

Revisiting Rabindranath Tagore's Critique of Nationalism in Light of Hindutva's Rise in India

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Abstract

This article analyses Rabindranath Tagore's critique of nationalism in the context of Hindutva politics in India. It identifies three key issues on which Tagore disagreed with the neo-Hindu nationalist tendencies that swept Bengal in the aftermath of its partition in 1905. The article argues that the cultural nationalism endorsed by the swadeshi leaders drew upon such ideologies which also lie at the heart of Hindutva politics. Tagore's disagreement with his contemporary nationalist milieu could therefore be applied to understand the present context as he disagreed with the ideas which inform both the Hindutva as well as the swadeshi narratives. Discussing the symbolic importance of Bharat Mata, the question of religious/ ethnic identity and the role of education in forging such identities, the paper shows Tagore's contentions with these lay at the heart of his 'alternative politics.' By historicising Tagore as a deeply political figure, the paper demonstrates that his vision of inclusive politics is the much-needed counter narrative to the exclusionary and narrow designs of Hindutva.

Introduction

'I have no mother, no father, no country, no caste, no name, no family gotra, no deity... Today I have become an Indian... In me there is no hostility towards any community, Hindu, Muslim or Christian. Today, I belong to every community of this Bharatvarsha, I accept everybody's food as mine.'
(Rabindranath Tagore, 1909).'

The above excerpt is from Rabindranath Tagore's novel *Gora* (1909) which hints at absolving all the ethnic cultural markers of identity in becoming a true Indian. In this article I draw parallels between two historical events in India: Tagore's critique of the

nationalism that emerged in the aftermath of swadeshi agitation in Bengal, and the steady rise of Hindutva politics since the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992. This exercise is designed to understand the ways in which these moments speak to each other in profound ways and inform India's present-day politics. This is, however, not to suggest in any way that the destruction of the Masjid marks the birth of Hindu nationalism, as the latter had its roots in pre-independent India with the founding of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh upon the initiatives of Keshav Baliram Hedgewar (1889-1940) and V.D. Savarkar (1883-1966).¹ I draw on the example of Babri Masjid as a watershed event in India's history, which demonstrates with clarity the consequences of political mobilizations along religious lines.

I begin by situating Tagore within the historiography of nationalism and identifying his specific critique of the idea. Discussing in some detail the issues which constituted the fault-line between Tagore and the Bengali nationalist intelligentsia (who led the swadeshi agitation in Bengal), I argue that Tagore's critique of the nationalist movement and its ideology can be transported to the present scenario quite seamlessly. It might appear to be an ambitious claim at the outset, but in my ensuing discussion I draw on the specifics of the two historical moments that I mention above to make a plausible and intelligible argument. This article is by no means a commentary on Tagore's political philosophy but an engagement with a specific historical context which was foundational in the formulation of his critique of nationalism. Tagore's contentions with the nationalist movement were hinged on the issues which are central to the politics of Hindutva. This is what this article explores.

As I discuss the development of each trend and highlight Tagore's disagreement with them, I also draw parallels to show how the Hindutva narrative is woven around the specific ideas that Tagore disagreed with. In the final section, I will discuss the alternatives that Tagore proposed to the idea of nationalism and whether or not the remedies he outlined are helpful for us in thinking about the present socio-political scenario and addressing our present concerns.

Tagore's Anti-nationalist Stance

¹ See Christophe Jafferlot ed. *Hindu Nationalism A Reader* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 16.

This article opened with an eloquent passage from *Gora* which captures what it was to be an Indian according to Tagore. The plot of Tagore's novel, which derives its name from the protagonist Gora, speaks to wider debates of contemporary relevance. Being a young man's quest for universal harmony and unity, Gora inserts itself, as polemic instance, into the debate about the nation, the debate about religious practice and the basis of faith and the debate about the purpose of political action and of social reform.² At the beginning of the novel, the central character Gora is seen to be fervently anti British and endorsing a Hindu way of life with its attendant prejudices and prohibitions as an expression of his devout love for the nation: his nationalism. At the end of the novel, Gora becomes aware of his Irish descent and the facade of his orthodox Hindu nationalism is torn apart. He emerges as the symbol of the unity that Tagore envisaged for an independent India where differences of caste, class, religious differences and ethnicities were dissolved for the purposes of embracing humanity. Through the plot of this novel Tagore achieves two things. Firstly, he anticipates the antecedent Hindutva ideology founded upon defining not only a race but a whole nation in religious terms. Secondly, he penned a critical response to this emerging tendency which was clearly visible in the ranks of the Bengali political leadership following the partition of the province in 1905.

The most persuasive account of his critique appeared in Tagore's essay 'Nationalism' which was published in 1917 by the Macmillan Company. Being true to his commitment to humanity, Tagore proclaimed 'for the sake of humanity we must stand up and give warning to all, that this nationalism is a cruel epidemic of evil that is sweeping over the human world of the present age, and eating into its moral vitality.'³ Tagore had previously published various tracts, essays as well as novels, containing his ideas of desh, jati, samaj and swadesh suggesting alternatives to counter the evil force of nationalism.⁴ These were published in the early years of the twentieth century up until the end of the First World War in 1919, a period which historian Dipesh Chakrabarty has identified as a period in Indian history dominated by cultural nationalism. This period was characterised by ideas and debates revolving around the

² See Supriya Chaudhuri, 'The Nation and Its Fictions: History and Allegory in Tagore's *Gora*,' *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 35, no. 1 (2012): 97-117.

³ Rabindranath Tagore, *Nationalism* (London: Macmillan, 1917), 16.

⁴ Among others the prominent essays of Tagore on the topics include: 'Nation ki?' (1901), 'Swadeshi Samaj' (1904), 'Aboshtha o Byaboshtha' (1905). These can be found in his collected works entitled *Rabindra Rachanabali volumes I-XXVII (1939-65) Volume XXVIII (1995)*. Calcutta: Visva Bharati.

establishment of India's cultural and spiritual superiority over the West. The form that this nationalism took was different from political nationalism of the later years which focused primarily on elections, questions of representation in the government, and suffrage.⁵

The partition of Bengal was announced in 1903 by Lord Curzon, who was the Governor General of Bengal at the time. It was brought into effect in 1905 which officially marked the launch of the swadeshi movement. According to Tagore's eldest son, Rabindranath Tagore

'took an effective part in the agitation that followed the partition of Bengal. It almost appeared as if one day he emerged out of his seclusion to become overnight the high priest of Indian nationalism. In songs and poems and in trenchant addresses on the public platforms he bitterly attacked Curzon's policy of divide and rule. At the same time, he made a powerful appeal to the people to stand together – self-respecting and self-reliant. He gave a new orientation to the traditional Rakhi-bandhan and under his inspiration the wrist band of coloured thread became the symbol of undying unity in Bengal.'⁶

Some of the patriotic songs composed by Tagore during this time were, *Banglar Mati Banglar Jol*, *Bidhir badhon katbe tumi emni saktiman* and *Ekla cholo re* in the spirit of forging brotherhood among the people of Bengal. About Tagore's contributions to the movement Sumit Sarkar observes that the proposition of the Rakhi-bandhan ceremony alongside the composition of patriotic songs would endure in public memory even if all else about the Swadeshi movement is forgotten.⁷ The swadeshi movement represents the high point of cultural nationalism which focused on three key issues. First was the replacement of the colonial state machinery and the British nation with an indigenous one. The second was a consolidation of specific identities to serve as the basis for political mobilization and creating a mass base for the nationalist agitation. The third was a system of education which gave primacy to sacred texts that served as the basis for legitimizing political actions. Despite Tagore's participation in this moment of cultural nationalism, these were the three central themes upon which

⁵ Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Harper Lecture: The Civilizational Roots of Indian Democracy.' Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UX31U50-1pQ&t=229s>.

⁶ Rabindranath Tagore, *On The Edges of Time* (Kolkata: Orient Longman, 1958), 71. Rabindranath Tagore was the eldest son of Rabindranath Tagore and Mrinalini Devi. He was born in November, 1888 at the Tagore residence in Jorasanko of erstwhile Calcutta.

⁷ Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India 1885-1947* (United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan, 1989), 47-48.

he disagreed with the Bengali nationalists and the bhadralok intelligentsia who were the principal architects of the swadeshi agitation in Bengal.

The Symbolic Importance of Bharat Mata

The first motive of cultural nationalism was to establish the spiritual/cultural superiority of India as the basis of carving out an independent Indian nation state. The image of the *Bharat Mata* (Mother India) became central to this imagination of India which was meant to replace the colonial state machinery. Sumathi Ramaswamy's work has dealt at length with the mother goddess and her curious entanglement with the Indian nation's attempt to create a visible and tangible form for over a century, starting from the 1880s.⁸ What is crucial to note however, is that *Bharat Mata* has been appropriated and re-appropriated, imagined and re-imagined in multiple ways and forms as 'the substantial embodiment of national territory' and 'also as a powerful rallying symbol in its long hard struggle for independence.'⁹ *Bharat Mata* was originally painted by Abanindranath Tagore in 1905 in the historical context of the swadeshi agitation in Bengal. Modelled along the image of a Bengali woman, she was a deity with a halo around her head, clad in austere saffron. Her four hands offered the four gifts of education-wisdom-food-clothing to her children. The historical significance of this painting lies in the fact that it inspired the conceptualization of the nation as a mother. The imagination of the nation as a goddess was popularized in the nationalist writings of Bankimchandra Chatterjee, Aurobindo Ghose and Bipin Chandra Pal, of whom the latter two were prominent swadeshi leaders in Bengal.

Additionally, a prominent part of this movement, dating back to the late nineteenth century, was the rise of a band of gurus who emerged in Bengal. Notable among them were Sri Ramakrishna Paramhansa and the most revered nationalist guru, Swami Vivekananda. Their prestige emanated from endorsing rural folk idioms as distinct from Western education. They claimed indigenous authenticity alongside promoting *tantric*¹⁰ traditions in public intellectual life. The tantric conceptualisation of the feminine (Shakti) aspect of the divine as immanent to the phenomenal world, led

⁸ Sumathi Ramaswamy, *The Goddess and the Nation Mapping Mother India* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010).

⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹⁰ See Andrew Sartori, 'Beyond Culture Contact and Colonial Discourse: "Germanism" in Colonial Bengal,' *Modern Intellectual History* 4, No.1 (2007): 77-93.

to the understanding of the 'Divine Mother' as an embodiment of the spiritual in the material world and became central to the imagination of an independent nation as *Bharat Mata*.¹¹ It is to this idea that the Hindu nationalist ideas of Bankimchandra, Bipin and Aurobindo contributed to. This led to the subordination of the scientific-geographic to the anthropomorphic-sacred idea of the nation.¹² This was central for making Indians particularly devoted to the service of their nation as sons and daughters of *Bharat Mata*. Political actions, which included the use of revolutionary techniques, violent modes of agitation and boycott of government institutions were justified in the name of rescuing the body of the mother that was endangered and under threat from foreign invasion and domination.

Tagore was against the idea of an Indian nation in particular and the idea of nations in general. He wrote:

'I am not against one nation in particular, but against the general idea of all nations. What is the Nation? It is the aspect of a whole people as an organized power. This organization incessantly keeps up the insistence of the population on becoming strong and efficient. But this strenuous effort after strength and efficiency drains man's energy from his higher nature where he is self-sacrificing and creative. For thereby man's power of sacrifice is diverted from his ultimate object, which is moral, to the maintenance of this organization, which is mechanical.'¹³

Tagore did not conform to the idea of a nation, as he saw it as an abstraction, an idea imported from the West which made little sense in the understanding of the Indian context. His vision was that of swadesh, a creatively engineered enterprise in which all sections of the Indian people had an active role to play. They brought their specific contributions which were diverse in scope and intent to put together a swadesh, which was not merely a land in which one is born but a place which emerges out of active human efforts and interventions. He denounced the violent modes of protest carried out for the sake of *Bharat Mata* as mere 'fireworks which have only splendour but no permanence.' He focused instead on lighting the humble lamp of one's home, which would be the first step towards gaining sustainable independence of any kind. The negative programmes of boycott, the spectre of foreign cloths being burnt did not

¹¹ See *Ibid.*, 84.

¹² Ramaswamy (2010).

¹³ Rabindranath Tagore, *Nationalism* (London: Macmillan, 1917), 28.

appeal to Tagore as he saw them to be consumed by negativity which diverted attention from doing constructive work for the swadesh.

Today we observe a similar attempt where the liberal, secular and democratic framework of the nation has come under attack and is sought to be replaced by a *Hindu Rashtra*. V.D. Savarkar's book *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?* written in the early 1920s, contained the first clear exposition of the *Hindu Rashtra* (Hindu Nation) based on the cultural identity of Hindutva as distinct from Hinduism. As a proclaimed atheist, Savarkar was of the opinion that religion was one aspect of the Hindu identity. Therefore, the most sacred element of his Hindu nation was the territory of *Aryavarta* as described in the Vedic texts followed by the purity of race and the sanctity of language. *Hindu Rashta* thus, was the holy land of the Hindus who descended from 'Vedic fathers' and who spoke in puritan Sanskrit or its derivative Hindi. 'Hindi-Hindu-Hindustan' hence became the three pillars of Hindutva.¹⁴ As the Indian identity for Savarkar is epitomized by Hindutva, the majority community became the embodiment of the nation because not only were they the largest in terms of number but also because they were the oldest. It strikes at the root of India's diversity, marked by the presence of various religious, linguistic and ethnic communities. It thrives on the politics of othering, particularly of Muslims and other communities, automatically rendering non-affiliates of Hindutva as 'outsiders' who are expected to 'pay allegiance to Hindu symbols' in the public domain even as they are 'allowed to worship their own Gods or follow their own rituals in their private lives.'¹⁵ The imagination of this abstract entity called the *Hindu Rashtra* derives its basis from the historical imagination of the nation as the mother or the goddess, i.e., *Bharat Mata*. This discourse is then popularized, normalized and converted into the act of producing and reproducing the nation on an everyday basis through slogans like *Bharat Mata ki Jay!* (Victory to Mother India). The superimposition of a particular religion, culture, language and territory is the unfailing recipe of ethnic nationalism that Hindutva spearheads. Unprecedented violence is unleashed upon those who wish to identify with their country in ways that are not absorbed within this narrative of who is an Indian or more narrowly who is a Hindu.

¹⁴ See Christophe Jafferlot ed. *Hindu Nationalism A Reader* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 15.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

Tagore abhorred this kind of ethnic nationalism which sowed the seeds of division in society and polity. His writings in the post-swadeshi phase contain clear indications of his discomfort with this trend where the icon of *Bharat Mata* became the rallying point for swadeshi agitators.

The Question of Identity

Consolidation of identities was another significant contribution of cultural nationalism. It follows closely from the first idea of what constitutes a nation and who are its inhabitants. During the swadeshi movement, there was an increasing awareness among Bengalis as a distinct ethnic and linguistic community who wanted to portray themselves as racially and culturally at par with or even superior to the colonial masters. Harnessing religious and cultural symbols were central to this project. For instance, Bankim's writings had refashioned the revered Hindu God Krishna, from a symbol of love to a warrior who inspired political action and displayed enviable masculinity.¹⁶ Ascetic and spiritual practices were promoted in the rank and file of nationalist leadership and their cadres. In the writings of Aurobindo Ghose we find him urging for the creation of a band of spiritual workers whose sole purpose would be to devote themselves to the service of the nation – their god as well as their mother. The numerous secret societies that sprung up in Bengal in the early years of the twentieth century for recruiting and training young men as revolutionaries, testifies to the practices highlighted by Ghose.¹⁷ Tagore did not believe in this programme. He denounced any form of ethnic identity and voiced his criticism against the mobilization of specific forms of identities for political purposes. A pertinent example of his position is voiced by the protagonist of Tagore's novel *Gora* (1909), in the excerpt with which I opened the article. Thus, when the previously hindutvawaadi Gora proclaims that he has 'no father, no mother, no race or caste [*jati*], no name, no *gotra*, no god' and embraces his true Indian identity by absolving all conflicts with every community, he embraces universal humanity as the essence of his being. This universal humanism was at the heart of Tagore's political will as well as behind his frontal critique against

¹⁶ See Mrinalini Sinha, 'Giving Masculinity a History: Some Contributions from the Historiography of Colonial India,' *Gender and History* 11, No. 3 (November, 1999): 448.

¹⁷ The most prominent secret society in Calcutta was the *Anusilan Samiti* founded in 1902. For details on the same see John Rosselli, 'The Self-Image of Effeteness: Physical Education and Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century Bengal,' *Past and Present* 86 (February, 1980): 127-28.

this idea of *Bharat Mata* in whose name the politics of spiritual asceticism was being unleashed. He urged his countrymen to take note of the immediate concerns – poverty, ignorance, ill-health, and weakness rather than deluding oneself with the idea of Bharat Mata, Bharat Lakshmi, or the figure of Krishna. In an enigmatic phrase Tagore conveys: ‘The way in which an intoxicated man values his poison over the vitals like food, so were we so deeply impressed by the idea of the country’s welfare that it took precedence over the country.’¹⁸

In present times we have seen the valourisation of Ram as epitomizing the purity of the Hindu race. Ram is a Hindu deity believed to be born in Ayodhya, a city in Uttar Pradesh, India. A section of Hindus believe that the Babri Masjid, named after the Mughal emperor Babur, was constructed in Ayodhya after destroying a temple that marked the Birthplace of Lord Ram.¹⁹ Although there is no historical or archeological evidence of the mosque being built on the site of Ramachandra’s birth where the temple built in his honour was desecrated to construct the mosque, yet an ancient and imaginary wrong was sought to be corrected by inflicting forcefully another monstrous wrong that played havoc with people’s lives and emotions.²⁰ Pertinent in this regard was L.K. Advani’s remark on March 25, 1986, ‘If there is an attempt to work up communal passions, anti-Muslim feeling and all that, I would think that is wrong. But if in a normal way things are being corrected anywhere as for example at Ram Janmabhoomi, I do not think we should be apologetic about it.’²¹ This narrative amassed political support from the Hindu right. Chants of Jai Shree Ram became the performative practice of consolidating a group identity with communal undertones. Forging such identities include the use of religious and cultural artefacts. Masses of people are swayed by the purity attested to Ram, which is then used for the political purposes of vehemently protecting the idea of Ram Janmabhoomi or the birthplace of Ram and building a temple there to symbolize the victory of *Hindu Rashtra* over other competing notions of a nation (most notably a secular one).

¹⁸ Rabindranath Tagore ‘Chhatrader Prati Sambhasan’ Baisakh 1312 B.S. (April-May 1905), 27. Translations are my own.

¹⁹ See A.G. Noorani, ‘The Babri Masjid-Ram Janmabhoomi Question,’ *Economic and Political Weekly* 24, No. 44/45 (November 1989): 2461-2466.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Lal Krishna Advani is a senior leader and one of the co-founders of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) who began his career as a volunteer of the Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh (a Hindu nationalist organization).

Such group identities are rooted in acts of collective interpretation of the objects or traditions that are considered sacred. What is also important is the act of interpretation itself which contributes to the sense of group belonging. In this context communal passions can easily be ignited on the pretext of 'hurting the sentiments,' religious or otherwise, of a particular community. In the present times, it has been observed that self-appointed vigilantes, keepers of collective conscience and nurturers of group purity, resort to violence in defiance of law. These are reflected in the practices of cultural policing, book burning, and the intimidation of artists and their creative activities which have become far too common. Film screenings have been disrupted, writers and painters threatened and beaten up, academic work has been subjected to speculation to the point of dire consequences on account of non-conformism. Such events escalated to a point when eminent Indian writers and film personalities have returned their prestigious awards (most commonly the Sahitya Akademi Award) beginning in September 2015 'against the growing incidents of communal violence and the NDA government's inability to protect writers and intellectuals from enemies of free speech.'²² The protest against the curtailment of freedom of speech and expression popularly known as the 'Award Wapasi Movement,' saw some fifty personalities return their awards challenging the intolerance towards their creative self-expression avenues under the elected government that assumed office in 2014.

Tagore had anticipated the untoward outcomes of the politics of ethnic nationalism. Apprehensive of the consequences of asserting cultural identities, Tagore in the aftermath of the swadeshi movement stood in opposition to the project initiated by Bankim whereby the spiritual superiority of the Bengalis over the British was sought to be established by drawing on Hindu scriptures and icons. Alternatively, Tagore chose to rely on the creative avenue of composing songs which not only protested against the unjust policies of the rulers but also showcased his discomfort with ethnic identities which did not accommodate his vision of universal humanism.

The Role of Education

²² See Makarand R. Paranjape's report 'Award wapasi: What really happened is still a mystery!' Published on August 11, 2018. Available at: <https://www.dnaindia.com/analysis/column-award-wapasi-what-really-happened-is-still-a-mystery-2648215>

The third crucial aspect in perpetrating and perpetuating hyper nationalisms was education. It was an instrument for creating a receptive support base for narrow and exclusivist designs. The early years of the twentieth century saw a widespread dissatisfaction with the colonial system of education. Across India, numerous alternative educational institutions were founded to counter the conversion of Hindus into Christians and for protecting the sanctity of the Hindu families. They emphasized the vernacularisation of the medium of instruction and promoted religious and moral lessons as mandatory parts of school curriculum. With the purpose of combining modern knowledge with that of Sanskrit, these institutions aimed at training students in the 'true Vedic origins of Hinduism.'²³ Prominent example of this would be the Arya Samaj Gurukuls that had at its heart the foundation of an ideal Arya life. Reciting and memorizing sacred texts such as the Vedas and the Bhagwad Gita were integral to the education of young students. These gurukuls aimed at re-establishing the ideal stages of Hindu life as enshrined in the Vedas. They became the modern-day instruments of churning 'good citizens' and 'religious men' on the basis of 'pure Vedic instructions.'²⁴ The Indian education system modelled on the ancient ashrams was used as a tool to nurture nationalistic sentiments and produce a band of patriots. Supplementing these missions were secret societies which focused on the cultivation of physical culture and trained men in the use of guns as revolutionaries. Education thus contributed in specific ways to challenge the 'civilising mission of the colonial state' by privileging pre-colonial history, by validating the Indian past.

Tagore, who founded an alternative educational mission at Santiniketan in 1901, had a different intention altogether. His ashram was founded on the basis of his longing for freedom and to counter the education which focused incessantly on nation-worship. He wrote: 'India has never had a real sense of nationalism. Even though from childhood I had been taught that the idolatry of Nation is almost better than reverence for God and humanity, I believe I have outgrown that teaching, and it is my conviction that my countrymen will gain truly their India by fighting against that education which teaches them that a country is greater than the ideals of humanity.'²⁵ He did not take

²³ Sanjay Seth, *Subject Lessons The Western Education of Colonial India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007), 163.

²⁴ Nonica Dutta, 'The 'Subalternity' of Education: Gurukuls in Rural South-East Punjab' in Mushirul Hasan ed. *Knowledge, Power and Politics Educational Institutions in India* (New Delhi: Roli Books, 1998), 28-29.

²⁵ Rabindranath Tagore, *Nationalism* (London: Macmillan, 1917), 27.

recourse to religious education but rather promoted universal humanism through the curricular design of the ashram. At Santiniketan therefore, his students recited the *Gayatri Mantra*²⁶ which made them dwell upon the fact that they were not residents of any particular nation but a mere speck in the universe. Through a consistent reading of the Upanishads, Tagore sought to inculcate in his students a sense of deep appreciation for the creative divine essence that permeates the universe while revealing itself in the consciousness of the individual.²⁷

In recent years, there has been a massive restructuring of the school curriculum, consistent attempts to rewrite the past in which histories of certain kinds are privileged whereas others are either erased or their presence in textbooks are hugely curtailed. In 2017, Dina Nath Batra, the head of Shiksha Sanskriti Utthan Nyas, affiliated to the Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh,²⁸ sent a list of recommendations to the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) demanding a host of changes in its “baseless and biased” textbooks.²⁹ In the five page list, Nyas asked the NCERT to remove English, Urdu, and Arabic words, a poem by the revolutionary poet Pash and a couplet by Mirza Ghalib, the thoughts of Rabindranath Tagore and extracts from painter MF Husain’s autobiography.³⁰ Thus, while Shivaji is taught with fervor, it was recommended that Tagore be removed from NCERT textbooks on grounds that in his thoughts there is a rift between ‘nationality and humanity.’ The raging controversies that followed lie beyond the scope of the present article. Instead, my purpose here is to highlight how education becomes a powerful tool in disseminating certain narratives as historical, valid and worth perpetuating. For instance, the textbooks published by the RSS affiliate, Saraswati Shishu Mandir Prakashan, for children from pre-school and primary education, focuses on spiritual

²⁶ The Gayatri mantra is a sacred hymn of the Arya Samaj. It was chanted by the students at the Santiniketan ashram. The essence of it as Tagore explained was: to unite oneself with the universe by stepping aside from one’s national identity.

²⁷ The essence of the spiritual training that Tagore designed for the students at his ashram is contained in his letter to Kunjalal Ghosh (one of the teachers at his ashram). See Rabindranath Tagore, *Chhithipatra Vol. 13* (Kolkata: Visva Bharati Grantha Bibhag, 1992), 164.

²⁸ The Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh (RSS) is a volunteer organization committed to the cause of founding a Hindu Rashtra by training and uniting the Hindu community. It was founded in 1925 in Maharashtra by Keshav Baliram Hedgevar.

²⁹ See the report of Hindustan Times, ‘RSS’ Dina Nath Batra wants Tagore, Urdu words removed from NCERT textbooks’ July 24, 2017. Available at: <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/rss-dina-nath-batra-wants-tagore-urdu-and-arabic-words-removed-from-ncert-textbooks/story-11iigvXLLMaTBrwQ0PiApM.html>

³⁰ Ibid.

education as necessary for the psychological needs of Indian children.³¹ The content of these books are replete with visual imageries of *Akhand Bharat's* (United India) glorious past, and seeks to engage students in the Indian culture, rituals and civilization from their childhood as the necessary prerequisite of consolidating a *Hindu Rashtra*. By this visualisation, the cultural significance of the Indian nation is also incorporated into the territories of other nations. According to these textbooks, *Akhand Bharat* encompasses a geographical framework which consists of the countries of Pakistan, Nepal, Burma, Bangladesh and Myanmar.³² Yet this inclusion did not mean an accommodation of diverse geographical and cultural regions. It had at its heart the agenda of reviving *Akhand Hindu Bharat*, which could only be achieved by forming a virtuous powerful Hindu identity in the global world.³³ The present-day practices of revamping school curriculum and redesigning textbooks are reminiscent of the older practices initiated by the Arya samajists to preserve the sanctity of Indian families from the denationalizing influence of Western education.³⁴

Opposed to these practices, Tagore's aims and purposes of education were to link it to a celebration of humanity and a global vision of India that he cherished. He did not exacerbate the existing differences amongst people, but instead chose to celebrate diversity as an essential virtue. He said: 'India has all along suffered from the looseness of its diversity and the feebleness of its unity. A true unity is like a round globe, it rolls on, carrying its burden easily; but diversity is a many-cornered thing which has to be dragged and pushed with all force.'³⁵ In his attempt to preserve this diversity and yet ensure that strong bonds of unity were continually forged, Tagore focused on the samaj as self-sufficient village units. He did not give primacy to the mechanical interests of the nation, rather, he chose to focus on the village as his unit of work which would inspire a complete restructuring of the Indian society through self-sufficient samajik units. The most prominent example of his rural reconstruction work

³¹ Neeti Chaudhary, 'RSS textbook Visuals,' *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, vol. 78 (2017): 1155-1164.

³² See *Vandana*, a textbook published by the Shiksha Mandir Prakashak in Uttar Pradesh 2016 edition, p. 11.

³³ Chaudhary (2017): 1159.

³⁴ Madhu Kishwar, 'Arya Samaj and Women's Education Kanya Mahavidyalay Jalandhar,' *Economic and Political Weekly* 21, No.17 (April, 1986): WS9-24.

³⁵ Rabindranath Tagore, *Nationalism* (London: Macmillan), 34.

is found in Sriniketan, the details of which fall beyond the purview of my discussion here.³⁶

Conclusion

The discussion of the three components which constitute Tagore's critique of nationalism would adjudge him as an 'anti-national' who refused to buy into dominant and popular imaginations of a nation and its community of people. In the words of Sukanta Chaudhuri, Tagore was the earliest person to stage the *award wapsi* drama returning the knighthood when four hundred people were shot in the interest of protecting the law and order.³⁷ To apply the polemics of nationalist or anti-nationalist in understanding a political figure like Tagore in my view constitutes a gross historical misjudgment. It takes away from the complexity of Tagore's distinctive vision of politics which stood outside the framework of nationalism. It also considerably erodes the significance of the historical moment which shaped his ideas.

Having discussed Tagore's critique of nationalism and the historical context in which it was formulated, I suggest that the rise of the Hindutva politics offers an opportune moment to take into cognizance Tagore's ideas as a formidable counter narrative to the present scenario. Ideas are historically conditioned features of the world that emerge and make sense in some larger socio-cultural and linguistic contexts, yet, they have the potential to be transported to make sense of the present. Tagore's alternative politics and the ideas embedded in it, hints at the consequences of blind nation-worship by revering its symbols, idioms and sacred texts. Therefore, he chose to address social inadequacies, as he saw them to be the main causes of our weakness as a community and as a samaj. He criticized mass based political agitations against the British and advocated that his countrymen use their efforts in constructive enterprises which would remedy the ills of the samaj. He fearlessly critiqued the boycott movement during the swadeshi days and later his disagreements with Gandhi on the issue of the nationwide spinning movement, which served to show how dissent could be intricately woven into the social fabric without the threat of its

³⁶ For a rich discussion of this topic see, Uma Dasgupta, 'Santiniketan and Sriniketan: A Historical Introduction,' *Visva Bharati Quarterly* 41, No.1-4 (1975-6): 270-325.

³⁷ Sukanta Chaudhuri, 'Rabindranath Tagore, the traitor' *The Telegraph Online*, 22nd September 2019. Available at: <https://www.telegraphindia.com/opinion/rabindranath-tagore-the-traitor/cid/1706823>.

disintegration. Tagore's *swadeshbhakti* did not translate into nation worshipping practices, nor did it mean uncritical devotion to the land of his birth. He was committed to upholding the spiritual, moral and humanistic values to build the India of his dreams against the exclusionist designs of neo-Hindu nationalism.

Hence, I argue that Tagore's alternative politics present a creative and inclusive alternative to the one that is endorsed by the Hindu right. Moving away from the abstractions of *Bharat Mata* and focusing on concrete social realities, denouncing political mobilizations around ethnic identities and choosing to take a stance against dominant or popular ideologies would definitely pull Tagore into myriad controversies in the present climate. It is easier to visualise him languishing in prison than imagining the heaven of freedom into which he wished India would awake. Tagore's ideals were undoubtedly lofty and immensely difficult to put into practice, his ideas were not free from idiosyncrasies; he was born in a rich zamindar family and was very much a product of his refined upbringing. Through his educational endeavour at Santiniketan, his rural reconstruction work at Sriniketan, through his songs, poems and tracts Tagore charted the path of his alternative politics. Through this article, I hope to have been able to resuscitate Tagore's ideas from being buried in the pages of history. In making his ideas speak to the present context, this article has attempted to cast Tagore in a light different from the ones that see him as India's first Nobel laureate, or as the sage of Santiniketan or as the greatest poet of India. In historicizing him, I have shown Tagore to be a deeply political figure, one who had a distinct imagination of India and someone who left us a legacy of ideas through which to view our present. Drawing parallels between the neo-Hindu movements of his time (the ideologies of which underlie Hindutva's designs), and Tagore's critique of them, this article also raises a broader question: is it time to evaluate Tagore's vision as a much needed corrective to the wrongs that have taken India further away from his imagination of a land 'where the mind is without fear'?³⁸

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³⁸ Rabindranath Tagore, *Gitanjali* Poem 35, (New York: Macmillan Company, 1917), 27.

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