verses of vengeance. The hungry self of the Nation shall burst in a violence of fury from its shameless feeding. For it has made the world its food. And licking it, crunching it and swallowing it in big morsels…

It is not nationalism, but the issue of caste that India should address and strive to resolve her ‘burden of heterogeneity’ and the contradictions that defeat the spirit of the Indian social fabric. In his short story ‘Purification’ Tagore examines the loopholes of Gandhiji’s Satyagraha movement and the selfishness

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21 Rabindranath Tagore, Letters to a Friend. (Rabindranath Tagore’s Letters to C.F. Andrews.) (1928) 2002. New Delhi, Rupa..


23 N 80, ll. 1-5. Quoted in Ibid.
inherent in the project of nationalism.\textsuperscript{24} Tagore in fact believed in \textit{Ahimsa} and found it difficult to accept the violence and frenzy involved in the burning of all foreign goods as symbolic of non-cooperation with the British.

In Tagore’s words,

The Nation, with all its paraphernalia of power and prosperity, its flags and pious hymns, its blasphemous prayers in the churches, and the literary mock thunders of its patriotic bragging, cannot hide the fact that the Nation is the greatest evil for the Nation, that all its precautions are against it, and any new birth of its fellow in the world is always followed in its mind by the dread of a new peril.\textsuperscript{25}

Tagore focussed on the limits and perils of the nationalist discourse. He analysed it in terms of an embedded evil which got reflected in a complex of deficits: deficits of knowledge, custom, and human character that called for a total correction of life itself which Tagore articulated in his anti-nationalist, anti-revolutionary novel, \textit{The Home and the World} (1915). The inevitable fallibilities of the nationalist ideology and the desire for freedom seem incompatible. In the context of the Japanese people’s submission to their government Tagore says-

The people accept this all-pervading mental slavery with cheerfulness and pride because of their nervous desire to turn themselves into a machine of power, called the Nation, and emulate other machines in their collective worldliness. \textsuperscript{26}

Tagore’s persistent critique of the external forces that affect the sense of belonging to the national identity in a rigid and mechanical manner only marks a set of external conflicts. Tagore described such conflicts in this manner,

The conflict between the individual and the state, labour and capital, the man and the woman; the conflict between the greed of the material gain and the spiritual life of man, the organized selfishness of

\textsuperscript{24}Mohammad A. Quayum  \textit{www.mukto mona.com/.../mohammad_quayum/Tagore_Nationalism.pdf} visited on 2.3.2014

\textsuperscript{25} N:42

\textsuperscript{26} N:38-9.
nations and the higher ideals of humanity (...) all these have to be brought to a harmony in a manner not yet dreamt of.27

Tagore tried to expose the illegitimacy and irrelevance of the idea of the nation particularly in oriental societies. He advocated an artistic freedom that transcended the limits of a merely material existence. It needs to be mentioned that Tagore and Gandhi, who otherwise had great respect for each other differed in their views on nationalism and in their vision for independent India. Tagore did not approve of Gandhiji’s method in the Non-Cooperation movement and maintained that there was a thin line between nationalism and xenophobia. Besides, hatred of the foreigner could later turn into a hatred of Indians different from oneself.28 C.F. Andrews who was a common friend to both Tagore and Gandhi commented that the two had “a difference of temperament so wide that it was extremely difficult to arrive at a common intellectual standing, though the moral ties of friendship remained entirely unbroken...”29 While Gandhiji envisioned the future of India in non-violence and suppression of bodily desire, Tagore linked it to the embrace of the creative sensuousness of the body reflected in art, which would transcend narrow differences of caste, gender and race. Tagore’s difference with Gandhiji on the character of the Non-cooperation movement as a collective movement may be interpreted as Tagore’s insistence on the uniqueness of the individual which necessarily cannot be merged with the collective. For Tagore, neither the ‘vagueness’ of cosmopolitanism nor the ‘fierce self-idolatory’ of nationalism can be the goal of human history.30

27 N, 72-3